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An Evaluation of Rapture Theology

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by

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## Abstract

In the realm of scholarly debates regarding eschatology, a prominent divisive topic is the Rapture. Entire books and articles elaborate on the biblical support for and against the role that the Rapture plays within pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and posttribulationism. Such works contain the ongoing clash between interpreters, often with each side claiming that the same passages constitute absolute proof of their respective belief systems. Arguments frequently include the possibility of a seven-year tribulation, an antichrist, and a Rapture: terms not found in the book of Revelation and therefore difficult to explain. A central question that continues to draw a line between scholars is when the Rapture will occur. However, since all prominent theories are not without fault, perhaps the central question should revert to if there is a Rapture.

This thesis examines the development and exegesis of modern Rapture theologies. This study reveals that advocates of the Rapture often use inconsistent and unsound methods to arrive at their eschatological conclusions, including distorting the order of passages, using erroneous calculations, and, most of all, reading into verses that which is neither written nor implied. Such attempts to understand the mystery behind potential end-times prophecy causes some scholars to attach confusing passages to a future seven-year tribulation and an associated Rapture. A more contextual explanation is warranted for these portions of Scripture

This thesis argues that Rapture theories in relation to either the Great Tribulation or the precise time in which Christ returns are unsustainable. Biblical phrases that refer to living believers being snatched are, instead, consistently timed in relation to the resurrection of the dead, which is shown throughout the New Testament to occur at the final judgment, when the old heaven and earth are destroyed. It is at this point when dead and living Christians meet Christ in the air and are transfigured in preparation of progressing to the new heaven and earth.

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## Introduction

### The Problem of Rapture Theology

Bryant Wright states, “Looking at Scripture in light of Scripture clearly teaches the doctrine of the rapture of the church.”<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, “Rapture doctrine/Rapture theology” encompasses all prominent views of the Rapture that are timed in relation to a future seven-year tribulation or the return of Jesus Christ. Rapture proponents profess that the New Testament teaches that the return of Christ is associated with Jesus snatching believers from earth to either ascend to heaven or return to earth (e.g., 1 Thess 4:17).<sup>2</sup> While various scholars believe that the Rapture is a clear teaching, it is challenging to find any biblical support confirming it: primarily the difficulties in confirming its relation to a seven-year tribulation and the return of Christ. One would think that such an important aspect of the Christian faith would be more universally agreed upon; however, the evangelical church remains extremely divided on the details of Christ’s return. Given the extreme lack of consensus on such an important doctrine, it is therefore imperative to continue the debate of authorial intent when examining biblical passages used to support the Rapture.

Paul believed his letter to the Thessalonians was understandable “as written” because he taught them in person prior to writing these instructions (cf. 1 Thess 3:4), but ideas about its implications change with the perspectives of each generation. These implications are often used to derive the interpretation instead of the other way around. Paul is not the only biblical writer whose eschatological works have been interpreted differently through time and cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryant Wright, *The Stage is Set: Israel, the End Times, and Christ’s Ultimate Victory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New American Standard Version* (La Habra, CA: Foundation, 1997).

However, his works often define Christianity. The result of misunderstanding his passages on eschatology sometimes leads believers to have difficulty interpreting other biblical authors correctly.

Today, the problem is that the beginnings of eschatological beliefs are usually established within believers by individuals from the pulpit rather than Scripture, which then give the perception that every author in the Bible who either writes about or is perceived to write about the last days is supporting speakers' particular ideas. This results in modern readers being caught in the middle of impassioned debates by teachers who often present less than scholarly interpretations. Contributing to the problem is that almost every current popular book on Revelation is completely devoid of exegesis (e.g., those written by Tim LaHaye and John Walvoord).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps worse still are the terms not found in but frequently used to describe events and characters in Revelation: e.g., the antichrist, seven-year tribulation, and Rapture.<sup>4</sup>

Some commentaries hold to an eschatological position without presenting the difficulties associated with their viewpoints. For instance, *The Moody Bible Commentary* teaches that deceased believers alone resurrect during the Rapture while only unbelievers return to life on judgment day (Rev 20:11-15).<sup>5</sup> No supporting argument or supplemental scripture is offered by the commentary because there is no teaching in the Bible that makes such a distinction during the resurrection. It is an assumption often made based on scriptures that are silent on the status of unbelievers in their teaching of resurrection (e.g., 1 Cor 15). However, writers, like Paul, would

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 250.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Koester, *The Apocalypse: Controversies and Meanings in the Western History* (Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, 2011), audio disc 1.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Rydelnik and Michael G. Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 1803, 2025.

not need to include the resurrection of unbelievers when they were only addressing believers in their letters. The absence of unbelievers in the text does not necessarily mean that they are absent from the same resurrection. By contrast, Scripture supports the simultaneous judgment of all people (cf. Matt 25:31–33; Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10).

Other commentaries avoid addressing questionable details. For instance, Mark Taylor avoids fitting Paul’s teaching into the larger eschatological narrative. Taylor’s only connection between 1 Corinthians 15:51–53 and Revelation is that they both demonstrate that trumpets accompany the resurrection of the dead.<sup>6</sup> Taylor forgoes an opportunity to make further connections to John’s resurrection of the dead or to point out the strengths and weaknesses of Rapture theology as it pertains to Paul’s passage.

Unfortunately, influential writings, such as that of LaHaye, Walvoord, and N. T. Wright, also neglect the high level of exegetical standards that should always accompany the teaching of Scripture. Of the repeated eisegesis that one can identify in their writings regarding eschatology, an example from each is here provided. LaHaye informs readers that Paul has intentionally comforted “millions” with “the pretribulational Rapture doctrine” in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 by implying that they will not have to endure the seven-year tribulation.<sup>7</sup> There are four problems with this teaching: (1) LaHaye fails to address that Paul’s audience was ignorant of the seven-year tribulation let alone the need for escape from such an event. (2) Paul would not know that he was bringing comfort to millions but only to those who escaped the time of the trial of which he referred. (3) LaHaye avoids defending the reason Paul’s audience would be comforted by

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 413.

<sup>7</sup> Tim LaHaye, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible: New King James Version* (Wheaton, IL: AMG, 2001), 1609-10.

learning that a future generation would escape worldly tribulation. (4) Just as there is no explicit teaching on the Rapture throughout the Bible, there is also no explicit teaching on the seven-year tribulation (discussed later in this study). There are details of other events that Rapture proponents use to support their beliefs, but no direct teaching of these views exists in any single passage. Therefore, building the Rapture doctrine on the presupposition of a seven-year tribulation will lead one to commit theological fallacies.

N. T. Wright dismisses 1 Thessalonians 4:17–18 as “highly charged metaphor” used for emphasizing the significance of believers escorting the Lord into his millennial reign.<sup>8</sup> Interpreting the snatching of those who are alive as metaphor is problematic for his argument since the resurrection of the dead in verse 16 is a literal event according to Rapture proponents. Scholars who choose which interpretations are literal and which are symbolic within a single teaching risk committing eisegesis.

Walvoord explains that the Rapture was first revealed in the Bible during the night prior to Jesus’ crucifixion (John 14:1–3).<sup>9</sup> Pretribulationists, like Walvoord, also believe that Matthew 24:4-26 refers to the seven-year tribulation. It is unlikely that Jesus told the Twelve that they would be the generation to witness the Abomination of Desolation in Matthew 24:15, 34 but cryptically meant a different generation. It is also unreasonable that Matthew 24 would teach the Great Tribulation without mentioning the Rapture while John 14 implies the occurrence of the Rapture without mentioning the Great Tribulation, especially if one event is the precursor for the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 132-3.

<sup>9</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible: New King James Version* (Wheaton, IL: AMG, 2001), 1270.

The problem that this thesis addresses is that there are many interpreters who take biblical verses out of context to support their competing Rapture doctrines. This process damages the authorial intent. These interpretations often fail to commit to an exegetical reading of Scripture, which would honestly admit no direct teaching of Rapture theology.

### The Purpose of This Study

This thesis intends to refute the likelihood of Rapture theology by examining and comparing the texts that reputedly support such teaching. Countering Rapture theology consists of understanding these eschatological passages as the authors of Scripture intended them. Achieving this comes primarily through analyzing the biblical sections for contextual coherency, comparing various passages for commonalities or differences, and determining the nature of the authors' writing styles. The research of this thesis exposes inconsistencies pertaining to the claimed biblical support for the Rapture. The aim is to derive a more faithful interpretation from specific passages and determine what effect these scriptures have on comprehending the last days. The independent view of this research concludes that fulfillment of passages that describe what happens to living believers during the resurrection of the dead occurs not in relation to the return of the Lord or the Great Tribulation but at the white throne judgment of Revelation 20:11. This interpretation will be demonstrated to have biblical support but is not corroborated by any sources available to the author of this thesis and, therefore, may be a unique perspective.

### The Importance of This Study

The misinterpretation of biblical passages is the primary error with Rapture theology. Without a hermeneutical approach to the Rapture's origin or any direct biblical teaching of a two-part return of Christ, those dedicated to the doctrine's survival cling to "special revelation"

as their sole means of proper interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Corruption of authorial intent plagues conclusions anywhere from a few verses to many chapters, depending on the level of justification one pursues to fill in the holes of Rapture doctrine.

Common Rapture teachings also distort the characterization of God. Although the Bible is replete with references to mankind's function to acknowledge the Lord's authority and honor alone (e.g., Neh 9:6; Rom 7:25; Rev 15:4), the Rapture presents the church as the one who is praised by the heavenly hosts. Pretribulationism teaches that the "blessed" who are invited to the Wedding of the Lamb referenced in Revelation 19:9 pertains solely to the "snatched away" church.<sup>11</sup> Prior to this, believers are said to spend seven years in heaven celebrating their achievements and victory over the enemy (Satan) and receive recognition, one-by-one, for their good deeds alone (while God forgets their bad deeds). All the while, those remaining on earth, even those who place their faith in Jesus after the Rapture, experience levels of torture never before endured and orchestrated by the hand of God. This portrayal of God's character as judging only unbelievers contrasts those passages that claim universal judgment and the revealing of the totality of hidden things for all mankind (Matt 12:36; Mark 4:22; 2 Cor 5:10; Heb 4:11–13). Furthermore, these beliefs are uncharacteristic of a jealous, yet merciful God. Ezekiel records seventy times the reason God provides for his actions yet to come in the prophet's day. Each phrase is some form of, "So they will know that I am Lord." The Bible echoes this theme repeatedly, and pretribulationists risk misleading believers when they emphasize that the Rapture is primarily to honor and reward the church instead of solely being

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, Desmond Allen, *The Wise Shall Understand: A Homiletical Commentary on the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (United States: published by author, 2017), 12, claims that his ability to discern today's worldwide events as "the end time and the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ," is a fulfillment of Daniel 12:10.

<sup>11</sup> Bryant Wright, *The Stage is Set*, 137, 139-40.

on the glory of God through Christ Jesus. It is true that believers will be rewarded one day for their respective deeds while on earth, but not to the exclusion of those who place faith in the Lord after the Rapture. To suggest that God spares a select group of future Christians from earthly trial and rewards them for their good deeds on earth (as pretribulationism does), distorts the unchanging character of God by expecting him to show partiality to a certain group.

Furthermore, pretribulationism and midtribulationism promote “escapism” mentality. They teach that Christ glorifies his name not through his working through the Holy Spirit in the lives of his earthly believers (as consistent with the model set by New Testament authors and re-emphasized for the last two-thousand years) but through miraculously providing an escape for a particular generation of Christians from further (and supposedly worse) earthly suffering. The implication is that believers readily accept interpretations of eschatological passages in ways that are of material benefit to themselves. Escapism severely undermines the biblical teachings on suffering, like that of Paul, who cannot compare the horror of his sufferings to the coming glory of the Lord (Rom 8:18).

Closely associated with “escapism” are common misunderstandings about God’s wrath. Many who support Rapture theology equate wrath with tribulation. For instance, some pretribulationists believe that the wrath of 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 and 5:9 exclusively applies to the seven-year tribulation.<sup>12</sup> This fails to convey how Paul’s contemporaries benefited from this prophecy or why Paul taught that Jesus rescues “us” (Paul and his fellow first-century Christians). Associating wrath with tribulation and claiming that Christians avoid both fails to account for the terrible trials that Christians have encountered since the time of Nero and counters Jesus’ promise that Christians assuredly have tribulation (John 16:33). Of course, one

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<sup>12</sup> LaHaye, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, 1407, 1412.

can accept the trials that face believers throughout history and still believe in escape from latter suffering in the form of a Rapture, but then the pretribulation message of having the Rapture for the purpose of keeping Christians from tribulation becomes invalid. Arguments of posttribulationism against escapism represent biblical understanding superior to those of pretribulationism and midtribulationism. However, posttribulationism contains flawed doctrine as well, which will be discussed throughout this study.

It is presupposed that Rapture doctrine is established by the foundational passages later addressed in the body of this thesis. These presuppositions create the misunderstanding of a significant biblical teaching: Christ's return. Believers who accept Rapture theology are at risk of forming conjectures necessary to defend such an unfounded doctrine. In turn, one common response is that Christians divert excessive attention to "signs of the times" and push quick salvation before the imminent deadline of the Rapture approaches instead of focusing on the daily example they set by adhering to the messages of Christian living included in multiple eschatological passages (e.g., 1 Cor 15:58; 2 Thess 2:15; 2 Pet 3:14). When new converts fail to see evidence of an approaching Rapture, their faith may wither like the seed that fell on rocky places (Matt 13:20–21). Upon a foundation of bad theology, Christians might relish escaping a largely fabricated futuristic tribulation and placing themselves at the centerpiece of God's plan (like the Pharisees, Matt 23:6). Although true repentance and fruitful living in anticipation of Christ's return is the message of the New Testament, Rapture proponents have Christians' attention diverted toward a preceding removal from worldly hardships. Not only is all faith and joy in Christ as the sole fulfillment of his followers' hope replaced with hope for escape, but

some Christians risk becoming estranged from faith altogether because the Rapture failed to occur within the season that some proponents said it would.<sup>13</sup>

### An Exegetical Position on the Problem

Rather than analyzing eschatological passages that validate pretribulationism, midtribulationism, or posttribulationism points of view, this thesis supports interpreting them as the authors intended: a task made more difficult by the presuppositions of these positions (e.g., the existence of a seven-year tribulation or a future temple in Jerusalem). This research indicates that Rapture doctrine is flawed, not only because of unconvincing and often unsupportable assumptions but also because there are more reasonable interpretations of the various passages used to defend Rapture theology that align with a single return of Christ. This is not to suggest that posttribulationism is correct, since the “catching up” that Paul refers to is not synonymous with a premillennial return of Christ, as will be demonstrated (1 Thess 4:17). Several arguments presented in this thesis are also shared by posttribulationism; however, there is a significant distinction. Whereas posttribulationists contend that the Rapture is the same event as the physical return of Jesus to Earth at the end of the Great Tribulation, this thesis offers that there exists no biblical evidence for a Rapture prior to the reign of Christ.

This research demonstrates the absence of biblical teaching of a seven-year tribulation, making arguments between pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and posttribulationism irrelevant. This study refutes common misconceptions, such as Paul clearly teaching the Rapture, eschatological enlightenment being reserved for today’s generation, Revelation including the

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<sup>13</sup> LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndall, 1972), spends several chapters attempting to demonstrate how the generation that lived through World War I will witness Jesus’ return and fulfill Matthew 24:34. Although many Rapture advocates do not set dates, they convey that the season of the Rapture is present due to worldwide circumstances.

