

## Does Pretribulationism's Wrath Argument Prove Pretribulationism?

—Sam A. Smith

[Sam A. Smith is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary. Having advocated pretribulationism for over thirty-five years, he believes that the case for pretribulationism is seriously flawed and has actually undermined the case for the imminency of the rapture, and may even jeopardize the future of dispensationalism itself. This is the second in a series of four papers on the problems of pretribulationism. The first is titled: *Can Pretribulationism be Proven by Imminency?*, the third is titled: *How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency*, and the fourth is titled: *Some Final Thoughts on Rapture Theories*. These titles, as well as other books and articles by the author are available from Biblical Reader Communications (BiblicalReader.com).]

Pretribulationism maintains that the rapture of the church must occur before the tribulation period begins. This view rests upon two central tenets—that Christ's return is imminent, and that the church is not to be the object of divine wrath during the coming day of the Lord. While other supporting arguments are employed to bolster the case for pretribulationism, these are the two heavy arguments; and pretribulationism as a theory stands or falls on the validity of these two arguments. We have explored the question of whether the doctrine of imminency is capable of proving pretribulationism, and it has been concluded that from a purely logical standpoint, imminency (if assumed to be true) has no bearing on whether the rapture must (or will) occur before the tribulation period begins, or afterward. [Imminency only requires a pretribulational rapture if the rapture is sequenced with (placed before or after) other future events, which is the approach of the major views (pretribulationism, midtribulationism, Rosenthal's pre-wrath view, and posttribulationism). However, if (as in the New Testament) the rapture is not sequenced with other events, it remains imminent even though it isn't specified to be the first event. Since the rapture would not be placed into the sequence, leaving its timing unspecified, it could occur at any point irrespective of the order specified for other future events. Thus, an imminent rapture might, or might not, occur pretribulationally. For a more complete discussion see the first paper in this series: *Can Pretribulationism be Proved by Imminency?*] We now turn our attention to the wrath argument, which in the middle to latter part of the twentieth century seems to have emerged as the dominate argument for pretribulationism due to a weakening of the case for imminency by pretribulational assumptions about Matthew 24:36-25:30, which will be explored in the third paper in this series: *How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency*.

### a. The pretribulational wrath argument defined

That the church is not to be the object of God's wrath is expressly stated by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 (esp. 5:9-10). Paul's statement in 5:9-10, taken at face value, can only be understood to mean that the rapture of the church (described in 4:13-18) must occur before the manifestation of the divine wrath associated with the coming day of the Lord (described in 5:1-8). In other words, with respect to divine wrath, the extreme terminal point at which the rapture could occur is the moment prior to the manifestation of divine wrath at the day of the Lord. It is interesting to note that on this point pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and Rosenthal's pre-wrath view all agree; and it could rightly be said that each of these views takes a "pre-wrath" view of the rapture; for each, according to its own view of the nature of the events of the tribulation, places the rapture prior to the time of divine wrath. The distinctive feature of pretribulationism is the presumption that the entire seven-year tribulation period is divine wrath, thus necessitating the placement of the rapture prior to the beginning of the period.

The pretribulational wrath argument can be stated as follows: The church will be raptured before the time of God's wrath begins at the coming day of the Lord. The tribulation period and the day of the Lord are the same. Therefore, the rapture of the church must occur before the tribulation period begins. In examining this argument, we note that 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, and other wrath passages such as 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 clearly support the major premise (that the church will be raptured before the coming divine wrath); but if the deduction is to be valid, it must also be proven that the minor premise is true (that is, that the tribulation period in its entirety is to be equated with the day of the Lord—*i.e.*, that it is divine wrath). How do pretribulationists support the validity of that premise?

