

How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency

—Sam A. Smith

[Having advocated pretribulationism for over thirty-five years, Sam A. Smith 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 third of four papers on the problems of pretribulationism. The first is titled: *Can Pretribulationism be Proven by Imminency?*, the second is titled: *Does Pretribulationism's Wrath Argument Prove Pretribulationism?*, and the fourth is titled: *Some Final Thoughts on Rapture Theories*. These titles are available from Biblical Reader Communications (BiblicalReader.com).]

On the one hand there is pretribulationism, the belief that the rapture of the church must occur before the tribulation period begins, and on the other hand there is every other view. Between these, there has always been a vast gulf. Of the major views (pretribulationism, midtribulationism, Rosenthal's pre-wrath view, and posttribulationism) only the pretribulationist view is consistent with the doctrine of imminency (that the rapture of the church will occur without signs or warning, and could occur at any moment). If the choice were between these views, and if the doctrine of imminency is valid, then of these views only pretribulationism could be correct. That logic, along with the argument that the church must be removed from the earth prior to the manifestation of divine wrath at the day of the LORD, forms the crux of the support for pretribulationism. Of course, there are numerous minor arguments offered for pretribulationism, but those are merely "icing for the cake." It has always been assumed by pretribulationists that imminency is the linchpin of the pretribulationist rapture theory (see: Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, pp. 53, 55, and 82). Pretribulationists generally assume that if the imminency of the rapture could be sustained, that alone would be sufficient to prove pretribulationism. (And if the opposition of most non-pretribulationists to imminency is any indicator, it seems they share that assumption.) The wrath argument is a little trickier. The wrath argument would only prove pretribulationism if it could be shown that the entire tribulation is to be divine wrath. The wrath argument, while a powerful argument if it could be sustained, has this inherent weakness: there is no firm biblical or logical proof that the entire tribulation period is to be divine wrath; such has merely been a pretribulationist (and posttribulationist) assumption. (For further discussion see the author's paper, *Does the Pretribulationist Wrath Argument Prove Pretribulationism?*) Add to this the fact that pretribulationists have seriously undermined the biblical case for imminency by removing Matthew 24:36-44 (and hence, 24:45-25:30) from the discussion of the rapture. (Matthew 24:36-44, if spoken in regard to the rapture, is the only biblical passage that explicitly teaches that the event is imminent.) This state of affairs has led to a fracturing of the dispensational position, with pretribulationism on one side, and midtribulationism, Rosenthal's pre-wrath theory, and dispensational posttribulationism (all non-imminent views) on the other side.

Pretribulationism underwent a subtle, yet significant transformation in the first half of the twentieth century. The earlier pretribulationism of J.N. Darby and C.I. Scofield began to be replaced by the pretribulationism of Henry C. Thiessen and Lewis Sperry Chafer, and later John F. Walvoord. The dividing line between these two forms of pretribulationism centers on the interpretation of Matthew 24:45-25:30. Earlier pretribulationists, while viewing Matthew 24:36-44 as describing the second coming, generally viewed Matthew 24:45-25:30 as a description of the latter church age, culminating with the rapture. Consequently, they saw support in the Olivet Discourse for the imminency of the rapture. The newer form of pretribulationism differed on this point; proponents insisted that not only did 24:36-44 describe the second coming, but that the descriptions and illustrations given in 25:45-25:30 (*i.e.*, the wise servant in 24:45-51, the virgins in 25:1-13, and the servants in 25:14-30) pictured Israel awaiting the second coming, thus