Rapture, the duration of the Great Tribulation lasting seven years, and more. Furthermore, the most reasonable explanation is that passages generally used to support the Rapture instead are fulfilled on Judgment Day (Rev 20:11–21:1). Not only does this thesis expose and counter the illogical use of Scripture to support Rapture doctrine, but also offers a solution that fits the context of the authors' circumstances, is consistent with a rational understanding of the language of the text, and maintains the chronology of events presented throughout Matthew 24 and Revelation.

### Research Method

This thesis analyzes and evaluates relevant eschatological theologies pertaining to biblical passages commonly used to support Rapture theology. The focus regards various strengths and weaknesses of different interpretations of Scripture, ultimately providing an alternative solution to counter Rapture doctrine. The format will consist strictly of deliberations between eschatological arguments, building toward a logical conclusion.

The synthesis of the data involves comparing arguments and conclusions of competing theories to determine which ones closely support the authorial intent of the primary source, which is the Bible. Analyses show the contextual relevance of each position and how each fit into broader biblical themes. An evaluation concludes each chapter and builds on the overall argument of the thesis.

### Limitations/Delimitations

This thesis includes the following parameters:

1. Understanding of content and arguments requires familiarity of eschatological themes, terminology, and main characters of the Bible.
2. Academic sources alone support the arguments. No fictional works contribute to the debate (e.g., the *Left Behind* series).

3. This thesis omits Old Testament passages concerning eschatology except when enabling better comprehension of relevant New Testament passages. The eschatology of the Old Testament aligns with the findings of this research; however, space does not permit a just defense of its contributions. Furthermore, once readers understand the support for this thesis, greater awareness for the implications of pertinent Old Testament passages should naturally increase. Nevertheless, this study will include an explanation of Daniel 9:24–27 since it is the primary passage used to defend the length of the Great Tribulation as seven years.
4. This thesis only counters prominent Rapture theories and not the plethora of lesser-known contributions.
5. Alternate arguments presented in this thesis of the eschatological passages in the Bible exclude those interpretations that are entirely or largely allegorical. If a particular view understands the Rapture to be symbolic in nature rather than literal, then determining the meaning of passages often used to support the Rapture becomes even more difficult to defend since there would be fewer details to study than if it were literal. Those who attribute large portions of end times prophecy to allegory often do not offer distinct lines between what they consider symbolic and literal.<sup>14</sup>
6. The terms, “Rapture doctrine/Rapture theology,” encompass all prominent views of the Rapture that are timed in relation to the Great Tribulation or the return of Jesus Christ.
7. The term, “midtribulationism,” includes partial-rapture and pre-wrath concepts since the arguments of this thesis pertain to all major theories that fall between pretribulationism and posttribulationism.
8. This discussion does not include arguments relating to a restored Israel.

This thesis builds upon the following presuppositions:

1. The Bible and its authors are authentic and trustworthy.
2. The arguments for the premillennial return of Christ are persuasive, true, and believed to be taught by some of the members of the early church.<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this study, it is unnecessary to distinguish between historical and futurist premillennialism.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Nicholas T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 132-3, believes in a literal return of the Lord but insists that the Rapture is “highly charged metaphor, not literal.”

<sup>15</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 94, 183.

## Chapter 1 – Rapture Doctrine Arranged by Darby and Dispensationalism

### Introduction

Although the primary objections against Rapture theology involve conflicts with interpretation of Scripture, it is prudent to discuss the controversy over the doctrine's origin. Many authors, despite various eschatological beliefs, recount the history of their views of a two-part return of Christ with John N. Darby's concepts. This discussion avoids repeating the full details of his life and teachings; rather, it offers a brief summary of Darby's formulation of the Rapture and highlights the effects that dispensationalism had on forming new interpretations of Christ's return. This argument concludes by identifying the circumstances in which modern understandings of the Rapture were derived and the state of the church in which Rapture theology became embraced. It will be demonstrated that the development of Rapture ideas was not founded on sound exegesis but on divine revelation and recent cultural circumstances.

### Darby's Two-Part Return of Christ

A brief overview of Darby's story sheds light on the development of Rapture theology, which presents the Rapture as a prelude to Christ's return and millennial reign on earth.<sup>16</sup> According to Barbara Rossing (and other authors regarding Rapture theology's origin), a family from Port Glasgow, Scotland, supposedly gifted by the Holy Spirit, began speaking in tongues. Darby (among other interested parties) investigated the report. A teenage girl belonging to the Scottish family claimed to experience a vision of a two-part return of Christ and confessed it to Darby, who "adopted and amplified" the vision.<sup>17</sup> It is uncertain whether Darby originated his

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<sup>16</sup> John N. Darby, *The Rapture of the Saints and the Character of the Jewish Remnant*, 118, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/PROPHET/11007E.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 22.

idea from the young girl's vision or from pre-existing ideas, but there is little dispute that Darby was the first person to be recognized widely for writing about and teaching this new interpretation.<sup>18</sup> The first part of Christ's return would become known as the Rapture while the second part, often called the "glorious appearing" by Rapture proponents, pertains to Jesus' physical return to earth to establish his one thousand year reign (Rev 19:11–20:6). The evidence suggests that prior to 1830, Christians believed in a single return of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Darby's invention of the modern-day understanding of a two-part return of Christ exposes the weakness of forming Rapture doctrine based on divine revelation instead of through exegetical discipline. Some object to this proposal, countering that Christian faith was first developed through divine revelation as evidenced by the Old and New Testaments. However, this alone is an insufficient commonality to consider a vision's authenticity. Even the visions recorded in the Bible were included (while others were presumably not) because they conformed to other trustworthy revelations and also what was evident about God through creation and experience.

For Darby's revelation to be considered reliable it should be likewise scrutinized, and scrutinized it was. Darby's radical new teaching was not received well among some of his

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<sup>18</sup> Michael J. Svingel, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), chap. 9, states that according to available evidence Darby was the first person to truly outline a pretribulation Rapture; William Watson, *Dispensationalism before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2015), demonstrates that ideas of dispensationalism were present prior to Darby. Even still, Darby is credited with organizing doctrinal ideas that led to modern evangelical views on the Rapture; Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994), 88, explains, "Darby's system contained nothing new, . . . but Darby wove these diverse strands into a tight and cohesive system that he buttressed at every point by copious biblical proof texts, then tirelessly promoted through his writings and preaching tours."

<sup>19</sup> Steve Wohlberg, *End Time Delusions: The Rapture, the Antichrist, Israel, and the End of the World* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2004), 128.

peers,<sup>20</sup> and his suggestion that Jesus raptures the church prior to the tribulation caused a division within the Brethren movement.<sup>21</sup> Of Darby's teaching concerning a secret coming of Christ, Samuel Tregelles, Plymouth Brethren member of Darby's day, wrote, "It came not from Holy Scripture, but from that which falsely pretended to be the Spirit of God."<sup>22</sup>

It was not only by Darby's contemporaries that his work was dissected for biblical accuracy. Seeking to advance his message elsewhere, Darby evangelized in America during multiple trips between 1859 and 1877.<sup>23</sup> His teachings were included in the *Scofield's Reference Bible*, which swiftly made its way into seminaries that were leaning toward more liberal theology. As conservative churches looked toward these Bible institutes for pastoral leadership, pretribulationism spread rapidly throughout America via the pulpits.<sup>24</sup> George Ladd explains that most Bible schools throughout America became devoted to Pretribulationism, adding, "So deeply entrenched has it become that many pastors and Christian leaders have been led to assume that this teaching has been an essential doctrine in the history of the Church extending back to apostolic times."<sup>25</sup> Not all scholars accepted Darby's ideas though. Such prominent men who abandoned their premature acceptance of Darby's Rapture included Oswald J. Smith, W. J.

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<sup>20</sup> John N. Darby, *Narrative of the Facts: Connected with the Separation of the Writer from the Congregation Meeting in Ebrington Street*, 16, accessed August 27, 2020, [https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/ECCLESIA/20001E\\_A.html](https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/ECCLESIA/20001E_A.html).

<sup>21</sup> Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chelmsford: Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, n.d.), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 133.

<sup>25</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 9.

Erdman, Robert Cameron, Philip Mauro, Rowland V. Bingham, and Harold J. Ockenga.<sup>26</sup> Like those in Darby's and Scofield's days, scholars today also bear responsibility to go beyond what "makes sense" about Rapture theology and determine if there is biblical support.

Darby attempted to justify his position by interpreting biblical passages with his preconceived understanding of a pretribulational Rapture based on divine revelation. For instance, he identified the church's removal within the book of Revelation by interpreting the "male child, who is to rule all the nations" as the corporate church, and the son's being "caught up to God" as the Rapture (Rev 12:5, 10–12).<sup>27</sup> This belief no longer has support (even from modern pretribulationists), because the "male child" is widely accepted as Jesus (cf. Ps 2:9; 45:6; 108:8; Heb 1:8; Rev 2:27; 19:15). Rather than try to fit the Rapture into Revelation, as Darby did, Rapture proponents now claim that Revelation's silence on the Rapture confirms its existence. For instance, John Hart claims that the "mystery of God" pertaining to what the "seven peals of thunder" spoke is a reference to the timing of a pretribulational Rapture (Rev 10:4–7).<sup>28</sup> This is not a logical conclusion from reading the text but a leap to his desired conclusion based on looking for evidence to support his pretribulational belief. More examples of this nature are provided in chapters 2–4 of this study.

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<sup>26</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 48-58.

<sup>27</sup> John N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, Revelation, chap. 12, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/synopsis/revelation/revelation12.html>; *The Rapture of the Saints*, 162.

<sup>28</sup> John Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 46.

## Dispensationalism

Darby's two-part return of Christ was part of a larger model he is often credited with inventing, which includes dispensations. Dispensationalism, according to William Watson, expects that the Rapture will, along with the Great Tribulation, reign of the Antichrist, and battle of Armageddon, precede the return of the Lord.<sup>29</sup> Rossing describes dispensations as "intervals of time ordering God's grand timetable for events."<sup>30</sup> Like the Rapture doctrine, dispensationalism is a belief structure with an unbiblical foundation, having no basis in scholarly grounding or exegetical study in original languages (unlike Lutheranism or Arminianism).<sup>31</sup> Dispensationalism claims to use extreme literalism—and often does when it comes to comprehending prophecies—but sometimes fails to appreciate literal historical fulfillments of those same prophecies.<sup>32</sup> Such inconsistencies will be addressed regarding the Great Tribulation in a later section.

Key passages used to defend dispensationalism need to align with sound hermeneutics. Whereas dispensationalists certainly do not believe that they remove prophecies from context, their unwillingness to recognize historical fulfillments hinder their understanding.<sup>33</sup> For instance, some dispensationalists interpret "when the perfect comes" to mean the coming of the canon of Scripture (1 Cor 13:10).<sup>34</sup> This assumption lacks regard for the context of Paul's message that

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<sup>29</sup> Watson, *Dispensationalism before Darby*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 21.

<sup>33</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 123.

<sup>34</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 111.

love endures whereas other attributes, like prophecy and tongues, will cease “when the perfect comes.” It would make little sense for attributes used to give fellow Christians hope to cease before hope is realized in the return of Christ. Rather, the contextual understanding of Paul’s message supports that “the perfect” is perfect love that comes at Christ’s return. Furthermore, Paul’s audience would be incapable of understanding “the perfect” as the canon of Scripture. In another instance, dispensationalists claim that God’s plan of dispensation is illustrated in the book of Daniel, referring to the seventy weeks prophecy (Dan 9:25–27). Their interpretation of this passage is eisegetical by forming a belief on information that is simply not present. Furthermore, dispensationalism has no basis in the whole of the New Testament, where one would look for confirmation of such a theory.<sup>35</sup>

Like the Rapture, dispensationalism is believed by many to be a relatively recent invention. The system’s advocates admit that no early church writings support it, it was not fully realized until the twentieth century,<sup>36</sup> and it lacks direct teaching from any biblical passage.<sup>37</sup> Since many Christians now believe in dispensationalism (although they may not realize it), the two-part return of Christ often becomes a question of “when” instead of “if.”<sup>38</sup> However, the Rapture, as well as dispensationalism, needs to be analyzed for weaknesses and inconsistencies as with any introduction of new ideas to the Christian faith.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 110-11.

<sup>37</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Hindson, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, 1409.

<sup>39</sup> For detailed lists of problems with dispensationalism, see Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 123-4; Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 123-4.

## Escapism

Part of Darby's initial success in swaying Americans toward a two-part return of Christ was due to timing. His evangelistic journeys occurred at the onset of, during, and after the Civil War. Ben Witherington explains, "Many Americans were quite vulnerable to an escapist theology that promised they would not have to go through the great tribulation."<sup>40</sup> Dwight L. Moody furthered Darby's theology as a means of giving hope to those suffering during the Civil War. In addition to *Scofield's Reference Bible*, Moody Press, Moody Bible Institute, and Moody Radio contributed much to advancing pretribulationism. In a matter of a few decades, escapism by Christ was being taught, and Rapture doctrine became easy to adopt into Christianity because it amended the understanding of the New Testament to offer a chance to escape the worst of the suffering described. Rapture theology risks being compatible with popular "prosperity" teaching, which promises material benefits in this world for those who are faithful to Jesus.

The primary argument used by pretribulationists to support escapism is their equating tribulation with wrath, supported by the interchanging of scriptures that use either word. Walvoord exemplifies this interchange when he writes that the wrath of God and of the Lamb describes the Great Tribulation (Rev 6:17).<sup>41</sup> However, John writes that God's wrath comes when the sixth seal is broken, which is manifested by a great earthquake, falling stars, a red moon, and a darkened sun (Rev 6:12–17). Walvoord's conclusion is also inconsistent with Jesus' description of the Great Tribulation, possibly because he does not find the two events connected. The events of the sixth seal do not occur until "immediately after the tribulation" (Matt 24:29).

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<sup>40</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 84.

Were Walvoord's claim true that tribulation and wrath are interchangeable,<sup>42</sup> Revelation 6:17 would not be a credible example because it is corroborated by Jesus to follow the Great Tribulation.

Scholars like Norman Harrison believe that divine judgment is also synonymous with the Great Tribulation (e.g., Rev 19:2).<sup>43</sup> This argument falters by the same reason: that the Great Tribulation ends prior to the completion of God's judgment according to Matthew 24:29 and 25:31–46. Advocates' comparison between wrath and the Great Tribulation is not limited to Revelation. When Paul teaches, "For God has not destined us for wrath" in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, pretribulationists apply this to the Great Tribulation. However, Paul was only stating that God spares Christians from his wrath. Ladd reasonably suggests that this wrath is not described as pertaining to tribulation but given Paul's broader context, relates to the return of the Lord to issue final judgment (Rom 2:5).<sup>44</sup>

Jesus teaches that the types of tribulation believers will face consist of hearings, betrayal, imprisonment, murder, and being hated for His name's sake (Mark 13:9–13). What He omits from this list of trials are wrath and judgment: terms, according to Andrew Woods, that refer to the seven-year tribulation according to Revelation 6:12–17; 9:20–21; 16:1, 7–11, 21.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, there is no basis for connecting the types of man-inflicted persecutions Jesus mentions with the actions of wrath and judgment from God unless one is trying to support the pre-existing belief that there is a seven-year tribulation. Furthermore, believers can expect

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<sup>42</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 69.

<sup>43</sup> Norman B. Harrison, *The End: Re-Thinking the Revelation* (Minneapolis: Harrison, 1941), 120.