#### **b. The problems with support for the pretribulational wrath argument**

One approach in arguing that the entire tribulation period is divine wrath has been from the presumed unity of the period. Pretribulationists often equate the tribulation with the day of the Lord (the time of divine wrath) in order to establish that the entire tribulation is a time of divine wrath; but the basis for equating the two is the prior assumption that the tribulation is (entirely) a time of divine wrath. In other words the reasoning goes like this: the tribulation period is divine wrath because it is the day of the Lord; and it is the day of the Lord because it is entirely a time of divine wrath. Clearly this is a circular path. The argument is sometimes expressed in abbreviated form as follows: Whenever the Old Testament discusses the coming day of the Lord, judgment is in view; thus the tribulation is a time of judgment (see, J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 230 and 233-237). Pentecost quotes twenty passages to prove that the tribulation is a time of judgment, but not one of those passages speaks to the extent of the divine wrath during the tribulation period. The fact that the tribulation includes divine wrath is beyond dispute. All Pentecost's evidence demonstrates is that divine wrath occurs sometime during the tribulation (a point upon which virtually all premillennialists agree); however, none of his arguments prove that the entire tribulation is divine wrath. In other words, the manifestation of divine wrath in the tribulation period, and the extent of the tribulation period that can be characterized as divine wrath are distinct issues; and evidence that the tribulation includes divine wrath does not argue that the entire period is divine wrath. Pentecost states that since the judgments associated with the second coming need to occur over a period of time, the entire tribulation period must be a time of judgment (Pentecost, *op. cit.*, p. 230). This is, of course, an incredible leap. Why would the judgments directly associated with the second coming need to extend over the entire tribulation period? Pentecost offers no justification whatsoever. He also argues that if the day of the Lord did not begin until the second coming, it would be preceded by signs and could not come, as indicated in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, as "a thief in the night" (Pentecost, *op. cit.*, p. 230). Pentecost overlooks the obvious flaw in his argument that if the day of the Lord begins on the heels of the rapture, then the rapture itself would be a sign to which the day of the Lord would be contingent. Indeed, the timing of the rapture cannot be used to determine the extent of divine wrath during the tribulation period, for the one argument needed to establish the terminal point at which the rapture could occur (the wrath argument) is itself dependant upon when the divine wrath begins. While the day of the Lord is undoubtedly a component of the tribulation period, there simply is no good reason to assume that the entire seven-year period is to be divine wrath, or that the day of the Lord must begin when the seven-year tribulation period begins. (We should note that even within pretribulationism there has been considerable disagreement as to when the day of the Lord begins. C.I. Scofield, in the original *Scofield Reference Bible* (p. 1349) stated that the day of the Lord would begin at the second coming, after the apocalyptic judgments of Revelation 11-18 (*i.e.*, after the seventh trumpet bowl judgments); and Chafer seems to agree with this, see Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, IV, pp. 11, 383, 398; VII, p. 110, though Scofield's note was changed in 1967 with the publication of the *New Scofield Reference Bible* to reflect that the day of the Lord will begin with the translation of the church (see p. 1363 of the new edition).

Another approach in equating the entirety of the tribulation period with the day of the Lord is to assert that the seals, trumpets, and bowls of Revelation 4-19 are all divine judgments; and therefore, since it is reasonable to expect that the first seal occurs early in the tribulation period, it follows that the entire seven-year tribulation period is a time of judgment. However, there is no evidence that the seals themselves represent divine wrath. Rather, the seals appear to be simply movements within the tribulation period. As noted, Scofield limited the apocalyptic judgments to the seventh trumpet, *i.e.*, the bowls of wrath (see, the original *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 1363). It is assumed by many that since the book of Revelation pictures Christ, in heaven, breaking the seven seals, that those seals must be divine judgments. While Christ's breaking of the seals certainly indicates his sovereignty over the tribulation events (perhaps as a reminder during those difficult times that God is still sovereign, even when evil appears to reign), it does not follow from that, that the seals are divine wrath. Revelation does not mention divine wrath until 6:15-17, which is after the events of the sixth seal have passed. There is an additional problem in viewing all of the seals as divine wrath. The fifth seal (Rev. 6:9-11 cf. Matt. 24:9, 15-22) involves the martyrdom of many saints living at that time during the tribulation. Pretribulationism has always been at a loss to explain how the persecution and death of these faithful saints could be attributed directly to divine wrath. If all the seals represent divine wrath, then the fifth seal must be divine wrath. Yet Revelation pictures the major event during the time of the fifth seal as an evil to be punished by a future (but soon) outpouring of divine wrath (6:11 cf. 8:1-6). The fact that these martyrs are pictured in Heaven under the altar making great lamentation to God (6:9-11), and asking how long he will restrain his judgment and avenging of their blood upon the world, is indicative that the deaths of these saints can in no way be attributable to God's justice in the execution of wrath upon sin. God responds that they should wait a little while for the answer to their petition for judgment and vengeance (6:11). The events of the seventh seal—the sequence of trumpet and bowl judgments—are plainly indicated to be in response to the prayers of the saints from under the heavenly altar (8:1-6 cf. 16:4-7 and 19:2); they are also the only components of the tribulation period that are specifically designated as divine wrath (Rev. 15:1; 16:1). Thus, it is not without significance that the first mention of divine wrath in this book occurs just prior to the opening of the seventh seal (6:17). Given these observations, it is difficult to sustain the case that all of the seals represent divine wrath. And if God's wrath has not commenced by the close of the fifth seal, at most, only the last two seals could involve divine wrath. Since wrath isn't mentioned until after the time of the sixth seal is past (6:17), and since there is a very momentous transition between the sixth and seventh seals (8:1), the case could be made that the most likely point for divine wrath to begin (*i.e.*, the beginning of the day of the Lord) might be with the opening of the seventh seal—though it is not necessary to argue that point in order to see the problem with pretribulationism's premise that the entire tribulation is divine wrath.