removing the church and the rapture entirely from the scope of the discourse. While the new pretribulationists held strongly to the doctrine of the imminency of the rapture, they were forced to conclude that this discourse offers no support for that doctrine, since given their interpretation of Matthew 24:36-25:30, the rapture is not in view. (The earlier pretribulationists could at least point to 24:45-25:30 as support for imminency.) The latter form of pretribulationism is mostly implied in the writings of Thiessen and Chafer, and was later formally defended by Walvoord (*Matthew*, Moody Press, 1974, pp. 193-195). Its presence in Pentecost's influential *Things to Come* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1958) is mainly implicit (note p. 281, and the complete absence of any reference to Matthew 24:36-25:30 in connection to the rapture; also see pp. 193-218). The significance of this shift in interpretation is impossible to overstate. Why did the new pretribulationists extend the description of the second coming all the way to 25:30? One reason is purely exegetical: they correctly understood the connection between 24:36-44 and the three illustrations following in 24:45-25:30—a point the earlier pretribulationists had failed to recognize. The other reason is both historical and theological. The new pretribulationists were deeply concerned about the advance of posttribulationism and partial rapturism, both of which drew support from arguments that viewed 24:36-25:30 as pertaining to the rapture. The correct solution to the exegetical problem would have been to recognize that all of 24:36-25:30 pertains to the rapture, but that was an uncomfortable solution since it would have acknowledged a discussion of the rapture on the heels of a discussion of the tribulation and the second coming. In the end, they opted to regard this entire section as pertaining to the second coming. Since most of the commentaries (having been written by amillennialists) supported such a view, and since the original pretribulationists had already taken the initial step in this direction by viewing 24:36-44 as the second coming, it was a convenient solution. Unfortunately, eliminating the rapture entirely from the Olivet Discourse had unintended consequences. The new pretribulationists failed to recognize the primacy of Matthew 24:36-25:30 (or at the very least, 24:45-25:30) to the doctrine of the rapture; for both the particularity of the rapture as an event distinct from the regal appearing, and the doctrine of the imminency of the rapture, are contingent upon Matthew 24:36-25:30. Thus, by arguing that the entire passage pertains to the second coming proper, proponents inadvertently threw out any remaining support for the particularity and the imminency of the rapture. This crucial error has resulted in the virtual demise of pretribulationism in theology, at least at the scholarly level. However, this error didn't just jeopardize pretribulationism, it jeopardized all dual appearance views, that is, any view other than the unitary view of posttribulationism—which sees the rapture and the second coming as the same event. (Interestingly, it may have been the tension between imminency and non-imminency in this very discourse that gave rise to modern pretribulationism in the mid-1800s.)

How did the new pretribulationists support the contention that Matthew 24:36-25:30 refers to the second coming? Strangely, the seeds of what was to come in the new pretribulationism were sown in the old pretribulationism. Walvoord, just as Darby, took the position that Matthew 24:36-41 describes the second coming because in the illustration of Noah's day (vv.37-39) the ones the flood "took" were the unrighteous taken in judgment [sic]; hence, if one assumes a symmetrical parallelism between the ones the flood "took" away (in the Noah illustration) and those "taken" at the event described in verses 40-41, then those taken in verses 40-41 are to be taken in judgment, which could only be true if the event is the second coming. Starting from that point, Walvoord then argues that Matthew 24:45-25:30 is simply an extension of 24:36-44. Here Walvoord is correct about the connection between 24:36-44 and 24:45-25:30, but incorrect in identifying 24:36-44 as the second coming. Of course, neither the Noah illustration nor the event described in 24:40-41 can refer to the second coming, since an appearing that is sudden, unexpected, and virtually instantaneous, and that occurs at a time when human conditions are described as being quite ordinary—a point explicitly made in the illustration (cf. 24:38-39)—cannot be the same as an appearing that is protracted, public, and predictable, and

that occurs at the peak of cataclysmic global judgments at the end of the tribulation. We should also point out that Walvoord's analysis of the parallelism in the Noah illustration is seriously in error. Note that the twin analogy of Lot's day, found in Luke 17:28-29, does not support Walvoord's view that the unrighteous are the ones removed. Thus, the assertion that Matthew 24:36-44 describes the second coming is demonstrably incorrect.