<sup>44</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 84.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew M. Woods, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 209.

worldly tribulation, as will be discussed. Not only is there no two-part return of Christ taught in the Bible, but escapism for Christians from tribulation is also an unsupportable concept.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

The origin of Rapture theology came about through supposed divine revelation and is defended using questionable interpretations. The circumstances involving the doctrine's foundation are well-known but little alter mainstream evangelical perception of pretribulationism or other competing Rapture theologies. The two-part return of Christ as a fundamental belief of dispensationalism lacks the support needed to be credible. Nearly two-thousand years after Jesus taught that "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (including the Great Tribulation), those events which he predicted have still not happened in the literal and specific ways dispensationalists claim.<sup>47</sup> Darby's teachings flourished in an American environment of war and were repeatedly renewed in the last two centuries through fear of international conflicts, economic uncertainty, and natural disasters. Americans became indoctrinated from the pulpit with escapism by being told what certain Bible passages "really mean." The conception of Rapture theology alone is appealing but academically insufficient to completely dismiss it as a possible biblical interpretation. For sufficient evidence against Rapture theology, relevant scriptures must be analyzed for meaning.

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<sup>46</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 186.

<sup>47</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 183.

## Chapter 2 – The Great Tribulation’s Effect on Rapture Theology

### Introduction

The primary debate between evangelists regarding the Rapture is not “if” it happens but “when” it happens in relation to the Great Tribulation. This is why many Christians identify themselves with pretribulationism, midtribulationism, or posttribulationism. It is also commonly believed that the Great Tribulation is a future seven-year event. However, if the seven-year tribulation theory proves false, then the argument for the Rapture must be revisited since it may not be able to occur either before, during, or immediately after the tribulation. There are two areas of seven-year tribulation doctrine that are relevant to this discussion. First, the timeframe derived from Rapture advocates’ interpretation of Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy raises objections. Second, the nature of the Great Tribulation according to the explicit teachings regarding the event requires examination. The results of this study will demonstrate that biblical teaching on the Great Tribulation does not support Rapture theology.

### Daniel’s Seventy Weeks Prophecy

The idea that the Great Tribulation’s duration lasts seven years comes primarily from an interpretation of Daniel 9:24–27. For those calculating the timeframe of this prophecy, there is no serious dispute among scholars that Daniel is referring to seventy weeks of years.<sup>48</sup> Each week equals seven-years, meaning that seventy weeks represent 490 years (cf. Lev 25:8). Scholars attempt to discern the fulfillment of this passage in one of three ways: messianic, historical, or eschatological. Ladd champions the messianic view, arguing that verse 26 is

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<sup>48</sup> There are scholars who understand it to mean seven cycles of completion rather than seven literal weeks of years. For the purpose of this discussion, neither view dismisses the argument against Rapture theology. See John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 744.

reasonably referring to “the death of Christ and his utter rejection.”<sup>49</sup> From a Christian’s perspective, Christ would be the front-runner in completing those six functions in verse 24 that Gabriel lists for Jerusalem and the Jews. However, this does not dismiss the historical explanation familiar to first-century Judaism. William Nelson offers sound arguments demonstrating that Jesus is not in view when Gabriel mentions “Messiah the prince” (Dan 9:25), supplying that Christians read Christ into the passages and the identity is probably the high priest Jeshua (Neh 12:1; Zech 3:1).<sup>50</sup> John Goldingay confirms that the language “is not speaking of the end of all history, or of the sin of the whole world,” but relates solely to Jerusalem and Israel and was likely fulfilled through the Antiochene crisis.<sup>51</sup> Goldingay further offers a thorough commentary in which he provides support for and concludes that Gabriel’s message “unfolded in the ordinary way that history does” and that attempts to suggest that ideas suggesting fulfilment came through “Jesus’ death and resurrection, the fall of Jerusalem, various subsequent historical events, and the still-future manifesting of the messiah,” are exegetically mistaken.<sup>52</sup>

Rapture proponents, claiming an eschatological fulfilment of Daniel 9:24–27, disagree with the historical fulfillment of Daniel’s passage during second-century BC, explaining that sin continued past the cross and, therefore, Daniel’s prophecy cannot be fulfilled until the *parousia* (the coming of Christ; e.g., 1 Cor 15:23). However, this passage refers to the sin of Israel and not to worldwide sin, which, in any case, does not cease with Christ’s return since the sinful revolt of

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<sup>49</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Last Things: An Eschatology for Laymen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 61.

<sup>50</sup> William Nelson, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 234, 236-7, 244, identifies the Messiah of verse 25 as Jeshua and the Messiah of verse 26 as Onias III.

<sup>51</sup> John E. Goldingay, *Word Biblical Commentary: Daniel* (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 258, 261-2, 267.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

Revelation 20:8 occurs after Christ's return.<sup>53</sup> If Christ's return abolishes sin, then this rebellion, prompted by Satan's deception, could not occur. Therefore, this argument not only disregards the Jewish understanding that this prophecy was fulfilled,<sup>54</sup> but is also incompatible with Revelation 20. The historical fulfillment recognizes that the death of Onias III ended the line of high priests chosen by God to make atonements for Israel's sin. From this perspective, these events usher in the season for Jesus to make an end to sin through his sacrifice. In this theory, Jesus is not the Messiah cut off and is not involved directly in the seventy-weeks but possibly completes the process of atonement initiated by the events of the Antiochene crisis. The historical fulfillment bears no direct weaknesses in resolving Daniel's prophecy and offers the simplest response, whereas the eschatological fulfillment has the least support.

Daniel 9:24–27 is the sole leg on which the gap theory stands,<sup>55</sup> and this interpretation is replete with assumptions. Understanding the seventy-weeks prophecy to imply a seven-year tribulation is an unwarranted stretch, but to read into it the support of the Rapture is farcical. Scholars like Steve Wohlberg, Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, and Douglass Moo do not apply Daniel 9:27 to a seven-year tribulation.<sup>56</sup> Moo writes, "There is certainly nothing in Daniel 9:25–

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Heeringa, "An Exploration of the Impact of Dispensationalism on End Time Topics." (D. Min. diss. Reformed Theological Seminary, May 20, 2006), 77, accessed January 18, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Craig Blomberg, *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), chap. 4, accessed June 8, 2020, ProQuest Ebrary.

<sup>55</sup> The gap theory is used by many scholars to suggest that there is a long period of time separating the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel's prophecy, allowing for the seventieth week to be a future seven-year tribulation.

<sup>56</sup> Wohlberg, *End Time Delusions*, 44.

27 to suggest a “gap” of two millennia or more between the sixty-ninth and seventieth “sevens”- and the burden of proof would seem to fall on those who posit such a gap.”<sup>57</sup>

This gap may be apparent to many prophecy scholars, but why? Is it unusual for a gap to exist in the middle of timelines of prophecies? Randall Price argues that it is wrong to, “assert that such a long prophetic postponement would be inconsistent with other passages of predictive Scripture.”<sup>58</sup> He then cites fifteen Old Testament prophecies as examples (e.g., Joel 2:28; Zech 9:9–10). Unfortunately, his comparisons omit any prophecies with timeframes. Rather than provide a pattern of prophecies where gaps exist, Price inadvertently highlights the uniqueness of suggesting a gap within a prophecy that provides a time period. Thomas Ice defends the gap theory, claiming, “There is no other passage like Daniel 9:24–27.”<sup>59</sup> However, there are other prophecies with timeframes, but none explained by using these unique standards of interpretation to justify a split and indefinite fulfillment. Therefore, it is not the prophecy that is unusual, but the interpretation used to support a seven-year tribulation and Rapture theology.

Another consideration to exclude the gap theory is offered by Iain Provan, who divulges the improbability that the seventy weeks are literally 490 years by explaining that since the year of Jubilee represents rest from work and social justice, 490 years represents the completion of the age of toil and ushers in God’s kingdom.<sup>60</sup> Provan explains that the emphasis of this prophecy is likely on the events that follow the Babylonian exile, including the violent death of an anointed

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<sup>57</sup> Douglas Moo, *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, Posttribulation*, ed. Stanley Gundry and Alan Hultberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 93.

<sup>58</sup> Randall Price, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, 1010.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Ice, e-mail message to author, March 30, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Iaian Provan, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible: Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), section 9:20–27, accessed June 3, 2020, Hoopla eBook.

one and Jerusalem's destruction, rather than on the literal fulfillment of 490 years.<sup>61</sup> Goldingay is in agreement, stating that this timespan is symbolically akin to the sevenfold punishment (Lev 26).<sup>62</sup> He asserts that the background of Daniel's passage does not enforce an exegetical understanding of the 490 years to "correspond numerically to chronological periods."<sup>63</sup> The complexity of the prophecy is worsened in that scholars are unable to provide any mathematical combinations to yield significant understanding of these seventy weeks.<sup>64</sup> This inability to understand how the years fit into the prophecy deter Rapture proponents from focusing on the historical fulfillment of the passage's details. If Provan's and Goldingay's assessments are accurate, then suggestions that the duration of the Great Tribulation can be calculated from Daniel's passage are dubious, leading to further distortions of Scripture by Rapture proponents who insert a gap for the express purpose of making room for a future seven-year tribulation.

Biblical evidence connecting the seven-year tribulation with Daniel 9:24–27 is absent. Like their efforts to justify the Rapture, advocates take verses out of context and tell Christians what they "really mean." In this case, the middle of the seventieth week from Daniel 9:27 shares the same 3 ½ year time span as Revelation 11:2–3 and 13:5. Such arbitrary connections lead many to fill in the gaps of understanding with a seven-year tribulation even though those passages of John contain different details than that of Daniel 9:24–27. Likewise, the "times of distress" of Daniel 9:25 do not contain many of the features of the Great Tribulation described by Jesus: famines, earthquakes, false prophets, etc. (Matt 24:6–28). Given the lack of direct

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<sup>61</sup> Provan, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible: Daniel*, section 9:20–27.

<sup>62</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 258.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Nelson, *Daniel*, 236.

connections between Daniel 9, Matthew 24, and Revelation 11 and 13, there is no logical reason to infer that the Great Tribulation is seven years long.<sup>65</sup>

The Great Tribulation is often perceived to begin in the future. This argument presumes that Daniel indicates a lengthy time period between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks<sup>66</sup> and Daniel 9:27 remains unfilled throughout history.<sup>67</sup> The only response needed regarding the challenge that Daniel indicates a gap is that such an interpretation reads into the text what is not explicit nor reasonably implied. Interpretation of the 490 years is often referenced by Rapture proponents to occur from Nehemiah's time (445 or 444 BC) to Jesus crucifixion (AD 32 or 33). Goldingay lists the faults of this theory:

It is not obvious why the word about building a restored Jerusalem should be connected with Artaxerxes' commission of Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem; nor why we should accept the basis of the computation, that of a 360-day year; nor why we should separate off the seventieth seven, as the theory requires; nor why we should date Nehemiah's commission in 444 BC or Jesus' crucifixion in AD 32.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, Daniel 9:27 was possibly fulfilled when Antiochus Epiphanes made a pact with the Jews who sought Hellenization (1 Macc 1:11–14).<sup>69</sup> Nelson adds that the seventieth week refers to the murder of the anointed one, Onias III, when Antiochus Epiphanes outlawed Judaism and

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<sup>65</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Revelation: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 2003 (repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 180-3, makes a good case that the beast of Revelation 13 resembles the fourth beast of Daniel 7, which he says represents the Roman Empire. However, at no point does Witherington relate either the beast or the 42 months with Daniel 9.

<sup>66</sup> Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord*, 64.

<sup>67</sup> Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 51.

<sup>68</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 257.

<sup>69</sup> Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 252-3; Goldingay, *Daniel*, 262.

“committed the desolating abomination in 167 B.C. by offering sacrifices to Zeus Olympios in Yahweh’s sanctuary (Dan. 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; 1 Macc. 1:54; 2 Macc. 6:5).”<sup>70</sup>

Jesus explicitly taught that the Great Tribulation would begin when the abomination of desolation stood in the holy place (Matt 24:15–21), comparing it to Antiochus Epiphanes’ desecration. This is a comparison only and not a suggestion that Daniel’s prophecy was incomplete. The natural understanding of the fulfillment of Jesus’ words would be when “this generation” of Matthew 24:34 witnessed the abomination of desolation in Jerusalem’s temple by the Romans prior to its destruction in AD 70. However, the fulfillment of this specific prophecy is not meant to condone the preterist position, which further claims that Jerusalem is Babylon (Rev 18:9–24), the seven seals and trumpets were carried out by first-century Romans against the Jews (Rev 6, 8–9), and that Christ’s millennial reign is currently in progress (Rev 20:4).<sup>71</sup> In fact, preterists hold the belief that the Great Tribulation described in Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 relate to first-century events and are fulfilled. However, it is illogical for this position to hold that everything past the fifth seal is part of Jesus’ Great Tribulation when he specifies that the Great Tribulation ends “immediately” prior to the events of the sixth seal (Matt 24:29–30; Rev 6:12–17). The Great Tribulation is also unlikely to occur in the future; there are exegetical faults with this theory and the reasoning contradicts the plain meaning of Jesus’ teaching in the Olivet Discourse, as will be discussed. Furthermore, the abomination of desolation fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes is certainly a separate, but similar, event than that committed by the Romans.

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<sup>70</sup> Nelson, *Daniel*, 239, 245.

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 52-65, 84-5.

The historical fulfillment of Daniel 9:24–27 is evident through the events surrounding Antiochus Epiphanes. The weaknesses of the messianic argument are it presumes that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah of verse 26 when first century Jews would not have likely understood that and that it applies to the Gentiles when the context suggest the prophecy is only relevant for Daniel’s people. The weaknesses of the eschatological argument include the differences in details between Daniel’s and Jesus’ descriptions, no gap, and that the prophecy would be completely irrelevant to Daniel’s generation.<sup>72</sup> If the historical position on Gabriel’s message is accurate, then Rapture proponents’ sole biblical basis for limiting the Great Tribulation to seven years dissolves.

#### Jesus and John’s Great Tribulation

More crucial to the discussion than addressing whether or not the Great Tribulation is seven years in duration, are the descriptions given by the only ones who taught about the event: Jesus and one of the twenty-four elders surrounding God’s throne (Matt 24:21; Rev 7:9–13).<sup>73</sup> This study reinforces that the “Great Tribulation” of Matthew 24 and Revelation 7 refers to the period following the “Abomination of Desolation,” which leads up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Matt 24:15).<sup>74</sup> This concept is sometimes held by preterists and posttribulationists, and many of their observations employ trustworthy exegetics. However, preterists also believe that the New Jerusalem was achieved symbolically at this time (Rev 21–

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<sup>72</sup> It should be assumed that Daniel’s prophecy is pertinent for the Jews of his day since the rest of his prophecies are pertinent, except when specified (the vision of Daniel 10–12 is sealed “sealed up until the end time” according to Daniel 12:9).

<sup>73</sup> Revelation 3:10 does not likely pertain to the Great Tribulation described here and is discussed in the section entitled, “Analysis of Revelation 3:10.”

<sup>74</sup> Wohlberg, *End Time Delusions*, 46.

22).<sup>75</sup> This would distort the order of John’s vision to have the New Jerusalem arrive prior to the return of Christ, which preterists say is a future event.<sup>76</sup> Posttribulationists believe that the Rapture immediately follows the Great Tribulation. This research will discuss and determine no event in which Christians are snatched away only to return to earth more convincing than one that takes them to heaven for seven years just to return back to earth.