There simply is no biblical statement to the effect that Daniel's seventieth "week" (the period which by common premillennial convention is referred to as, "the tribulation") is the same as, or temporally coextensive with the day of the Lord. This can be seen from the fact that pretribulationists appeal to various weak deductions in an attempt to support this premise. Daniel does not mention the day of the Lord in relation to the seventy weeks prophecy; however, we know that the day of the Lord must fall sometime within the seventieth week (since the first sixty-nine weeks of the prophecy are past, and both the seventieth week and the wrath associated with the day of the Lord are co-terminal (*i.e.*, they both end in connection with the second coming of Christ at the conclusion of the tribulation period). However, there is no basis for believing that the entire seventieth "week" is occupied with the day of the Lord, though undoubtedly the day of the Lord must occupy some portion of the tribulation period.

**c. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 contradicts pretribulationism's premise that the entire tribulation period is divine wrath**

We have noted pretribulationists' failure to make the case that the entire tribulation is to be equated with the day of the Lord (divine wrath). I would now like to turn attention to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9, and the fact that this passage flatly contradicts the pretribulationist assumption that the entire tribulation period is occupied with the day of the Lord. Paul states in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12:

[2:1-12] Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, (2) that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. (3) Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, (4) who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (5) Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? (6) And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. (7) For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. (8) Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; (9) that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, (10) and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. (11) For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, (12) in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. [NASB]

There are several observations to be made from this passage. First, it is clear that Paul had in mind the final events of the church in relation to the Lord's appearing (v. 1). Second, Paul was responding to the report of some message, mistakenly thought to have come from him, to the effect that the day of the Lord (not the tribulation) had already begun (v. 2). Third, he told the church not to be deceived, the day of the Lord will not begin until "the falling away" in connection with the "revelation" of the Man of Lawlessness (the Antichrist) occurs (vv. 3-4). Fourth, Paul explained how the Man of Lawlessness will be revealed; it will occur in this manner: He will oppose the worship of anything or anyone else, and he will seat himself in the temple of God proclaiming himself to be God (v. 4). Generally pretribulationists assume that the Antichrist is to be revealed at the beginning of the tribulation period. The support for this view is that the Antichrist will make a covenant with Israel at the beginning of the period (Dan. 9:27), and that he is likely to be identified with the rider on the white horse associated with the first seal of Revelation (Rev. 6:1-2). However, Paul's statement in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-9 is clear that the "revealing" of the Antichrist occurs at the mid-point of the tribulation period. Certainly this personage will be present at the beginning of the tribulation period (whether individually identifiable or not), but his revealing in character as the Antichrist is specifically stated to take place in connection with his activity in the temple of God, which we know from elsewhere occurs at the midpoint of the period (Dan. 9:27). Thus there need be no contradiction as to when this person is present, and when he is revealed as the Antichrist. Fifth, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that the Man of Lawlessness will be restrained from revealing himself until the one restraining is taken out of the way (vv. 6-7). Sixth, the revealing of the Man of Lawlessness is to be in accordance with the work of Satan, displayed in powerful miracles, signs, and wonders (vv. 9-10). Seventh, once the man of lawlessness is revealed, God will send a powerful delusion on

those who have, up to that point rejected the truth; they will be deluded to believe the lie of the Antichrist.