Interestingly, the new pretribulationist view also implies an imminent second coming. How do they deal with this problem? Again, working from the perspective that those taken are taken in judgment, Walvoord argues from the Noah illustration that once Noah's ark was finished and all were safely inside, the unredeemed could have known, based on Noah's prophetic proclamation, that the flood was imminent; thus in like manner, the second coming will be imminent once all of the tribulation signs have been fulfilled (*Matthew*, p. 193). Hence, according to this reasoning the second coming can be viewed as imminent once all of the precursory signs are fulfilled (*i.e.*, only at the very end of the tribulation period, immediately prior to the second coming). But such an interpretation of the passage cannot be correct, since as has already been pointed out, this interpretation hinges upon 24:36-44 being a description of the second coming, which is logically impossible, and since 24:38-39 cannot be made to fit with any biblical description of earthly life immediately preceding the second coming. Thus, the new pretribulationism was simply a logical extension of the early pretribulationists' view of 24:36-44, extending that view to 24:45-25:30.

If the new, post-Chafer pretribulationists do not view the statements of imminency in Matthew 24:36-25:30 as applicable to the rapture, how do they support the doctrine of imminency? J. Dwight Pentecost's *Things to Come* (pp. 168-169, 180-181, 202-204) presents us with a classic example of the new pretribulationist quandary regarding the support of imminency. Pentecost cites several New Testament passages to support imminency (Jn. 14:2-3; 1 Cor. 1:7; Philp. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 4:16-17; 5:5-9; Tit. 2:13; Jam. 5:8-9; Rev. 3:10; 22:17-22 [sic]). However, when examined, we find that none of these passages teaches that the rapture is imminent. Not surprisingly, none of these passages are quoted or exegeted in his treatment of the doctrine. The weight of support Pentecost cites falls heaviest on the early church's belief in imminency, and he quotes from *2 Clement* and the *Didache* (Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 168-169). Interestingly, when the contexts of these two quotes are examined, it is apparent that they were both based on statements made in Matthew 24:36-25:30 (which Pentecost and virtually all post-Chafer pretribulationists reject as referring to the rapture). The immediate quotation he cites from chapter sixteen of the *Didache* contains no less than fourteen allusions to the Olivet Discourse, and the quote from *2 Clement* chapter twelve specifically appeals to the Olivet Discourse as its scriptural basis of authority (with an explicit reference to Matthew 24:3). Walvoord does the same, citing the same passage in the *Didache*; he also cites *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (Book VII, Section ii, Paragraph xxxi), which contains six allusions to the Olivet Discourse (Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, pp. 53-56). Neither Pentecost nor Walvoord comments on the illogicality of appealing to the early church testimony, while at the same time denying the applicability of the scripture upon which those statements were based. What are we to make of this? It is apparent that some in the early church believed and taught the imminency of Christ's appearing; and they based their belief on Christ's statements in his Olivet Discourse—principally the Matthew 24:36-25:30 section. This likely indicates a general belief in imminency on the part of the very early church, at least prior to the influence of Gnosticism and the Alexandrian school, even though discussion of the topic in early church literature is sparse. However, the new pretribulationism has reduced the support for imminency to little more than some general references to Christ's appearing, and a few statements from the early church fathers based principally on a passage that pretribulationists insist isn't even applicable to the rapture. This is an unfortunate circumstance, particularly since dispensational premillennialism has, for

the most part, “hung its hat” on the hook of pretribulationism, and pretribulationism is in very serious trouble. As we have observed from the preceding discussions, there are inherent logical defects in the principal pretribulationist arguments that have been there all along; for neither the argument from imminency, nor the wrath argument prove pretribulationism as many mistakenly assume (see the first two papers in this series). However, Chafer’s view on Matthew 24:45-25:30 has hastened the abandonment of imminency by some dispensationalists, and may ultimately contribute to the abandonment of dispensationalism itself. Unless dispensationalists can recover from pretribulationism’s theological overextension in claiming more than can be proven, and reclaim the doctrine of imminency as rooted in Matthew 24:36-25:30, it is likely that the beneficiary will be posttribulationism (dispensational, covenantal, or blended). Posttribulationism is, after all, what lies at the bottom of this slippery slope; midtribulationism and Rosenthal’s view are merely “speed bumps” along the way.