### **The Tribulation of Matthew 24:21**

Matthew 24:21 directly teaches that the Great Tribulation begins with the Abomination of Desolation occurring in the only temple that the disciples could possibly understand: the current temple about which they inquired (Matt 24:1–3). Rapture believers’ attempts to suggest a reference here to a different, future temple distorts the plain meaning and implies that Jesus knowingly misled the disciples.<sup>77</sup>

In the larger context of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus answered the disciples’ questions in verse 3 with thorough, chronological answers, beginning in verse 4, “And Jesus answered,” until verse 42 when he transitions into the meaning for his disciples, “Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.” Other interpretations that claim that the seals, trumpets, or bowls of Revelation are not chronological need solid evidence to support their conclusions. However, the plain understanding of the vision is an orderly and chronological unfolding. Evidence for chronological interpretation of Revelation will be presented in the section of this thesis entitled “John’s Audience.” If the Great Tribulation begins just prior to the

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<sup>75</sup> Gentry, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 89.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 86, explains that Christ’s return, the physical resurrection, and final judgment all occur in the future (Rev 20:7–15).

<sup>77</sup> Blomberg, *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, chap. 4; Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 115.

abomination of desolation prophesied by Jesus (in the manner similar to that prophesied by Daniel and fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes) in verse 15 and ends immediately before the events of the sixth seal (Matt 24:29–32; Rev 6:12–17), then the Great Tribulation will continue until that cosmic event unfolds.

### **The Tribulation of Revelation 7:9**

If the sixth seal follows the Great Tribulation and is when God’s wrath is realized, then John’s vision pertaining to the same event as Matthew 24 would be expected to align. Revelation 7:9–12 describes a heavenly scene of countless peoples wearing white robes, standing, and worshipping before the throne of God and before the Lamb. One of the elders explained to John that those wearing white robes “are the ones who come out of the great tribulation” (Rev 7:14). Witherington insists that the grammar prohibits interpreting this passage as those who come “from” the Great Tribulation; rather, it means those who come “through” it.<sup>78</sup> This seems a reasonable assessment since escaping the Great Tribulation would weaken the honor of true believers receiving their apparel and contradict testing by trial that Christians can expect. (cf. Rom 5:3–5; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 1:7).

### **The Greatness of a Seven-Year Tribulation Over-Estimated**

There are four possible ways that the seven-year tribulation could be defined as “great” and align with Jesus’ “great tribulation” (Matt 24:21). First, it could be considered great due to the length of time of its duration. This is the least credible, because, as the description suggests, it only lasts seven years. In fact, some pretribulationists believe that the persecution of saints does not begin until after the midway point, limiting the duration of actual tribulation to 3 ½

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<sup>78</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 138.

years. Second, it could be great due to the severity of the persecution. However, is it possible that believers worldwide could suffer in crueler ways than they already have and currently do?<sup>79</sup> Third, it could be great due to the number of people persecuted for faith in Jesus. However, if this tribulation occurs after all believers are raptured, it is difficult to imagine that there could possibly be more Christians persecuted during those seven-years (or 3½ years) than all persecuted Christians that have lived since the temple destruction in AD 70. Fourth, it might be great because of the number of places where persecution exists across the world during the brief period. This would not exceed current and past persecution locations unless the meaning is a *simultaneous* persecution. This is the only possible way that a future seven-year tribulation could be considered greater than the tribulation Christians have hitherto endured. However, no evidence of this possibility is presented in the Bible, and it would be an arbitrary reference.

Although Paul teaches that tribulation is to be expected by those living faithfully for the Lord,<sup>80</sup> this does not mean that every believer will suffer as long or as bad as others. There were Israelites who had moments of prosperity during trying times and seasons of trial during peaceful times, which is natural and biblical (cf. Matt 5:45). Christians may rejoice when blessed with seasons of rest, even though “tribulation is a normal experience for believers in this age” and should not come as a surprise (cf. 1 Pet 4:12; Rev 12).<sup>81</sup> Thus, it is acceptable to interpret the

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<sup>79</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 5.1.5, in *Josephus: The Complete Works*, trans. by William Whiston (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 837, records that Jerusalem faced pernicious inventions that were used against the Jews without mercy, no method of torture or cruelty was spared. For historical stories of persecution, see John Foxe, *Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 1989); and James C. Hefley and Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the 20th Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979). For current persecution statistics, see [www.opendoorsusa.org](http://www.opendoorsusa.org).

<sup>80</sup> Blomberg, *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, chap. 4, examines Paul's eighteen uses of *thlipsis* (tribulation) to refer to the “common feature of hardships and suffering in first-century Christian life.”

<sup>81</sup> Michael L. Brown and Craig S. Keener, *Not Afraid of the Antichrist: Why We Don't Believe in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), chapter 9, accessed April 2, 2020, Hoopla eBook.

Great Tribulation as lasting nearly two-thousand years without having to justify why many do not suffer.

### Conclusion

Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy refers to the coming of the Messiah who would "make an end of sin" and "bring in everlasting righteousness" (Dan 9:24). Although compelling cases convince many that Christ alone fulfills such a sacrifice and requires no further atonement of sin (whether through messianic or eschatological fulfillment), the historical fulfillment through the Antiochene crisis accomplishes Gabriel's criteria, was relevant to Daniel's generation, and was understood to be the resolution by Jesus' generation. The text neither states nor implies a gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks. The magnitude of the Great Tribulation as taught by Jesus and supported by Revelation is characterized by oppression and persecution "as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will" (Matt 24:21). The Great Tribulation begins with the Roman desecration of the Jewish temple and remains until the time of the sixth seal. Revelation 6:16 is the first time "wrath" is used in John's book because the Great Tribulation is not God nor the Lamb's wrath but ends immediately prior to "the day of their wrath" (Rev 6:17). The texts omit any support that the Great Tribulation would be in the distant future (unrelated to the original audience) or of a seven-year duration. Neither is it reasonable to assume that a future 3 ½ year period of persecution of saints—after all the previous saints were raptured—would be worse than what Christians have suffered for nearly two-thousand years. Therefore, it is likely that the Great Tribulation begins during the abomination of desolation in Herod's temple and continues until the sixth seal. Without the benefit of a future seven-year tribulation, pretribulationism and midtribulationism Rapture theories are significantly weakened.

## Chapter 3 – Examining Biblical Support for Rapture Theology

### Introduction

Pretribulationists claim frequent biblical allusions to the Rapture but admit that only three passages in the Bible directly teach the details of the Rapture: 1 Thessalonians 4:17; 1 Corinthians 15:51–52; and John 14:1–3.<sup>82</sup> Each of these passages need examination as well 2 Thessalonians 2, which, although used to indirectly support the Rapture, is prominently relied upon. By analyzing their contexts and comparing their content to other eschatological teachings, the intended meanings emerge. This chapter will identify if any of these passages directly teach a Rapture associated with the Great Tribulation or the return of the Lord.

### Analysis of 1 Thessalonians 4:17

Since 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is the single most cited verse used to defend Rapture theology, this section will include weightier details than other passages; if this verse cannot reasonably support the Rapture, then the doctrine has significantly weaker ground since many other scriptures, also supposedly supporting the Rapture, are used to compliment this verse. Furthermore, if an analysis of verse 17 determines that prominent Rapture theories mistakenly interpret its meaning, then the other passages which are used to claim Rapture support in conjunction with this verse may be equally misinterpreted. This discussion examines the broader context of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, after which, studies will be presented regarding the nature of Paul's message used to comfort his audience, an analysis of "meet" (1 Thess 4:17), and a comparison between Jesus' and Paul's eschatological teachings (Matt 24; 1 Thess 4:16–5:11).

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<sup>82</sup> Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture*, 99-100.

## Context of 1 Thessalonians

The first three of five chapters in 1 Thessalonians contain Paul's fond sentiments of the faith of the believers. Those in the church of Thessalonica received the Gospel of salvation from Paul gratefully, but after he was driven out, Paul began to fear for their faith and sent Timothy to encourage them (1 Thess 2:8, 15; 3:1–2). There are three points of interest to highlight in association with the theme of this paper. First, the Thessalonian Christians suffered afflictions, and Paul explains that this should not disturb them because, “for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this” (1 Thess 2:14; 3:3–4).<sup>83</sup> This implies that the Thessalonians were familiar with the expectation to endure persecution without altering their Christian behavior or beliefs as a result of fearing or experiencing such trials. Second, Paul reminds readers that he suffers as well. He was driven out of Thessalonica by hostile Jews, hindered in his preaching, and distressed on behalf of the Thessalonian church (1 Thess 2:15–16; 3:7). Lastly, Paul distinguishes between the affliction (tribulation) of believers and the wrath due to those who complete the measure of their sins by hindering the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Thess 2:16). These points have direct bearing on this discussion.

The suffering incurred by believers for their faith is overcome by Paul's reminder that their hope is in the return of Christ, “who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:10; cf. Rom 8:18). This “wrath to come,” such as that facing the Jews of 1 Thessalonians 2:14, is consistent with the eternal damnation received on judgment day (cf. Matt 25:41; Mark 9:47–50; 20:15). Far from wrath being identical to tribulation, Paul teaches that love is tested through

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<sup>83</sup> Gene Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 234, informs readers that the general population of Thessalonica enjoyed both peace and safety “during the mid-first century AD.” However, Paul is aware of the particular suffering of the believers due to their faith: persecution for their faith that came not from outsiders, but from their own “countrymen” (1 Thess 2:14).

tribulation. Whereas wrath comes through God inflicting punishment on those who need to repent (John 3:36; Rom 1:18; 2:5; 1 Thess 2:16; Rev 6:9–17), tribulations are the trials inflicted upon Christians by the world (Matt 24:7; Eph 4:14; Col 2:8; Rev 2–3). It is Paul’s hope that due to persevering through these trials, Christ will find the Thessalonians’ hearts blameless at his return (1 Thess 3:13). Candida Moss and Joel Baden further explain, “Whereas a number of apocalyptic texts stress the privileged status of the final generation, Paul is clear to emphasize that there is no advantage for those who survive to the end.”<sup>84</sup> If 1 Thessalonians 4:17 refers to the Rapture of a distant generation of believers for the purpose of preventing persecution, it would contradict the message hitherto proposed by Paul by suggesting that affliction is not necessarily for everyone. Believers will always experience hardships until the Lord’s return, but since the reason often given for the Rapture is to reward the church by removing them from further hardship, it is assumed that this hardship will be worse: a difficult case for Rapture proponents to make if they are basing that belief on 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Paul consistently instructs believers to expect trials but not once divulges of a select group who will not endure tribulation for a brief time. The Thessalonians would not likely understand that those raised to join Christ and the dead in the clouds would be timed to prevent that privileged generation from suffering earthly trials, especially while believing that their own afflictions demonstrated their love for the Lord and proved their character (1 Thess 3:12–13; cf. Rom 5:4).

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<sup>84</sup> Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, “First Thessalonians 4.13–18 in Rabbinic Perspective,” *New Testament Studies* 58, no. 2 (April 2012): 203. Moss and Baden compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 with Dan 12:12–13; 4 Ezra 6:18–28; Pss. Sol. 17:44; Sib. Or. 3:367–80.

## Comfort of 1 Thessalonians 4:16–18

In teaching about the resurrection of the dead in Christ, Paul assures readers that deceased believers will arise to meet Christ, followed by the living, adding, “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:18). What comfort is Paul offering? Walvoord suggests that there can be no comfort for those who may face “martyrdom, destruction, and persecution,” teaching that the encouragement this passage offers is escape from a future seven-year tribulation.<sup>85</sup> This study has recently brought attention to the affliction and suffering already facing believers within the context of this letter (1 Thess 2:14–15; 3:3–4, 7). The Thessalonians would receive no comfort in knowing that a distant generation would not suffer for their faith like they were. The comfort came through settling the debate that the dead in Christ resurrect, which is the message of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. The comfort was not, as Walvoord or Dwight Pentecost state, in knowing the Rapture would occur.<sup>86</sup> Pentecost assumes that the Thessalonians would praise the Lord in learning that future believers would be spared from enduring the seven-year tribulation.<sup>87</sup> However, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 mentions no tribulation, let alone as a pretext for being “caught up” (ἀρπαγησόμεθα).<sup>88</sup> Therefore, Paul’s description is not directly connected with the Great Tribulation but is meant to explain that deceased Christians will also be with Christ and the living believers. The comfort Paul offers is in the Lord’s victory for them and deceased believers despite their suffering and not in removing a distant generation from it. This is evident in Paul’s reminders to abound in love, encourage one another, be alert, and examine what is good, even if

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<sup>85</sup> Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord*, 51.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1958), chap. 8, accessed June 3, 2020, Hoopla eBook.

<sup>87</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, chap. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 74.

they die in the meantime (1 Thess 3:12; 5:6, 11, 14, 21). Despite their hardships, the Thessalonians will be with Jesus eternally. This is the comfort of 1 Thessalonians.

### **Analysis of “Meet” (ἀπάντησις)**

Debates persist on the meaning of the nature of how living believers “meet” Christ in the clouds (1 Thess 4:17). Pretribulationists and midtribulationists propose that believers meet Christ in the air so he may escort them into heaven while posttribulationists trust that believers meet Christ in the air to usher him into his millennial reign on earth. Difficulties exist with both interpretations and are distinct from a third viewpoint proposed here, which is wholly disconnected with the Great Tribulation.

A seven-year tribulation is necessary for pretribulation and midtribulation theories to prevail. Paul’s context also needs to confirm the existence of an escape for a select generation of privileged Christians. Both requirements are unmet by the examination of this study. However, were this theory not dismissed for these reasons, meeting Christ in the air would still be problematic. Paul determines the chronology and circumstances of the resurrection of the dead that counter pretribulation and midtribulation theories. He teaches that “God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thess 4:14). This informs readers that Jesus might be “with” those who have fallen asleep. Since the dead reside beneath the earth and in the sea (Rev 20:13), this may indicate that Jesus may already be reigning on earth at this moment. Those alive on earth witness this resurrection and then ascend with Jesus and the resurrected dead (1 Thess 4:15–17). Christ brings all who are God’s children into that place that he has prepared for them (John 14:2–3). There is no language involving Jesus meeting the dead somewhere between

heaven and earth, simply to accompany them onto heaven or back to earth.<sup>89</sup> It appears that Jesus may be on earth prior to bringing the dead with him to the prepared place. This explanation aligns with John’s teaching that Jesus’ return precedes the resurrection of the dead (Rev 19–20).

Attention is also warranted to the fact that throughout the entire letter, this is the only passage where resurrection and clouds are mentioned—not only mentioned together but at all. Darby acknowledges that Paul adds this particular doctrine of resurrection to instruct the Thessalonians that Christ’s return was necessary for resurrection.<sup>90</sup> Although every chapter in Paul’s letter includes the return of Christ, none refer to clouds except the passage including the resurrection of the dead (1 Thess 4:13–17).<sup>91</sup> This is not to say that clouds have no role in Jesus’ return (cf. Acts 1:9–11), but it does increase the likelihood that clouds are used in this instance to describe the resurrection of the dead and meeting Christ in the air rather than referring to Christ’s return to earth (if the two events are separate, as this study proposes).

Contributing to improper interpretations of verse 17 are two challenges concerning verse 14. The first difficulty regards translations which distort the natural order of the verse. Rather than projecting “in Jesus” as “describing the spiritual state of dead Christians”<sup>92</sup> (as in the NIV and NASB), the NRSV, ESV, and the TLB rearrange the words earlier in the sentence to suggest

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<sup>89</sup> Some scholars attach significance to “the air” (ἀέρα) in verse 17, suggesting that it is a realm of gods, spirits, or powers of darkness but there is no contextual connection between this belief and Paul’s use of the word; rather, this appears to be Paul’s way of simply saying that living believers will meet the Lord “up” from earth. See Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 228; Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 181.