Paul states emphatically that the day of the Lord will not begin until after “the apostasy” (*hē apostasia*)—not just any apostasy, but “the” apostasy (the one prophetically anticipated) that occurs in connection with the revealing of the Man of Lawlessness (*kai*, “and” is used here ascensively, meaning “even,” or “indeed”). Note how much attention Paul devotes to the description of the revealing of the Man of Lawlessness (vv. 3-9). Why? Because the revealing of the Man of Lawlessness distinguishes this particular apostasy from all others. Some pretribulationists have interpreted “the falling away” as a veiled reference to the rapture, and the revealing of the Man of Lawlessness as the appearing of the Antichrist at the beginning of the tribulation period. However, given Paul’s statement as we have it, it is clear that he intended for us to understand the revealing of the Man of Lawlessness as his revealing in accordance with his true character as Antichrist, when he seats himself in the temple of God (v. 4). How do we know this? 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 comprises one sentence in the original, and it is apparent that “the falling away” and the “revealing” are thus structurally related components of the same description (which is further developed in verses 5-9). This is a specific apostasy—the one in connection with Antichrist’s revealing (v. 4) when he takes his seat in the temple purveying himself to be God with satanic power displayed in signs and wonders deceiving those who have rejected the truth—that is, the non-elect (vv. 5-9). As stated before, we know from elsewhere that this event marks the midpoint of the tribulation period (Dan. 9:27). There is an excellent parallel to this description in Matthew 24:4-25, where Jesus said that the abomination in the temple (v. 15) will be accompanied by persecution and apostasy (vv. 10, 15-22), spiritual deception of the non-elect (vv. 11, 24-28), lawlessness (v. 12), and deceptive signs and wonders (v. 24). It could not be more clear that Paul had the Olivet Discourse in mind since he covers five of the six major aspects associated with the mid-point of the period as outlined by Christ (Matt. 24:9-24). (Although it is likely that the gospels were written after 2 Thessalonians, undoubtedly accounts of Christ’s Olivet Discourse circulated early in the churches at Jerusalem and Antioch, and it is not likely that Paul would have been unfamiliar with this important material.)

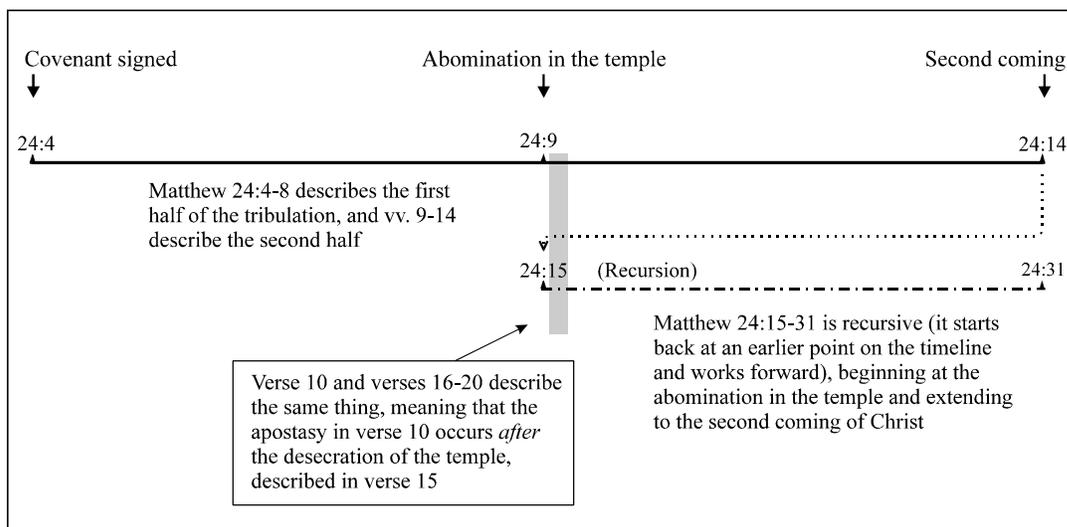
**Comparison of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9 With Christ's Olivet Discourse**