Pretribulationism was controversial from its beginning with J.N. Darby in the nineteenth century, and no wonder, for the dominant eschatology at the time was postmillennialism. However, due largely to the popularity of the *Scofield Reference Bible* and to the dispensational Bible college movement, pretribulationism became well established in the first half of the 1900s. In the early nineteen forties, a controversy erupted within premillennialism due to the proposal of the midtribulationist rapture theory. Midtribulationism (being composed mostly of covenantalists rather than dispensationalists) rejected imminency altogether (see, Norman B. Harrison, *The End: Rethinking Revelation*, 1941, pp. 231-233) and held that only some events of the seventh seal of Revelation, which they placed at the midpoint of the tribulation period, represent divine wrath. However, the tribulation chronology employed by early midtribulationism was not well conceived; also the arguments used to place the rapture at the seventh trumpet of Revelation were quite weak (for further discussion see, *What the Bible Says About the Future*, pp. 202-203, by the author). Midtribulationism never gained a large following, and languished; nevertheless, dissatisfaction with pretribulationism did not disappear. In the early nineteen-nineties a theory based on the general framework of midtribulationism emerged under the name “pre-wrath rapturism” (Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church*, 1990). Rosenthal’s theory was a reformulation of some of the core ideas and arguments of midtribulationism; it added some new arguments, and very importantly, it subscribed to an improved tribulation chronology that placed the rapture about three-quarters of the way through the tribulation period. Like midtribulationism, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath theory jettisoned imminency and viewed only a segment of the tribulation, about the last quarter, as divine wrath, thus allowing for the rapture to occur late in the tribulation period. To the extent that this theory was based on the framework of midtribulationism, it suffered from the same problems. While midtribulationism emerged out of covenant premillennialism, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath theory emerged from dispensational premillennialism. Interestingly, they share two basic characteristics: 1) the denial of the imminency of the rapture; and, 2) the denial that the entire seven-year tribulation period is divine wrath (one of the core arguments of pretribulationism).

Does the Bible explicitly teach imminency?

In his Olivet Discourse, Christ clearly taught that his appearing would be imminent. In Matthew 24:36-44 he said:

[24:36-44] “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. (37) For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. (38) For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, (39) and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the

Son of Man be. (40) Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. (41) Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. (42) Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. (43) But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. (44) For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.” [NASB]

The appearing that Christ describes in this passage can only be his appearing at the rapture of the church sometime prior to the second coming proper. Of course Christ did not make a distinction between his appearing for the church (the rapture) and his second coming proper to establish his visible kingdom on earth; it was left to Paul to reveal that distinction (1 Cor. 15:51-52). Christ simply spoke of his “coming” in which he combined elements of both events. Thus, it would not be incorrect to say that the rapture is a component (or “phase”) of the second coming, though the events are separated in time, with the rapture occurring sometime prior to the second coming. Nevertheless, Christ’s description of his coming in Matthew 24-25 clearly contains elements of both events (such was normal biblical expression according to progressive revelation; just as elements of Christ’s first and second advents are co-mingled in the same sentence in Isaiah 61:1-3, and just as elements of the millennium and eternity are co-mingled in Isaiah 65:17-25). The fact that Christ did not distinguish between the rapture and the second coming proper does not mean that they are not discrete events, nor does it in any way support posttribulationism, which sees the two events as one; it simply means that we must learn this distinction from elsewhere in scripture (hence the mystery that Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Having said that, it is apparent that Matthew 24:36-44 (as well as the material that follows in 24:45-25:30) is applicable to the rapture, at least insofar as it teaches the imminency of Christ’s appearing. In fact, Christ’s statement on this subject was so explicit and so complete that there was no reason for the subject to be developed further—the Master had spoken, and that was all that needed to be said.