<sup>90</sup> Darby, *Notes on the Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 298, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/EXPOSIT/27030E.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 180, illuminates possibly greater significance by stating that this is the only occurrence in which Paul refers to clouds in all of his letters.

<sup>92</sup> R. Garland Young, “The Times and the Seasons: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11,” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 2 (1999): 267.

that the dead are brought “through Jesus.” This questionable interpretation is used to support the Rapture, thereby giving hope not only in being reunited with departed Christians but also in escaping tribulation. Second, the phrase “with them” from verse 17 complements “with him” in verse 14. The precession of the dead rising aligns with the previous suggestion that Jesus will already be with the living believers on Earth when the “catching up” occurs. Garland Young states, “[‘The dead in Christ will rise first’], implies that Christ’s glorious return is a prerequisite for the resurrection of the dead believers.”<sup>93</sup> This appears to be why the dead are raised first, so that Jesus, the living, and the dead may then rise together from Earth and prior to all meeting one another “in the air.” Since Jesus is only said to be on Earth during the millennial reign (Rev 20), this understanding of Paul’s passage would imply that the resurrection could not precede his return.

Advocates for posttribulationism have to address why believers would meet Jesus in the air simply to “turn around” and come back down with him. Millard Erickson, one of many scholars who holds this view, likens the meeting of Jesus in the clouds to the virgins who “went out to meet the bridegroom” (Matt 25:1, 6).<sup>94</sup> Millard proposes that the virgins and the raptured believers are escorting their beloved back to where they originated from.<sup>95</sup> Unfortunately, a comparative study does not provide the location from which the virgins started. Even if it had, that would not necessarily mean that returning to earth is the implication of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 since the message of Jesus’ parable is not about the destination but being alert so that Christians may be with the bridegroom (Matt 25:13; 1 Thess 5:6). This is confirmed by the bridegroom and

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<sup>93</sup> Young, “The Times and the Seasons,” 268.

<sup>94</sup> Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 157.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

virgins' union at the wedding feast rather than by specifying a destination—which is apparently irrelevant.<sup>96</sup>

Gene Green offers better support in his comparison to Acts 28:15 that ἀπάντησιν promotes the implication that the greeters return to their origin when the brethren of Rome came to meet Paul.<sup>97</sup> However, like in Matthew 25:13, “meet” here merely supports that the parties came into contact for the purpose of greeting. Posttribulationism often leans on the understanding that ἀπάντησιν firmly implies that important citizens go out of the city to escort the honored guest back into their community.<sup>98</sup> However, it is the other details within the narrative that allow us to know if the departing and arriving locations are the same or even relevant. Although himself a posttribulationist, Ladd agrees on omission, and thus irrelevance, of this point regarding 1 Thessalonians 4:17, concluding, “Thus shall we ever be *with the Lord*, whether in the air, in heaven, or on earth” (italics in original).<sup>99</sup> F. F. Bruce acknowledges that the use of ἀπάντησιν sometimes describes meeting someone to escort them back to the location of origin but, in the context of Paul’s letter, nothing demands this interpretation, and the Lord’s destination is uncertain.<sup>100</sup> Gordon Fee not only sees nothing to encourage such an understanding but counters “meet’s” use as a technical term that implies the ceremonial return to the awaiting

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<sup>96</sup> In a similar teaching, Martha was concerned about the timing of Lazarus’ resurrection, but the timing was irrelevant because Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11:23–25).

<sup>97</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 226.

<sup>98</sup> Jeffrey A. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2014), 333; Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 226-8.

<sup>99</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 78.

<sup>100</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Nashville: Nelson, 1982), 102-3.

parties' origin.<sup>101</sup> He determines that the direct connection associated with this Hellenistic term used to receive a distinguished dignitary is unlikely, given that ceremonial elements are missing from the text.<sup>102</sup> The context and the grammar of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 fails to clarify where the destination is, implying that it was either unimportant or understood by the audience.<sup>103</sup>

The context of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 concerns the resurrection of the dead. Paul is offering hope to those who erroneously believed that the dead in Christ would never be united with Jesus. This supports the idea that some Christians believed Jesus would return in their lifetime. Paul does not allow this deception to continue to cause his church sorrow (1 Thess 4:13). It is eisegetical to interpret being “caught up” as escaping tribulation that has nothing to do with the current grief experienced by the Thessalonian church. Therefore, it is at the resurrection of the dead that living believers also go to meet Jesus in the air without the implication that they were not together on earth prior to this event. Nothing in Scripture provides evidence that the resurrection of the dead precedes earthly tribulation. Resurrection is spoken of as occurring not “in the last days” but “on the last day” (John 6:39–40; 44; 54; 11:24). It is reasonable to conclude that Paul’s statement will be fulfilled on judgment day (Rev 20:5, 12–21:1).

### **One Return: A Comparison between 1 Thessalonians 4:16–5:11 and Matthew 24:30–49**

Craig Blaising, among others who support a two-part return of Christ, teaches that 1 Thessalonians 4:16–5:11 strictly refers to the Rapture while Hart explains that “most pretribulationist interpreters have opposed seeing a rapture of any form in Matthew 24,” claiming

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<sup>101</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 180, including fn. 52.

<sup>102</sup> Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 180.

<sup>103</sup> P. G. R. De Villiers, “The Eschatology of 1 Thessalonians in the Light of Its Spirituality,” *Acta Theologica* 28, no. 1 (June 2008): 23.

that this passage only expounds on Christ’s glorious appearing.<sup>104</sup> However, comparing the two passages makes the assessment that they refer two different events untenable. Table 3.1 demonstrates that the topics addressed by Jesus and Paul are identical.

**Table 3.1. Eschatological Terms, 1 Thessalonians 4:16–5:11 and Matthew 24:30–49**

<i>Eschatological Term</i>	<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	<i>Matthew 24</i>
Christ Returns	4:16	24:30
From Heaven/Sky	4:16	24:30
Angel(s)	4:16	24:31
Trumpet	4:16	24:31
Believers Gathered Together	4:17	24:31
Clouds	4:17	24:30
Unknown Timing	5:1–2	24:36
Day of the Lord Comes Like a Thief	5:2, 4	24:43
Unbelievers Are Unaware	5:3	24:37–39
Believers Are Not Deceived	5:4–5	24:33
Believers Be Watchful	5:6	24:46
Believers Soberly Wait	5:7	24:49

The contexts of both passages involve the return of Christ, and the language overwhelmingly supports that they are the same return and not two distinct parts. Paul described the same event in chapter 5 as in chapter 4 and understood the *parousia* and glorious appearing to be the same event.<sup>105</sup> Fee supports the single return of Christ, explaining that Paul is conveying what happens to the living and dead believers at the time of the *parousia*, which compliments the synoptic record of Jesus’ return (e.g., Mark 13:26).<sup>106</sup> Hart, although a pretribulationist, agrees that the

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<sup>104</sup> Craig Blaising, *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, Posttribulation*, ed. Stanley Gundry and Alan Hultberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 66; Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture*, 46, 66. Hart further identifies and cites Paul Feinberg, Charles Ryrie, and John Walvoord as examples.

<sup>105</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 131.

<sup>106</sup> Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 179-80. Fee wisely comments on 1 Thessalonians 4:17, “Here there is no ‘return’ to earth with those who meet him in the air, any more than there is any interest in heaven as the place of final destiny” (181).

similar wording must mean that both passages refer to the same event, but since he believes Paul's teaching is firmly about the Rapture, he concludes that the Olivet Discourse must likewise teach the Rapture, regardless of any direct language to distinguish the Rapture from Jesus' Return.<sup>107</sup> Parallels exist between the two passages, as in the day of the Lord reflecting the parousia (Matt 24:36; Thess 5:2). Those who maintain that Matthew 24 refers to the Rapture may suggest that the absence of the millennial reign of Christ from the text indicates that it has not occurred yet, providing evidence for the described return to be the Rapture. However, since the return of Christ also precedes the millennial reign, then there is no reason to suppose Matthew is writing about a two-part return of Christ. Furthermore, the second question that Jesus answers pertains to his return and not believers' removal from earth. Christ says six times in chapter 24 that he is coming and not once that he will remove living believers from the peril described (Matt 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 44).

Blaising holds an alternative view from mainstream pretribulationism that would have readers distinguish between the coming of the Lord described in Matthew 24:4–35 as a different event than his coming in Matthew 24:36–25:46 on the basis that a distant seven-year tribulation is implied to cause the distinction.<sup>108</sup> Moo disagrees, arguing that there is no reason to view two parts to Christ's coming in either the Olivet Discourse or in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians.<sup>109</sup> Blaising's distinction would not be apparent to anyone not trying to "fit" the Rapture into the Olivet Discourse. Verse 36 does not jump from the events surrounding the Rapture to the return

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<sup>107</sup> Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture*, 46, 51-8.

<sup>108</sup> Blaising, *Three Views on the Rapture*, 52-4.

<sup>109</sup> Moo, *Three Views on the Rapture*, 99-100.

of the Lord; rather, it simply expounds on Christ's answer to the disciples' second question regarding his return (Matt 24:3).

John further confirms that Jesus and Paul are talking about the same occurrence in his description of the seventh angel sounding the trumpet. Both 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 and Revelation 11:15–18 refer to common elements: God's trumpet, heavenly voices, the Lord's possession of the world, the dead rising to face judgment, saints reuniting with the Lord, and Christ's kingdom being eternal. These similar aspects make it likely that John and Paul are referring to the same season, which is Christ's return. It is evident that Jesus did not teach of his own two-part return, and neither Paul nor John were aware of such a message. These two passages in particular cannot be dismissed as the authors' inability to comprehend their own prophecies (as some have suggested based on extended application of Daniel 12:4);<sup>110</sup> rather, they can be trusted because both authors received their messages directly from the Lord (1 Thess 4:15; Rev 1:1, 11; 4:1).

When determining the time, nature, and identity of those "caught up" (1 Thess 4:17), the less added to the text, the better for understanding authorial intent. It has been demonstrated that adding details to the text is not done without complications. Whether one adds that those "caught up" return to earth, go onward to heaven, conquer supernatural powers in the air, participate in a Hellenized dignitary reception, later coincide with Christ's descent, or are at the precise point of being saved from wrath, corruption of Paul's message occurs. The context requires no additional details to understand that this event occurs not at the return of Christ, nor at the Rapture, but at the resurrection of the dead. The church of Thessalonica would likely have understood this to be

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<sup>110</sup> Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: A New Understanding of the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Second Coming* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990), 270; LaHaye, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, 1018.

the case since a two-part return of Christ was not taught and a catching up was not mentioned elsewhere, even though Christ's return was taught in every chapter of Paul's letter. Although living believers are "caught up" at the resurrection of the dead, it follows chronologically, but is not in direct association with, the Great Tribulation and Jesus' subsequent return. Therefore, Rapture theology that uses 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as an anchor for its belief appears unsupportable.

#### Analysis of 1 Corinthians 15:51–52

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 is often used to provide additional details for how the Rapture will occur. One cannot depend on this passage to confirm a Rapture event, much less to identify whether Paul supports a pretribulational, midtribulational, or posttribulational Rapture since there is no mention of the Great Tribulation.<sup>111</sup> The general topic of 1 Corinthians 15 is to inform the believers of Corinth of the state of transformation of Christians during their resurrection (1 Cor 15:12, 35, 42).<sup>112</sup> Specifically, these verses help answer, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" (1 Cor 15:35).

The focus of this passage is sometimes used to justify Rapture theology, which is unfortunate because it often involves corrupting the natural understanding of the text. For instance Michael Vanlaningham makes the case that Paul is defending a pretribulational Rapture because the context presented earlier in the chapter warrants that conclusion. There are two ways he distorts the order of Scripture to achieve his interpretation. First, the resurrection of believers is stated to occur "at His coming" (1 Cor 15:23); however, Vanlaningham insists that the

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<sup>111</sup> Michael G. Vanlaningham, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 123.

<sup>112</sup> Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 412-3.

following verse, which describes abolishing “all rule and all authority and power” precedes Christ’s coming and is achieved at the Rapture.<sup>113</sup> In other words, verses 23 and 24 should be understood in reverse order. Second, Vanlaningham supports reversing the two “when” statements of verse 24 to support his view that the abolishment of all rule occurs at the Rapture and precedes Christ’s handing over the kingdom to God.<sup>114</sup> Neither of these conclusions are likely to be understood by a natural reading of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Furthermore, Vanlaningham’s interpretation assumes two points: (1) this is the same event as in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, and (2) 1 Thessalonians 4:17 directly teaches of the Rapture. Although the topic of the resurrection of the dead is the same between both passages,<sup>115</sup> Paul cannot be addressing the Rapture here since it was established earlier in this study that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 speaks of no removal from tribulation. Rapture theology is only applied to this passage because of its supposed connection to the Rapture message of 1 Thessalonians 4:17.<sup>116</sup> Instead of the Rapture, Paul’s mystery is that heirs of the kingdom of God transform into imperishable bodies conforming to that of Christ’s resurrected body (1 Cor 15:53; cf. Phil 3:21).<sup>117</sup>

The context establishes that Paul is not addressing a method of escape from trial, let alone the timing of such an event. Walvoord disagrees, concluding that the Rapture preceding the

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<sup>113</sup> Vanlaningham, *Evidence for the Rapture*: 129-32, 137.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 131.

<sup>116</sup> Alan Hultberg, *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, Posttribulation*, ed. Stanley Gundry and Alan Hultberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 11.

<sup>117</sup> Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 724; Gary S. Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 189.

seven-year tribulation “is plainly implied” in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52.<sup>118</sup> However, the context reveals nothing of future worldwide tribulation, especially one in which a particular generation of Christians escape. This passage strictly relates to the resurrection of the dead, which, in Christian theology, does not equate to a Rapture.<sup>119</sup> Witherington identifies the clearest interpretation of this passage, writing, “Paul sees the future dominion as a place which one enters or inherits as a realm, and that one can do so only after Christ returns and the dead in Christ are raised.”<sup>120</sup>

There is also the complication of the Rapture supposedly occurring at “the last trumpet” (1 Cor 15:52). Since Paul’s passage does not discuss the timing of the “changing,” neither posttribulationists nor pretribulationists enjoy consensus on its meaning.<sup>121</sup> Revelation teaches that the seventh (and last) trumpet is when Jesus returns for his millennial reign (Rev 11:15). Arnold Fruchtenbaum points out the unlikelihood that Paul’s last trumpet was understood by the Corinthian believers to be the seventh trumpet of Revelation because Revelation had not been written yet.<sup>122</sup> It is true that Revelation was yet to come, but the Corinthians would not need to understand John’s seven trumpets in order for Paul’s statement to refer to the final trumpet. Furthermore, there is nothing throughout Scripture to suggest that God’s eschatological plan for the church runs on a different divine path than the rest of humanity (e.g., Noah’s salvation coincided with the earth’s judgment during the Flood). Joseph Pak argues that evidence for

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<sup>118</sup> Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord*, 52.

<sup>119</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 32.

<sup>120</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 186.

<sup>121</sup> Vanlaningham, *Evidence for the Rapture*, 134-5.

<sup>122</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1982), 101.