Jesus (Matt. 24:4-31)	Paul (2 Thess. 2:3-9)
(Events in the 1st half of the tribulation period)	
False Christs (v.5)	(None mentioned)
Wars and rumors of wars (vv.6-7)	
Famines and earthquakes (v.7)	
(Events connected to the mid-point)	
Abomination in the temple (v.15)	*Abomination in the temple (vv.3-5)
Persecution / martyrdom (vv.9, 16-22)	
Apostasy (v.10)	*Apostasy (v.3)
Spiritual deception of the non-elect (vv.11, 24-28)	*Spiritual deception of the non-elect (vv.10-12)
Lawlessness (v.12)	*Lawlessness (vv.3, 7)
Deceiving signs and wonders (v.24)	*Deceiving signs and wonders (v.9)
(Latter events up to the second coming)	
The gospel to be preached to the world	
Second coming of Christ (vv.13, 29-31)	*Second coming of Christ (v.8)

\*Matches to statements in Matthew 24:4-34

The five matching characteristics in these two passages (indicated above) are listed together nowhere else in the New Testament. Assuming a chronology of Matthew 24:4-31 in which verses 4-8 refer to the first half of the tribulation, and verses 9-14 refer to the second half, with verses 15-31 being a recursion back to the mid-point expanding on the second half, the actual order of these events would appear to be: 1) the revealing of the Antichrist in the temple, 2) the great persecution, martyrdom and apostasy, 3) lawlessness, 4) deceiving signs and miracles, and 5) the deception of the non-elect. (The diagram below illustrates that due to the recursive nature of verses 15-31, the apostasy mentioned in verse 10 actually occurs after the revelation of the Antichrist in the temple (v. 15), most likely in connection with the great persecution that follows the Antichrist's revealing, vv. 16-22).

### Chronology of Matthew 24:4-31



Unless one is willing to argue that Paul's description of the Man of Lawlessness in the temple, and the related spiritual deception, lawlessness, and deceiving miracles described in verses 3-9 have no direct connection to the apostasy in verse 3 (within the same sentence), it should be apparent that the apostasy referred to by Paul is the apostasy that will take place shortly after the mid-point of the tribulation period, cf. Matt. 24:15-24. (For a more extended discussion of the chronology of Matthew 24:4-31 see, *What the Bible Says About the Future*, pp. 166-169, by the author). Standard pretribulationist discussion of this passage regards the apostasy in verse 3 as either a veiled reference to a pretribulationist rapture, or an apostasy (or general state of apostasy) occurring during the church age prior to a pretribulationist rapture of the church. These explanations fail to account for both the structure of Paul's passage and the New Testament context of these statements, particularly Christ's teaching in his Olivet Discourse.

Since it is apparent that both Christ and Paul described the same set of events, and since these events, in both places, are unquestionably associated with the revealing of the Antichrist at the mid-point of the tribulation period, it is apparent that Paul taught that the day of the Lord would not arrive until sometime in the second half of the tribulation period—after the apostasy associated with the revelation of the Antichrist in the temple (2 Thess. 2:3). That being the case, Daniel's seventieth "week" (the tribulation) cannot be the same as (or even temporally co-extensive with) the day of the Lord (We should note that both Scofield and Chafer agree that the

day of the Lord does not occupy the entire tribulation period; see the 1917 *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 1349; and Chafer's *Systematic Theology*, IV pp. 11, 383, 398; VII, p. 110). The day of the Lord, while extending beyond the tribulation period into the millennium, will begin sometime in the second half of the tribulation period. Thus, the minor premise of pretribulationism's wrath argument is expressly disallowed by Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12. While Paul did teach that the rapture must occur before the coming day of wrath, such a view simply does not require a pretribulational rapture—though the rapture certainly could occur pretribulationally since, as we have argued elsewhere, it is an imminent event.

### **Integration with imminency**

We previously examined the doctrine of imminency and concluded there that even if the rapture is imminent (and I believe the biblical evidence strongly supports that it is), that fact does not require a pretribulational rapture—a misconception almost universal among both pretribulationists and non-pretribulational premillennialists. Assuming that the rapture is imminent (which will be argued in the third paper of this series), while neither imminency nor the pre-wrath requirement of the rapture proves pretribulationism, they do at the very least argue for a rapture that is imminent and pre-wrath (*possibly*, but not necessarily, pretribulational), or what I prefer to call, an “imminent, pre-wrath rapture.”

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