How can we be certain that Matthew 24:36-25:30 has the rapture in view? Simple: this passage must refer to the rapture or to the second coming proper, or to both—on that point all are agreed; and on the basis of comparison it seems quite impossible that it could refer to the second coming proper, which leaves only the rapture. The appearing of Christ as described in this passage is secret (vv. 36,42,44), unannounced and unexpected (vv. 36-39, 43,44), and virtually instantaneous (vv. 40-41). Yet Christ in the immediate prior context (vv. 27-31) stated the opposite in regard to his second coming proper. He said that it will be public (vv. 27-28), that it will immediately follow the catastrophic judgments associated with the conclusion of the period (v. 29) and be attended by an unmistakable sign in the sky visible to the whole world (v. 30); not to mention that it will be predictable to the very day once the desecration in the temple takes place at the midpoint of the tribulation period (according to Daniel 12:11 from the abomination in the temple there will be 1290 days). Thus, on the basis of comparison, it is apparent that this passage could only have been spoken in reference to the rapture, not the second coming proper. We can state this with confidence since the law of identity (sometimes called, the law of non-contradiction) tells us that nothing can be *what it is not* (i.e., unannounced and unexpected, yet announced and occurring on a specific day; or instantaneous, yet occurring over a span of time; or imminent, yet occurring on a precise day from the midpoint of the tribulation period, hailed by highly specific worldwide events, and preceded by an unmistakable sign in the sky visible to the whole world). The description of the event in verses 36-41 is irreconcilable with the description of the second coming proper given in verses 27-31, and therefore can only refer to the rapture of the church sometime prior to the second coming proper. It is really quite amazing that we should have to reassert this most obvious truth.

How is it that this truth has been almost universally ignored? No doubt, the bulk of interpretive comment on this passage has come from covenantal interpreters (whether amillennial, postmillennial, or premillennial). Covenantalists of all millennial persuasions fail to distinguish the rapture as an event separated in time from the second coming proper. Since covenantalists do not view the rapture as a discrete event, they must attribute Matthew 24:36-25:30 to the second coming, and thus they incorrectly conclude that the second coming must be imminent. Over time that view has become generally accepted in spite of the obvious problems involved. Add to that the fact that this portion of the Olivet Discourse presents a significant problem for pretribulationism. As strange as it may seem, pretribulationist interpreters who assign Matthew 24:36-25:30 to the second coming proper are forced to the same problematic conclusion as covenantalists; that is, that the second coming proper is (in some significant sense) imminent. Chafer was forced to this conclusion (see, Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 4, p. 367; and Vol. 5, pp. 129-140). Walvoord was also forced into a paradoxical position. He recognized the problems associated with viewing the second coming as imminent (see, John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, pp. 22-24); however, while he argued against the imminent second coming doctrine as held by posttribulationists, his own position on Matthew 24:36-25:30 led inexorably in the same direction. Walvoord attempted to minimize this discrepancy by explaining that while the general time of the second coming can be known (at least once the desecration in the temple occurs), it is the precise day and hour that cannot be known (Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Handbook*, 1990, pp. 392-398). However, such hedging in order to justify the reassignment of Matthew 24:36-25:30 to the second coming trivializes Christ's teaching. Are we to believe that Christ's concern with which these verses (24:36-25:30) are occupied, was only that his disciples might not be watching at the exact time of the exact day he would return? Wouldn't the catastrophic bowl judgments, the gathering of nations for the final battle (Armageddon), and finally the sign in the sky to be seen by the whole world (24:29-30) make such a concern a moot issue? For who on earth will fail to know when the second coming is about to happen? Isn't the principal teaching of Matthew 24:23-31 that the second coming is going to be unmistakable when it happens? Interesting, Walvoord's argument on this point appears to have been a co-opting of a posttribulationist argument popularized by Nathaniel West in his book, *Daniel's Great Prophecy* (1898); for West offers precisely the same argument against the use of Matthew 24:36-25:30 by nineteenth century pretribulationists who claimed that Matthew 24:36-25:30 taught the imminency of the rapture! (The text of West's argument can be found in George Ladd's *The Blessed Hope*, p. 46.) That the new pretribulationists have been unable to offer a better explanation of how Matthew 24:36-25:30 could describe an imminent second coming (other than to recycle a posttribulationist argument that trivializes Christ's teaching) is telling. And what it says is that the position of Chafer and Walvoord (*et. al.*), that Matthew 24:36-25:30 describes the second coming, not the rapture, cannot be squared with scripture and sound reason. (For additional comments on the Chafer-Walvoord interpretation of Matthew 24:36-25:30, see the appendix to this article.) Not only has this view undermined the biblical foundation of the doctrine of the imminency of the rapture by removing the only biblical proof-text for the doctrine, it has also contributed to the fracturing of dispensational premillennialism into imminent and non-imminent camps, and quite possibly has contributed to the overall decline of dispensationalism.