Paul's last trumpet referring to the Rapture hinges on the flexibility of trumpets being used in Judaic battle calls, Old Testament references, and how well the "uses of the trumpet fit so well with a pretribulational rapture."<sup>123</sup> Pak uses a broad understanding of all biblical trumpets to suggest that Paul's last trumpet is obscure, perhaps even a figure of speech. His claim that Paul's uses of "trumpet" fit the context of pretribulationism is not surprising since pretribulationism claims that this is the interpretation. This reasoning is cyclic and diverting from any intended meaning of Paul. A plain understanding of "the last trumpet" would indicate that this is the last trumpet for all mankind, which is why the timing of the resurrection of the dead on the last day is addressed. In Revelation, the dead are raised during the seventh trumpet as well (Rev 20:5, 12–13).

#### Analysis of John 14:3

The third passage frequently used to support Rapture theology is where Jesus teaches that he will go to prepare a place for his disciples and come back to receive them (John 14:3). In fact, Walvoord states that this is the first time in all of Scripture that the Rapture is mentioned.<sup>124</sup> That being so, how were the disciples to understand that Jesus was referring to his return in two stages? They would be incapable of discerning such an implication. In the seven instances in Revelation that Jesus tells John "I am coming," he never once expresses any language that conveys he is coming twice (Rev 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20). Therefore, if Jesus were revealing his two-part return in John 14:3, this teaching would likely become explicit somewhere in John's vision of the last days.

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<sup>123</sup> Joseph Pak, "Pretribulational Rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58" (S. T. M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, November 1993), 18-9, accessed January 18, 2020.

<sup>124</sup> LaHaye, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, 1269-70.

Rapture interpretation is adopted into John 14:3 simply because of “its similarity to Paul’s more detailed teaching” (1 Thess. 4:13–18).<sup>125</sup> Identifying the message of verse 3 with Paul’s teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4 is not misplaced; however, Paul’s teaching was relating to the resurrection of the dead, which is never said to occur in direct relation to the Great Tribulation. Since Jesus did not return to receive his disciples while they were alive, this passage can only apply to them at their resurrection. John’s context of Christ’s receiving them to go to the Father’s house in verse 2 aligns with his description of those raised from the dead into eternal life who inherit the new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem (Rev 20:11–21:1; cf. Heb 12:22–24). John writes nothing in this passage about those who are alive when Christ returns and, therefore, does not address the relevant aspects (for this discussion) of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 or 1 Corinthians 15:51–52.

Scholars debate each phrase in John 14: 1–3 to discern their meaning. For instance, correct interpretation of, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places,” is widely disputed. George Gunn insists that this statement refers to “heaven,” and this fact is demonstrated by Jesus’ need to “go and prepare” this location for the seven-year visit of the raptured church.<sup>126</sup> Rossing compares the same word for dwelling places, *μοναὶ*, from John 14:2 with the location where the Father and Jesus will “make our home with” whoever loves and obeys him (John 14:23).<sup>127</sup> Rossing explains how “God’s mystical indwelling in the believer” emphasizes Jesus’ earlier point in John 14:2 that it is neither the time nor the location that matters, but being with

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<sup>125</sup> Pak, “Pretribulation Rapture,” 1269.

<sup>126</sup> George A. Gunn, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 110-1.

<sup>127</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 184.

Jesus.<sup>128</sup> This provides the most direct interpretation of “where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). The relevance of the unspecified location of living eternally with Jesus is compatible with the previous point in this study regarding 1 Thessalonians 4:17; the lack of specifying a location does not grant the reader freedom to “fill in the blank” with their own eschatology.<sup>129</sup>

The emphasis of John 14:3 is that Christ receives the disciples, rather than the destination or the length of time residing at the destination as Rapture proponents suggest. Rapture theology fails to explain why the disciples’ hearts should not be troubled (John 14:1) if they know that they will have to return to earth, out of the presence of the Father, following their seven-year trip to heaven. Robert Gundry writes, “The pretribulationist interpretation would require us to believe that the church will occupy heavenly mansions for a short period of seven years, only to vacate them for a thousand years.”<sup>130</sup> However, posttribulationists likewise cannot use this verse to support a simultaneous snatching of believers and return of Christ simply because of its silence on the status of living believers during Christ’s return. Were the location pertinent to understanding Jesus’ pledge of returning, he would have elaborated. His focus is that his dwelling will ultimately be with the disciples at the resurrection on judgment day (Rev 20:15–19).

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<sup>128</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 184.

<sup>129</sup> Gunn, *Evidence for the Rapture*, 111, 117, who favors pretribulationism, disagrees with Rossing and argues that John 14:23 refers to the dwelling place “located within the believer” while the context of John 14:2 makes it certain that the dwelling place is the location where believers end up with the Lord. Gunn constrains his argument by limiting the destination to either heaven or earth, assuming that the obvious choice is heaven since the believers will be leaving earth to go to a prepared place.

<sup>130</sup> Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 153.

## Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 2

Whereas the previous passages constitute the resurrection of the dead, 2 Thessalonians 2 pertains to the return of Christ. This is partially established in chapter 1 by Paul's teachings that the Lord will return "with his mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess 1:7; cf. Ps 29:7; Isa 66:15; Rev 19:14). Nathan Holsteen disagrees on the premise that the Rapture teaching of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 "correlates very nicely with 2 Thessalonians 2."<sup>131</sup> Holsteen, somewhat vaguely, infers that the teaching of the Rapture (from the pretribulationist view) is contextually what Paul told his readers (2 Thess 2:5). This interpretation is completely unwarranted since Jesus' unity with the saints includes no language of catching up or transformation into his likeness. Although there admittedly exists grammatical difficulties and the understanding is somewhat obscure, several prominent scholars argue that the context and grammar of 2 Thessalonians teaches only of one return of the Lord (the *parousia*), referred to as "the coming of our Lord" and is part of an eschatological period known as "the day of the Lord" (2 Thess 2:1–2).<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, the implication of a Rapture for a future generation contradicts the suffering and tribulation that Paul taught the church of Thessalonica to expect (1 Thess 1:4–7). There appears to be no reason for Holsteen to interpret chapter 2 as a separate event from Christ's return except to create his own context for pretribulationism.

Chapter 2 should not be read outside of the context of verse 1, which informs readers that this information regards the Lord's return and a gathering to him. Posttribulationists claim proof that since "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him" share

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<sup>131</sup> Nathan Holsteen, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 178.

<sup>132</sup> Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 271; Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 242; Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 502; Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 302.

one article in Greek, the syntax demonstrates that they are the same event.<sup>133</sup> There are two objections with this statement. First, Daniel Wallace explains that Paul employs a construction using impersonal substantives, casting “the highest degree of doubt . . . upon the probability of the terms referencing the same event.”<sup>134</sup> Although this description does not preclude the two events from being simultaneous, it does ensure that Paul is referring to two separate events. Second, Gary Shogren states that Paul’s term could mean “events that are closely identified.”<sup>135</sup> Since this study demonstrated that Paul closely identified important but distinct seventh-trumpet events in 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17, Shogren’s description is likely an appropriate understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2:1. In other words, since Paul’s writing style has already demonstrated itself to lump multiple eschatological themes into a brief passage summarizing the events under the description, “the coming of the Lord” (1 Thess 4:15), it is reasonable that “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” likewise will be closely identified while still representing distinct events within the same season of prophecy. Furthermore, posttribulationists’ hypothesis is only possible if Paul’s “gathering” is the same event as his “snatching” (1 Thess 4:17). Given that the context for 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is in relation to the resurrection of the dead, it is uncertain whether Paul is referring to the same event and should not be assumed. Paul’s “gathering” may better fit the broader biblical theme that nations return to the Lord at his second coming (Joel 2:32–3:2; Isa 60:3; 62:2).

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<sup>133</sup> David J. Williams, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 122; Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 302; Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 500.

<sup>134</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 290.

<sup>135</sup> Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 271-2.

Verse 2 states that the Thessalonians were concerned that Christ's return had already occurred. Pentecost and Robert Thomas insist that the Thessalonians feared that they missed the Rapture.<sup>136</sup> Shogren disagrees with the logic of such an interpretation, pointing out, "Paul's proofs have to do with the Man of Lawlessness and the great Apostasy, signs that in a dispensationalist scheme should not have preceded the rapture."<sup>137</sup> Although this study cannot divert into analyzing the "apostasy" (2 Thess 2:3), the brethren whom Paul addressed will not be gathered together until they are resurrected in the last day. None of them would live to witness the supposed Rapture, making it unreasonable that this is the time of which Paul wrote. Witherington explains that verses 1 and 8 are clearly referring to the same return of Christ, despite many dispensationalists' claims that verse 1 refers to the Rapture.<sup>138</sup>

The Thessalonians would not have been confused about the Rapture occurring because the raising of dead and ascension of living believers accompanied by a loud command, voice of an archangel, and sound of God's trumpet could not go unnoticed (1 Thess 4:16–17). The Thessalonians were likely some of those spoken of by Jesus when he warned followers not to believe those who claim that Christ had come (Matt 24:23). They would not have expected him to be in the wilderness or the inner rooms if he were secretly removing them to heaven (Matt 24:26). Although followers would continue to be deceived regarding his return, he assured his

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<sup>136</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, chap. 8; Robert L. Thomas, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 37. Thomas' implied evidence for this deduction is merely that it correlates with Paul's previous teaching on the Rapture (1 Thess 4:14–17). His primary argument is that this understanding makes sense because the day of the Lord cannot occur until after the "gathering" takes place (1 Thess 2:1). However, this parameter of his interpretation is a presupposition of pretribulationism and not an idea gleaned directly from Scripture.

<sup>137</sup> Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 274.

<sup>138</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 142.

disciples that his return would be noticeable like lightening that covered the whole sky (Matt 24:27).

Furthermore, the Thessalonians' fear that Jesus may have already returned is countered by Paul's reminder that the Lord's return will be preceded by the abomination of desolation (1 Thess 2:3–4; Matt 24:15). Since the altar of the Lord was desecrated with the bodies of the dead during the temple destruction in AD 70,<sup>139</sup> the lawless one likely refers to either the Roman Emperor Vespasian who reigned during the holy site's desecration or one of Jerusalem's other great persecutors (e.g., Caligula or Nero).

It is also argued that Paul did not know the identity of the "man of lawlessness" because he is a future antichrist. Wohlberg offers another reasonable possibility on the nameless individual's identity: identifying the man of lawlessness as the Roman emperor would be seen as treason, resulting in increased persecution against the church.<sup>140</sup> Although Paul does not identify the man of lawlessness, his letter reads as if the Thessalonians are familiar with the term, which would be unlikely if he were a future villain, wholly unconnected with them. Fee notes that Paul is not teaching the Thessalonians about future events of which they were unaware but reiterating those things that he had already taught them concerning Christ's coming.<sup>141</sup> Given the ambiguity of the chapter, the Thessalonians would have already been familiar with his words, which were meant as comfort rather than as incomprehensible prophecy regarding an event unknown to and unconnected with them. The context allows no room for interpreting Christ's return or the day of the Lord as the Rapture.

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<sup>139</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 6.4.5-8, 887-8.

<sup>140</sup> Wohlberg, *End Time Delusions*, 80.

<sup>141</sup> Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 277.

## Conclusion

The meaning of “caught up” (ἀρπαγησόμεθα) from 1 Thessalonians 4:17 has been loaded with unbiblical meaning by those who promote Rapture theology. The sustainability of Rapture doctrine falters severely in its ability to demonstrate valid support in either direct language or in context. Since 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, John 14:3, and 2 Thessalonians 2 are taught to expound on the Rapture message of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, they, likewise, are unable to defend this belief. These passages are also the basis used for interpreting many other New Testament passages as describing the Rapture.<sup>142</sup> However, without any direct teaching available, such passages contain no content supporting the Rapture. There is no explicit doctrine of a two-part return of Christ, a miraculous snatching of a special generation of future believers for seven years, or that believers will meet Jesus in the air only to usher him back to earth. The contexts of these passages support the resurrection of the dead and transformation of living believers without contradicting the single return of the Lord and are consistent with the same principles reflected in Matthew 24 and throughout Revelation.

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<sup>142</sup> In light of accepting that the previously examined passages refer to the Rapture, proponents further claim New Testament support from many other Scriptures (John 14:28; Acts 1:11; Rom 8:19, 23; 14:10–11; 1 Cor 3:14–15; 4:5; 9:25; 11:26; 13:10; 15:23; 16:22; 2 Cor 4:14; 5:10; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:19; 5:23; 1 Tim 4:1; 6:14–15; 2 Tim 1:18; 3:1; 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13; Jas 1:12; 5:7–8; 1 Pet 1:4, 7, 13; 5:4; 2 Pet 2:1; 3:3–4, 10, 14; 1 John 2:25; 3:2–3; 4:17; 2 John 1:8; Jude 21, 24; Rev 2:10, 25; 3:3).

## Chapter 4 – Rapture Theology Compared to Revelation

### Introduction

Revelation describes the fulfillment of previously examined eschatological topics and omits direct mention of the Rapture. This section first exposes the obstacle of John's audience being unfamiliar with concepts of the Rapture. Then, a reflection of those passages in Revelation often used to reinforce the Rapture in relation to the Great Tribulation will be discussed (Rev 3:10; 4:1–2). Finally, the argument of raptured believers supposedly returning with Christ to earth is met with exegetical challenges (Rev 19–20). Revelation culminates with a transition from the old heaven and earth to the new and therein lies the resolution for Paul's meaning in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

### John's Audience

The book of Revelation is often explained by Rapture proponents as almost exclusively applying to today's believers. This viewpoint dismisses the historically referential nature of the text by overlooking the plain meaning of several key verses and the common sense of understanding the letters from the perspective of the seven churches.<sup>143</sup> For instance, the letters are addressed to the bondservants of Jesus Christ and sent to the seven churches of first-century Asia (Rev 1:1, 11). Rather than being prophecies directly written for Christians of any generation, Jesus specifically instructed John to send Revelation to the believers of his day. This is not to suggest that future generations could not benefit from the vision, but the content had direct relevance to John's contemporaries.

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<sup>143</sup> Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 118.

The seven churches' ability to directly benefit from Revelation is apparent in that the book contains prophecies of "things which must soon take place" because "the time is near" (Rev 1:1, 3; 22:10). If the vision were only pertinent to a distant group of Christians, then these statements would not exist. The grammar and context of these statements give readers reasonable certainty that the season of which John spoke will begin in the near future.<sup>144</sup> John expected these events to begin near his lifetime rather than two millennia hence.<sup>145</sup> This potentially aligns with Jesus' warning that his generation would likewise see the eschatological events of which he spoke (Matt 24:34). Furthermore, "After these things" and "After this" are used ten times in Revelation, demonstrating the vision's chronological nature. Scholars who rearrange the order of Revelation or liberally interpret the lengths of time given to justify the seven-year tribulation or the Rapture should have solid evidence for doing so.<sup>146</sup> Unfortunately, such distortions appear to merely align with authors' respective eschatology.

John's prophecy had direct relevance to both the seven churches of Asia and the believers at large of his time. The immediate impact of the vision would be experienced by his contemporary audience, even if the application of the vision would be felt throughout time. This is why Jesus later says, "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the

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<sup>144</sup> In an email dated to the author on October 5, 2016, Fred W. Burnett (professor of Advanced Greek) wrote, "In secular Greek, all semantic forms of *ταχύ* mean 'quickly,' 'as soon as possible,' 'right away,' and so forth, and this is certainly true in the context of Revelation."

<sup>145</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 66. By contrast, the preterist view interprets these phrases, along with Revelation 22:6, as meaning that the entire prophecy will soon take place. See Gentry, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 41.

<sup>146</sup> For instance, Alan Hultberg, *Three Views on the Rapture*, 152, suggests that John may have chosen to write about the resurrection of the dead in Revelation 20 instead of where it should fall chronologically in Revelation to highlight its significance in Christ.

churches” (Rev 22:16). How else could John’s audience have taken this prophecy if not as a call for immediate awareness, readiness, and repentance?

This is where many dispensationalists interpret Revelation backwards. They believe that John’s original readers were only to understand Revelation as a message of hope without experiencing direct involvement with any of the 7 Seals, the beast from the sea, etc. Brian Blount expresses this attitude, claiming that John tells his audience what they would want to hear to feel “vindication, peace, and security.”<sup>147</sup> At the same time, like-minded dispensationalists believe that present day Christians are living in the precise time to soon experience direct fulfillment because God has only recently revealed hidden meaning from within the text. They claim that recent opportunity for divine revelation is responsible for the greater insight and understanding in modern times that allow believers to understand the nature of eschatological prophecy better than those throughout much of church history. Albert Barnes disagrees, warning that those “with a view to furnish a more full and complete revelation; or with a profession that new truth had been communicated by inspiration” are in danger of suffering the consequences of Revelation 22:18–19.<sup>148</sup> Yet, dispensationalists claim biblical support for believing that the majority of the events in Revelation are either unfolding in modern times or will play out in the future, and it is not hard to see their perspective since they read Scripture from that angle. After all, if readers’ goal in studying Revelation is to see how modern Christians fit in, then (to no surprise) they eventually find passages that become that answer. The risk becomes elevated when believers narrow down interpretive options to the scenario that most likely places the church (themselves) in the best outcome and, therefore, choose to believe it—be that position as one of the 144,000

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<sup>147</sup> Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 386-7.

<sup>148</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the Old & New Testaments: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), Section on Revelation 22:18, accessed December 8, 2020, Google Books.

sealed bondservants, a cavalryman alongside Jesus on a white horse, or one who simply absconded in the Rapture. Much is missed if readers fail to appreciate the message intended for first century believers when interpreting Revelation.

### Analysis of Revelation 3:10

Revelation 3:10 is used as a reference to support pretribulational and midtribulational Rapture doctrines but not without difficulty. Ron Rhodes, claiming to use a “literal interpretation of biblical prophecy” writes, “The context clearly points to the future seven-year tribulation, which is described in detail in Revelation 6–19.”<sup>149</sup> However, John’s audience would not have seen a future seven-year tribulation or a method of escape from it as a literal explanation. The literal interpretation applies to the intended audience and the tribulation that they would face. Robert Wall explains that although the Philadelphian believers’ trial is “constitutive of the global hour of trial described in 12:1–19:10,” the promise is that “Christ will keep *them* from the hour of trial” (italics mine).<sup>150</sup> Present tribulation would have been understood to them: likely political trial or religious persecution given the context.<sup>151</sup> John was not communicating a future mysterious tribulation that neither concerned them nor made sense, nor was he covertly referring to a secret Rapture. Jesus says, “I am coming quickly,” but never mentions removing Christians; instead, he uses language of protecting Christians (Rev 22:7, 12, 20). The context of the situation

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<sup>149</sup> Ron Rhodes, *The End Times in Chronological Order: A Complete Overview to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2012), 41-2.

<sup>150</sup> Robert W. Wall, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), chapter 3, accessed June 3, 2020, Hoopla eBook.

<sup>151</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 33.

at the church of Philadelphia causes David Aune to conclude that the “hour of testing” was an event familiar to Paul’s audience through which God would preserve them.<sup>152</sup>

When reading Revelation primarily from the perspective that today and tomorrow’s Christians are the intended audience, beliefs about its meaning risk becoming corrupted. Witherington warns against following the teachings of dispensationalists like John Walvoord. He contradicts Walvoord’s assertions that only today’s churches are privileged to understand John’s prophecy.

John was writing for his own audiences in the first century A.D. not for late Western Christians in the twenty-first century. The text was a revelation to those Christians first. Any reading of these texts that suggests it could only have relevance for or make sense to Christians who lived many centuries after John does an injustice to this remarkable book. John is unveiling the secrets and unsealing the scrolls for his audience not sealing them back up for a much later audience to uncover.<sup>153</sup>

If believers are being taught that the judgments of Revelation will only occur in the last days (meaning their future), then they will, naturally, understand the Great Tribulation to apply to a future generation. Despite Rhodes’ confidence, the context in no way “clearly points to the future seven-year tribulation” nor escape for believers. Ladd asserts that the language neither demands nor implies bodily removal prior to the test mentioned.<sup>154</sup> If the prophecy of Revelation 3:10 is relevant to future generations, it is as an application of believers’ perseverance and God’s justice.

#### Analysis of Revelation 4:1–2

Scholars often agree that there is no specific passage in Revelation directly mentioning the Rapture. Many reject Darby’s theory that the Rapture occurs during Revelation 12:5, 10–12,

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<sup>152</sup> David Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Revelation 1-5* (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 239.

<sup>153</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 70.

<sup>154</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 85.

but when do they believe the catching up takes place in relation to John's vision? According to Desmond Allen, Revelation 4:1–2 refers to the Rapture since the terminology of these two verses is similar to 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, adding that parallels with other passages cannot mean anything other than a pretribulational Rapture (cf. John 10:9; 1 Thess 4:16–17; Titus 2:13).<sup>155</sup> However, Walvoord admits that this meaning is not explicitly taught but assumed.<sup>156</sup> Witherington adamantly disagrees that this passage refers to the Rapture, stating, "It is quite unwarranted to make out of this chapter a proof text for the rapture of the church. . . . What is in view is not the bodily transportation into heaven but an ecstatic state in which John received a vision."<sup>157</sup> Ladd adds, "the language is addressed exclusively to John and refers only to his reception of the revelations of the book."<sup>158</sup> Comparison of John's and Paul's passages will show which commentators are correct.

John speaks of no archangel, no resurrection of the dead, no gathering of believers, no eternal promise, and no descending Christ. The only similarities between the Revelation 4:1–2 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 are the words, "trumpet and heaven," but even these are not compatible themes. Paul refers to an actual trumpet of God whereas John hears a voice "like the sound of a trumpet" (Rev 4:1). Next, Heaven is the origin in one passage and the destination in the other. Lastly, those who are "alive and remain" are taken bodily while John was

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<sup>155</sup> Allen, *The Wise Shall Understand*, 102-3.

<sup>156</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 103.

<sup>157</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 116.

<sup>158</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 72.

“immediately in the spirit.”<sup>159</sup> Witherington and Ladd’s conclusion that Revelation 4:1–2 is not valid support for Rapture theology appears correct.

### Analysis of Revelation 19–21

#### **The Marriage and Marriage Supper of the Lamb**

Revelation 19:7–9 speaks of the joyous uniting between the Lord and his church. Pretribulationists believe that this event is where those who ascend in the Rapture are judged for their good deeds and are honored by Christ (while bad deeds are forgiven and forgotten). The belief in heaven as the site of this marriage is tenuous because it leans upon an assumption that the great multitude of verse 1 is the raptured church and also difficult to support since John never declared that the church gets raptured. What is not present is the fanciful idea that the marriage supper is a seven-year reward ceremony in heaven. Whereas the absence of the marriage’s location in the text alone is insufficient to exclude the possibility of a heavenly locale, grammar and context also counter the likelihood of this idea. The marriage of the Lamb “has come,” as in, “has *now* come.” Aorist verbs, like ἦλθεν, are undefined in the scope of when the action occurs. However, the context does not imply the distant past, but as having just occurred at this point in the vision, which is why the English translations do not present ἦλθεν as “came.”<sup>160</sup> Witherington and Ladd explain that Jesus returns not with his bride but for his bride, and this return precedes the feast.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> For evidence that believers are taken bodily, compare with Philip being “snatched” (ἤρπασεν) from Acts 8:39 and John’s reference to Christ’s ascension when he was “caught up” (ἤρπάσθη) to God (Rev 12:5; cf. Acts 1:9).

<sup>160</sup> Similar examples of ἦλθεν being used to state events as having just occurred at that relative points in stories may be found elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 5:7; 6:17; 8:3; 11:18; 14:7, 15; 17:1, 10; 18:10; 19:7; 21:9).

<sup>161</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 233; Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 102.

Paul Benware proposes a modified view, stating, “The marriage takes place in heaven, but the feast takes place on the earth.”<sup>162</sup> This view still allows pretribulationists the enjoyment of seeing themselves as the chosen bride of Christ ceremonially while recognizing their inclusion in the implied victory celebration of Revelation 20:4–6.<sup>163</sup> However, admitting that the marriage alone takes place in heaven still bends the grammatical structure out of place. John states that it is at this point that “the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready” (Rev 19:7–9). No indication of a previous unification is present to suggest that the bride made herself ready seven years prior.

### **The Return of Christ**

Christ returns accompanied by “the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean” (Rev 19:14). The relevant factor for this discussion is to identify the armies. Pretribulationists and midtribulationists believe that the armies comprise the raptured church. Several authors defend this position by identifying the armies as those with the Lamb who are “the called and chosen and faithful” (Rev 17:14),<sup>164</sup> none of whom offers a reason why the armies should not be angels; however, Alan Hultberg insists they are “almost certainly human believers” because the armies’ apparel resembles the bride (Rev 19:8).<sup>165</sup> “Cherry-picking” Revelation 17:14 to explain Revelation 19:14 overlooks the contextual explanation that “those

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<sup>162</sup> Paul Benware, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, 1527.

<sup>163</sup> Mark R. Saucy, “Storied Work: The Eschatology Turn and the Meaning of Our Work,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60, no. 1 (March 2017): 158.

<sup>164</sup> Alan Hultberg, *Three Views on the Rapture*, 151-2; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 960; Alan F. Johnson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: with the New International Version*, vol. 12 (Hebrews - Revelation), ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 575; Darby, *The Rapture of the Saints*, 155.

<sup>165</sup> Hultberg, *Three Views on the Rapture*, 151-2.

who are with him” are the 144,000. This identification is almost certain because the 144,000 are the ones already chosen to be sealed by God and were already said to be with the Lamb (Rev 14:1). Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the 144,000 are also the armies of Revelation 19:14.

Four additional scriptures are used to support the position that raptured saints return with Christ as his armies: Zechariah 14:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:14; and Jude 14. However, there are three considerations that affect these interpretations. First, Paul teaches that Christ will return “with all His saints” (1 Thess 3:13). “Saints” literally means “Holy Ones” (cf. Zech 14:5),<sup>166</sup> and, although “saints” usually mean believers, it is acceptable to refer to angels as Holy Ones (cf. Daniel 8:13). This can mean that the saints Paul refers to either pertain to the angels accompanying Jesus at his return, the saints on earth who are present at his return, or “*all his saints*” (emphasis mine) following the resurrection who actually spend eternity “before our God and Father” (1 Thess 3:13). What “all His saints” cannot mean, are raptured saints returning from heaven to earth because, in that theory, all the saints are not raptured. There are surviving saints still residing on earth (besides the 144,000) who supposedly outwit the Antichrist. Furthermore, this is the only instance when Paul used the word “Saints” throughout 1 Thessalonians, and it is used to signify what Paul and the believers are looking forward to: “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (1 Thess 3:13). It is unreasonable that Paul would write that they should look forward to the coming of Jesus and themselves (as the raptured church).

Second, 1 Thessalonians 4:14 focuses not on the identity of Christ’s armies but reassures readers that those who have died in Christ will one day be with the Lord forever and have not

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<sup>166</sup> David Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Revelation 17-22* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1059, cites Zechariah 14:5 as a reference to angels associated with divine judgment.

missed their chance. It is not verse 14 that refers to the details of the Lord's return but verse 16, which identifies his descent accompanied by the voice of the archangel. There is no connection between the resurrected in this passage and the descending armies.

Finally, Jude 14 is quoting Enoch regarding the "holy ones" who come with the Lord. In Enoch's context, this passage refers to God's people as "the righteous" prior to stating that "He cometh with ten thousands of His holy ones."<sup>167</sup> They are distinctly different groups.

Furthermore, Richard Bauckham identifies this company as "angels, the heavenly army of the Divine Warrior" (Matt 16:27; 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 2 Thess 1:7).<sup>168</sup> Even Beale, who believes the armies are the saints, acknowledges Jude 14 as referring to angelic forces.<sup>169</sup> When comparing all these sources (and more besides), the likelihood is high that the holy ones who return with Christ are his angels.

The biblical evidence that Christ's armies are angels is strong (Isa 66:15–16; Matt 16:27; 2 Thess 1:6–8; Rev 14:10). Aune argues that the natural understanding of Revelation's context should lead readers to conclude that the armies are "the force of angels led by Michael who defeated Satan and his angels in Rev 12:7."<sup>170</sup> Aune further supports this interpretation by the comparison that both angels and Christ's armies wear pure white linen (Rev 15:6, 19:14).<sup>171</sup> Understanding Christ's armies as raptured believers avoids the most direct interpretation of

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<sup>167</sup> Paul C. Schnieders, *The Books of Enoch: Complete Edition* (Las Vegas: International Alliance, 2012), 16-7.

<sup>168</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Jude, 2 Peter* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983), 97.

<sup>169</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 960.

<sup>170</sup> David Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1059.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 1060.

Revelation and Scripture as a whole. It is unreasonable that John's readers would process that "armies" meant raptured saints unless they already held such a belief.

The danger with identifying the armies of Christ as raptured believers, apart from being a distortion of authorial intent, is that this explanation tries to make the church the victors, who, after having a seven-year reward commemoration of all their good acts, get to wear new crowns astride white horses just like Jesus' and help him deliver due punishment upon the wicked. If the goal in reading Revelation is discovering either how many ways the church is glorified or how those who offend the church will pay, then readers will fail in understanding the main points of the prophecy (highlighted in John's letters to the seven churches, Rev 2–3).

### **Two Resurrections, Not Three**

Crucial to pretribulationism and midtribulationism is the belief in three future resurrections: the resurrection of deceased believers at the Rapture, the resurrection of those beheaded (Rev 20:4), and the resurrection of the unbelieving dead (Rev 20:12–14). However, Revelation 20 is the only chapter in Revelation to use any form of ἀνάστασις, teaching of two distinct resurrections. In accordance with the warnings of Revelation 22:18–19, adding a third resurrection to John's vision should not be done without a direct reference to it. Since Darby's proposal that Revelation 12:5, 10–12 refers to the Raptured church fails to withstand scrutiny and modern interpretations that Revelation 4:1–2 likewise fails to directly reference the snatching of a future generation of Christians, it appears that using Revelation to confirm the timing the resurrection of the dead in conjunction with the Rapture is speculation.

Pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and posttribulationism usually use Revelation 4:1–2 to defend their respective Rapture theories by claiming to know the identity of those resurrected during John's first resurrection (Rev 20:4). Darby acknowledges that "those beheaded" and

“those who had not worshipped the beast” are judges on the throne but adds a third party: “previously departed saints.”<sup>172</sup> Witherington and Aune claim that the first resurrection likely refers to martyrs executed by the Romans.<sup>173</sup> Ladd interprets this as a reference to martyrs and all saints.<sup>174</sup> Rosenthal states that the resurrected are those martyrs described in Revelation 6:9.<sup>175</sup> Gentry diverts from a physical nature completely, suggesting that the first resurrection is salvation.<sup>176</sup> The ambiguity of who is resurrected during John’s first resurrection allows scholars to read into Scripture whatever supports their eschatology. However, the focus needs to remain on the number of resurrections and not just who is resurrected for the sake of this discussion. Pretribulationism justifies three resurrections by concluding that John’s first resurrection comes in three installments: the resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of the dead Christians during the Rapture, and the resurrection of the tribulation saints and Old Testament saints in Revelation 20:4.<sup>177</sup> Any understanding involving three separate resurrections conflicts with John’s vision and is unsupported by Scripture.<sup>178</sup> Rapture theology is not maintainable without an explanation of this extra resurrection of the dead, and this teaching is absent from Revelation.