Conclusions

In his Olivet Discourse, Christ taught the imminency of the rapture—a fact recognized by pretribulationists prior to Thiessen and Chafer, but largely denied afterward in order to combat posttribulationism and partial rapturism, and to avoid the appearance that Christ's teaching might be incompatible with pretribulationism (*i.e.*, the Luke 21:36 problem). The new pretribulationists'

denial that Matthew 24:45-25:30 describes the rapture (at least with respect to the teaching of imminency) has led to a fracturing of dispensationalism. The result has been the defection of some dispensationalists from imminency altogether; and the new pretribulationists themselves have been left with no biblical support for the doctrine of imminency, other than some passages stating the nearness of Christ's coming and a few statements from church history based on Matthew 24:36-25:30—a passage which they deny has direct applicability to the rapture. The choice to regard Matthew 24:36-25:30 as a description of the second coming proper is one of the most tragic errors in the history of modern dispensational premillennialism; it is exceeded only by the error of wedding pretribulationism to dispensational premillennialism in the first place. Had those that recovered the truth of dispensational premillennialism in the nineteenth century (Darby, *et. al.*) not exceeded the limits of scripture and sound reason in insisting on the necessity of a pretribulationist rapture, it is likely that much of the confusion this dispute has generated in the last one hundred years would have been avoided; and dispensationalism might not be in the state of decline it is in today.

Pretribulationism is an over-reaching theology. Although correct in its insistence on an imminent and pre-wrath rapture, it far exceeds the bounds of scripture and sound reason by insisting that the rapture must be pretribulationist. Insofar as the rapture is concerned, we must confess that about all we can state for certain regarding its timing is that it is imminent (possibly, but not necessarily, pretribulationist), that it will occur before the coming wrath at the day of the Lord, and that it is sooner than it once was—what I prefer to call an “imminent and pre-wrath” rapture.

Appendix: Additional comments on the new (post-Chafer) pretribulationist interpretation of Matthew 24:36-25:30