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<sup>172</sup> Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, Revelation, chap. 20.

<sup>173</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 248; Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1086-7.

<sup>174</sup> Ladd, *The Last Things*, 84.

<sup>175</sup> Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture*, 268.

<sup>176</sup> Gentry, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 85-6.

<sup>177</sup> LaHaye, *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, 1532.

<sup>178</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 83.

The second resurrection plainly identifies participants as “the rest of the dead” (Rev 20:5). Ladd explains it best, “At the beginning of the millennial period, part of the dead come to life. There is no evident play upon words. The passage makes perfectly good sense when interpreted literally. . . . Speculation is no virtue.”<sup>179</sup> This is another critical point at which many Rapture proponents deviate from a plain understanding of the text, believing that only unbelievers are resurrected from the dead following the millennial reign. This is an especially crucial foundation for Posttribulationists. Since they are bound to Paul’s instructions that living believers are caught up to meet the resurrected dead believers (1 Thess 4:17), they can only interpret the first resurrection as applying to all Christians. Their insistence that the resurrection of dead believers occurs simultaneously with the Lord’s return is not directly stated and even contradicts some apocalyptic traditions (e.g., 2 Esdras 7:25–44).<sup>180</sup> Without support for either a separation of resurrections between believers and unbelievers or directly connecting the Rapture with the return of Christ, posttribulationists’ arguments disintegrate. A literal implication of the text does not speculate by excluding believers; instead, the righteous and unrighteous dead alike arise in the second resurrection.<sup>181</sup> Honoring this literal understanding of John’s vision supports this thesis by demonstrating that most deceased believers remain dead until judgment day when they are resurrected and the living believers will have need of being caught up (Rev 20:11–15, explained further in the next section).

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<sup>179</sup> Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 266; Ladd, *The Last Things*, 86.

<sup>180</sup> Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 172.

<sup>181</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1104; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 721-2.

Furthermore, segregating believers from unbelievers for judgment disregards the symbolism of Christ's separating the sheep from the goats on judgment day (Matt 25:32; cf. Dan 12:2; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; *The Apocalypse of Peter*, chap. 3).<sup>182</sup> As satisfying as it might seem for some in the church to watch Christ revealing the sins of unbelievers and punishing them, that is not the scenario painted by John nor supported by the Bible or early Christian literature. Christians do not get to sit in stands, like at a colosseum, feeding on the misfortunes of those destroyed by “gladiator-angels” below. Even if John's first resurrection were to consist only of believers and the second resurrection only of unbelievers, there is no biblical evidence of a raptured church returning to earth to aid the Lord in the facilitation of this judgment. John's message in Revelation consistently regards God's sovereignty and not the church's exultation over its enemies.

### **Fervent Heat**

The final biblical case against Rapture theology is found in the transition from the old heaven and earth to the new heaven and earth. The groundwork presented throughout this thesis that Rapture theology is unsustainable and unbiblical leads to this point in Revelation for fulfillment of Paul's eschatological passages (1 Thess 4:17; 5:10; 1 Cor 15:51–53). Revelation 20:11 describes a time when heaven and earth flee from the presence of Christ (cf. Matt 25:31). Since Jesus is one with the Father and God is omnipresent (Isa 66:1; Jer 23:23–24; John 10:30), John's statement that “No place was found for them,” applies to all space and time of this existing universe. Ladd explains, “The language is not merely poetical or symbolic of spiritual

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<sup>182</sup> Bart Ehrman, *The Apocalypse of Peter in Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 282.

realities but describes a real cosmic catastrophe whose actual character we cannot conceive.”<sup>183</sup>

It is reasonable to conclude that heaven and earth face destruction and go into non-existence as prophesied (Isa 51:6; 65:17).<sup>184</sup> The nature of Paul’s message points toward this moment as being when living believers are caught up with Jesus and transformed into immortals (1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:17).

This solution of Revelation 20:11 fulfilling passages where believers are caught up and transformed belies Rapture theology to the utmost, because this is the only time in Revelation in which those who are living on earth have need of being snatched. The reason Christians are suddenly taken is not to escape from earthly tribulation nor to escort Christ back to earth, but because there no longer remains an earth to reside on. Just as nature corroborates the Bible’s account of the order of creation, astrologists are certain that the earth, and probably the universe, will end. It stands to reason that if the biblical and natural accounts of creation align, then a proper understanding of heaven and earth’s dissolution would align with the scientific evidence.

N. T. Wright, among many others, insists that the present heaven and earth are “transformed” so “the whole of creation will be liberated from decay.”<sup>185</sup> Wright’s primary reason for interpreting a renewed creation is based on the “Exodus-language” of Romans 8:18–25.<sup>186</sup> However, this comparison of language is limited. Whereas slavery and deliverance were actual historical events, the phrase, “Creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21),” is a metaphor

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<sup>183</sup> Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 108.

<sup>184</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 720-1, presents further evidence to support the literal and total destruction of the physical cosmos.

<sup>185</sup> Nicholas T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2019), 138, 267.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

common to Pauline theology (Rom 6:6, 16–20; 16:18; 1 Cor 7:21–23; Gal 4:7–8) and should not be understood to have any direct connection to the Exodus. Wright also fails to explain how the Israelites’ freedom from Pharaoh supports that the current creation will become free from decay. Paul distinguishes between the creation that “was subjected to futility” and the creation free from “corruption” (Rom 8:20–21). The futile creation is what currently exists and has existed since God paused his creative work (Gen 2:1–3). The creation free from corruption occurs when God’s resting period is over and he, once again, creates something new (Rev 21:1). It is a distortion of Paul’s meaning to presume that God’s future creative work is not really creation but a repairing of older creations.<sup>187</sup>

The second weakness in Wright’s claim is that this renewal he proposes violates the natural order which God established. The law of decay that leads to death is part of the second law of thermodynamics, which Hugh Ross writes “is essential for life’s existence.”<sup>188</sup> The resulting “death” and “pain” associated with thermodynamic laws were a part of the creative process that God called “very good” (Gen 1:31; Rev 21:4), because they were part of God’s long-term plan for preparing his people for the new creation.<sup>189</sup> John Thomas and Frank Macchia explain, “What would be clear is that the earth and heaven have no more use and as such find no place for existence.”<sup>190</sup> Nature attests to the principle of decay in the present earth; however,

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<sup>187</sup> Christ will restore order to the nations during the millennial reign of Christ (cf. Ps. 2:8–9; Isa 2:2–4; 11:4–5; 25:2–3; 26:9; Mic 4:1–8), but this does not infer that Christ will create a new natural order for a renewed heaven and earth in Revelation 21.

<sup>188</sup> Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 97.

<sup>189</sup> Ross, *The Genesis Question*, 97.

<sup>190</sup> John C. Thomas and Frank D. Macchia, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 361.

John testified that the new earth has no death (Rev 21:4).<sup>191</sup> If decay is not present, then the second law of thermodynamics no longer applies. This is only possible if the universe of Revelation 21 operates under different laws than currently exist (cf. Rom 8:18–21). The implication is that the old order (laws of physics) established with initial creation will cease along with the first heaven and earth.<sup>192</sup> This may be in part why a “new heaven” is also required and not just a “new earth.”

The destruction of the cosmos is echoed elsewhere in the New Testament. The method of elimination appears to be intense fire that melts all celestial bodies into nothingness (2 Pet 3:10, 12).<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, the description used to describe the outcome of the “elements,” that they will not be found ([οὐχ] εὐρεθήσεται), is similar to John’s description of heaven and earth, that no place was found for them (τόπος οὐχ εὐρέθη αὐτοῖς).<sup>194</sup> Fervent burning is consistent with the method of destroying those things corrupted by sin and comes about by physical means (e.g., Gen 19:24; 1 Kgs 18:38; Mark 9:48; Rev 20:15). Josephus recorded that Adam predicted that the world was to be destroyed twice: “At one time by the force of fire, and at another time by the violence and quantity of water.”<sup>195</sup> Indeed, the earth was once devastated by water (Gen 7:23).

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<sup>191</sup> Ross, *The Genesis Question*, 95-7, 99.

<sup>192</sup> For details regarding the new dimensionality associated with Revelation 21, read Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos: The Extra-Dimensionality of God: What Recent Discoveries in Astrophysics Reveal about the Glory and Love of God*, rev. and updated ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), 218-21.

<sup>193</sup> Edwin A. Blum, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: with the New International Version*, vol. 12 (Hebrews - Revelation), ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 286-7, identifies the “elements” as celestial bodies.

<sup>194</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 317, regarding εὐρεθήσεται, explains, “the context requires a word equivalent to ‘destroyed.’”

<sup>195</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.1.3, in *Josephus: The Complete Works*, trans. by William Whiston (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 36.

Yet to come is its destruction, not by mere fire, but by “the force of fire,” which hints that there will be more than flames at work upon the earth, but a destructive force causing the flames.

Many scholars who claim that the millennial reign of Christ is literal also claim that the new earth is not literally new but renewed—the old one fixed. Aune describes John’s description as metaphorical “and not as the destruction of the cosmos.”<sup>196</sup> However, Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (Matt 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33; cf. Matt 5:18). Aune would have readers believe that the first half of Jesus’ statement is metaphor while the second half is literal. This explanation is inconsistent and unlikely. A literal millennial reign followed by a symbolical new heaven and earth would be a paradox given the chronological relationship between the two presented in Revelation. In other words, those who consider the new heaven and new earth to be not literally new should be the same interpreters who question the literalness of Christ’s ruling on earth for one thousand years.

Witherington presumes that John (and Paul) intended to convey that the “form of this world was passing away, including governmental structures among other things” and, therefore, communicated “healing from the old world.”<sup>197</sup> However, there is nothing in the text to justify an interpretation that says “new creation” equals “an earth that has been renewed.”<sup>198</sup> On the contrary, the word John used for “new,” *καινὸν*, “designates something new in kind, not just a new thing of the same kind; it is a newness hitherto unknown” (Rev 21:1).<sup>199</sup> N. T. Wright takes a different approach, claiming, “‘Peter’ is in any case warning against what certain ‘deceivers’

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<sup>196</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1101.

<sup>197</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 276.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>199</sup> Thomas and Macchia, *Revelation*, 363.

may say, not giving a report as to what the early church as a whole believed.”<sup>200</sup> Wright’s defense for such a presumption does not rest on comparison to other Petrine letters; rather, he claims, “The passage is unique among early Christian writings and cannot be used as an index of what Jesus and his first followers believed.”<sup>201</sup> However, the study of this thesis has already drawn support for a literal view of Peter’s words (e.g., 2 Pet 3:10). Wright’s disagreement with the plain understanding causes him to claim the text as unique, rather than admitting that his interpretation appears unique (just as Price and Ice did with Daniel 9:24–27).

Paul attests that believers’ bodies will be new and spiritual. The old body, which is natural, is perishable while the new body, which is spiritual, is imperishable (1 Cor 15:42). In no way is Paul suggesting that the believers’ corpses regenerate into new bodies.<sup>202</sup> By the same reasoning, the new heaven and new earth should not be understood as regenerated or renewed corpses of the old physical elements of the universe; rather, they are newly created. Robert Mounce suggests that the literal understanding may be that the “dissolution of the universe” is “preparation for the new heaven and new earth.”<sup>203</sup> Since heaven and earth literally become nothingness, believers who are alive at the time of the universe’s finality will have need of being “caught up” to meet Jesus.

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<sup>200</sup> Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 295.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>202</sup> Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 710.

<sup>203</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 375.

## Conclusion

Revelation prophesied of Jesus' return without mentioning anything that could directly lead one to believe that this event would occur in two parts. John's audience would be unlikely to discern such a doctrine. Revelation 3:10 does not pertain to a future generation of Christians escaping a seven-year tribulation but relates to the real struggles of the church of Philadelphia. Revelation 4:1–2 is entirely disconnected with 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Revelation 19:7–9 describes the marriage and marriage supper between the Lamb and living Christians following the Lord's return and not before. Revelation 20 apprises of two resurrections, saying nothing of a third resurrection nor multiple installments of the first resurrection. Revelation 20:11 provides the only biblical event in which living believers will need snatching and, like 1 Thessalonians 4:17, is devoid of any reference to the Great Tribulation. Therefore, any definition of the Rapture that results in Christians escaping worldly tribulation, temporarily going to heaven, or returning to earth contradicts Revelation. John endorses believers neither returning with Christ to heaven nor escorting him back to earth but, instead, being taken from earth to join him for judgment day and the creation of the new heaven and new earth as their inheritance (Rev 20:11–21:1; cf. 1 Pet 1:3–5).

## Conclusion

This evaluation of Rapture theology yields several results. First, the circumstances in which doctrines develop should always be considered when assessing their validity, and circumstances regarding modern views of the Rapture are no exception. Darby's two-part return of Christ and ideas on dispensationalism are founded on his claims of divine revelation rather than exegetical study of Scripture, and, therefore, deserve scrutiny. As Americans became enamored with escapism, Rapture theology was quickly embraced; however, several reputable pastors and theologians who initially accepted Darby's premillennial model eventually found fault with a two-part return of Christ. The circumstances in which Rapture doctrine was formed warrants re-examination of biblical passages used to support the Rapture and without seeking to validate Darby's presuppositions. Second, the Rapture is inexorably linked with the Great Tribulation for the vast majority of Rapture proponents. There are four contextual problems with this theory. (1) Daniel 9:24–27 is devoid of any reference to a gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week to make this possible. (2) When aligning Matthew 24 with Revelation 6, the Great Tribulation immediately precedes the sixth seal. (3) The magnitude of the Great Tribulation aligns better with a post-temple destruction (AD 70) theory than limited to a future seven-year event. (4) The texts used to support Rapture doctrine omit mention of tribulation and, instead, refer to the resurrection of the dead. For these reasons, it is unwarranted for the Rapture and Great Tribulation to be connected. Third, and most significant to this discussion, those passages used to support the Rapture affirm that the catching up is timed with the resurrection of the dead. Attempts to interpret either a two-part return of Christ, escape from earthly tribulation, or a ceremonial meeting in the air between believers and Jesus to usher him back to earth read what is neither explicit nor implied. The authorial intents are devoid of language promoting

modern Rapture doctrines. Finally, efforts to discover where the Rapture fits into Revelation involve insurmountable difficulties. Although many passages are said to refer to the Rapture (Rev 3:10; 4:1; 12:5, 10–12; 19:7–9), there is no evidence. The only room for a snatching of living believers is on judgment day (Rev 20:11–15), which is contrary to prominent Rapture doctrines.

This thesis examines the biblical support for modern Rapture theories that are based on a direct relationship with the Great Tribulation or the return of the Lord. The biblical passages used to build the foundation for these theories omit direct references to the Great Tribulation and only align with the return of Christ inasmuch as they occur in the season of Christ's return. Exegesis of the texts reveals that such passages, instead, relate to judgment day. This study yields the conclusion that no biblical author endorses or implies the Rapture's existence. Attempts to cultivate belief in the Rapture in the last two centuries continue to result in inconclusive theological debates, yielding the demand for better research and solutions. Toward this aim is this proposed meaning that believers who are "caught up" (1 Thess 4:17) and "changed" (1 Cor 15:51) describe the means by which living believers will ascend with Christ in Revelation 20:11. This "catching up" of living believers is in relation to the resurrection of the dead at judgment day and not in alignment with modern Rapture doctrines.

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