We have observed why pretribulationists do not wish to acknowledge Matthew 24:36-25:30 as the rapture (*i.e.*, the problems posed by posttribulationism and partial rapturism, and the Luke 21:36 problem); I would now like to focus on how they have attempted to rationalize away this incontrovertible fact. It is asserted that Matthew 24:36-41 does not describe the rapture because the flood illustration given in verses 37-39 indicates that those “taken” are taken in judgment—a scenario that would only be consistent with the second coming proper. Of course we should be suspect when an interpretation requires that we dispense with a fundamental law of reason, such as the law of identity. So, let us once again reassert that based upon the law of identity Matthew 24:36-44 cannot refer to the second coming proper, since the description given in this passage is irreconcilable with the description of the second coming proper (given in verses 27-31). Thus, the assertion of the new pretribulationists that Matthew 24:36-41 describes the second coming is simply wrong. If, as we have said, Matthew 24:36-41 cannot refer to the second coming proper, how does one answer the new pretribulationists’ assertion that the ones taken in verses 40-41 are taken in judgment (corresponding to the analogy of the ones the flood “took” in judgment)? The answer is that there is no parallelism between the ones the flood “took” and those “taken” in verses 40-41. Neither the structure of the passage, nor the language indicates a parallel. Verse 39 uses the word *ere*, from *airo*, translated “took” (or “swept away”); and verses 40-41 use an unrelated term, *paralambonetai*, (in the middle voice) translated “taken,” or “received (or seized) to or for one’s self.” While we need not make too much over the meaning of these terms, it is at least clear that no parallelism is expressly indicated in the choice of words. Nevertheless, Walvoord insists there is a parallel. He states that once Noah’s ark was finished and all were safely inside, the unredeemed could have known (based on Noah’s prophetic proclamation) that the flood was imminent; thus in like manner the second coming will be imminent once all of the tribulation signs have been completed (Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 193). Hence, Walvoord builds his case on an assumed parallelism between those the flood “took” and those

“taken” in verses 40-41. The purpose of this parallelism is: 1) to establish that verses 40-41 refer to the second coming proper (since those “taken” are taken in judgment), and 2) to explain how the second coming proper could be described as “imminent.” However, Walvoord’s interpretation is based upon an unstated assumption: that verses 40-41 actually refer to the second coming proper. In other words, he assumes that verses 40-41 describe the second coming proper, in order to establish the parallel between the ones the flood “took” and those taken in verses 40-41; then he appeals to the supposed parallel as evidence that verses 40-41 describe the second coming proper. This is clearly circular reasoning. As we have already observed, the event described in verses 40-41 cannot be the second coming proper (due to the law of identity); thus verses 40-41 cannot refer to the second coming, and there is no basis for asserting an analogical parallel between those the flood “took” and those that are “taken” in verses 40-41. Actually, quite the opposite is true. Since we have shown that verses 40-41 can only describe the rapture, we must conclude that the ones the flood “took” (v. 39) are analogous to the one’s that are “left” in verses 40-41 (an asymmetric, or inverted parallelism). Not only does Walvoord mismatch the parallelism in this passage, he fails to interpret what the passage actually says. The Noah illustration does not say that the antediluvians knew (or “should,” or “could” have known) the flood was imminent once Noah entered the ark; it says that they didn’t know what was happening until it actually happened, *i.e.* “until the flood took them all away” (v. 38-39). If the Noah illustration were analogically parallel to the second coming, as Walvoord argues, we should have to conclude that those taken in judgment at the second coming will not know what has happened until they are actually taken away (in accordance with the parallelism), yet such a conclusion would be incongruent with other scriptures; for according to Revelation 6:12-17 the unsaved will be aware of their doom before the breaking of the seventh seal, which is well before the end of the tribulation period. Even knowing their predicament, the unrighteous will refuse to repent (Rev. 9:20-21; 16:9-11), and their armies will gather to oppose Christ at his return (Rev. 19:19). Thus we see that Walvoord’s interpretation that verses 40-41 refer to the second coming proper (based upon an assumed parallel between those the flood “took” and those “taken” in verses 40-41) is neither logical nor biblical.

I would also like to briefly comment on the new pretribulationist interpretation of Matthew 25:1-13, since this passage is a continuation of Christ’s teaching on imminency in 24:36-51 (cf. 25:13). Consistent with their interpretation of 24:36-44, the new pretribulationists generally interpret the similitude of the ten virgins (25:1-13) as referring to the second coming proper. According to this interpretation, the passage describes Christ returning (having previously claimed his bride at the rapture) and calling redeemed Israel (represented by the virgins with oil) unto the wedding feast in the millennium; but some of Israel will not be prepared (redeemed) and will be left out (as represented by the virgins without oil for their lamps). Although it is true that Christ will return with his bride at his second coming, and saved Jews and Gentiles will enter the kingdom with him, reading that into this similitude is highly problematic. First, we are told in verse 1 that this similitude pertains to “the kingdom of heaven”—a frequent topic in Matthew’s gospel (see, Matthew 13). However, when we look at the other passages that deal with the kingdom of heaven, not one is limited in scope to the Jewish nation during the tribulation period, as this interpretation requires. In every other mention of the kingdom of heaven, the entire interadvent age, including the church age, is in view. So, the new pretribulationist interpretation does not fit the stated scope of the passage, (*i.e.*, the kingdom of heaven). Second, we note in verse 3 that some of the virgins were “foolish” (professing but unredeemed, as seen by having a lamp but no oil), while some were “prudent” (having both a lamp and oil), yet all presumed they would gain entrance to the wedding feast at the appearing of the same bridegroom; in fact, it appears that initially all ten virgins were, at least ostensibly, of the same party (*i.e.*, all professed faith in the true Christ). This picture of a mixed Christianity (believers and unbelievers visibly united in the profession of a common faith) fits well with the present age, especially given the

picture in the parables of Matthew 13; however, the tribulation period will be a time when believers will face great persecution and martyrdom (Rev. 6:9-11), and those who merely profess will fall away; the non-elect will even come under a powerful delusion sent by God to worship and serve the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:11). To assume that the non-elect will choose to associate themselves with severely persecuted believers in anticipation of the arrival of the true Christ at his second coming does not seem plausible. This description best fits the general apostasy associated with the end of the present age, to which Christ gives abundant testimony (Matt. 13:1-50). Third, in verse 5 we are told that while the bridegroom was delaying, all the virgins became “drowsy” and “began to sleep.” This could hardly describe believers during the later part of the tribulation period, whose lives are being spiritually refined (Dan. 12:2; Zech. 13:8-9), and who from the midpoint of the period will be in constant peril because of their testimony (Matt. 24:15-20; Rev. 6:9-11). To suggest that the body of believers present on earth during the latter tribulation period could be fairly characterized as “drowsy” and beginning to “sleep” (v. 5) fails to recognize what the Bible says about the nature, purpose, and some events of the tribulation period. The tribulation believers, more than any other generation of believers, will be the ones who, owing to their great faithfulness and testimony, will pay the ultimate price for holding forth the truth and maintaining a pure testimony amid the most difficult persecution history has ever, or will ever see (Rev. 6:9; Matt. 24:15-22). While it is true that belief will be relatively rare when Christ returns at his second coming (since many believers will perish), those that do believe will certainly not be “drowsy” or “asleep.” How the new pretribulationists, who generally take a literal view of tribulation prophecy, could subscribe to such an interpretation is really quite incredible. Note also that the delay of the bridegroom and the slumber of the virgins more naturally fit with the current age than with the tribulation period. Fourth, the unexpectedly long delay of the Lord indicated in the similitude of the ten virgins (25:5) and also of the talents (25:19) clearly encompasses the present age (from the time he departed until his appearing), and argues against limiting the scope of this passage to Israel in the tribulation period. Fifth, the new pretribulationist interpretation views this passage as a description of Christ’s return after having previously claimed his bride to enter the millennial wedding feast. However, according to the text (25:1), this story is a similitude (*homoiothesetai* from *homoioo* “like unto”). If this were an actual description, as Chafer’s interpretation implies, it could not be a similitude as the text explicitly states—for a thing cannot be compared to, *i.e.*, “similar to” itself (another application of the law of identity). While it is true that Christ will return with his bride, the church, at the second coming, that truth is not taught here. The similitude of the bridegroom and the ten virgins merely illustrates the manner in which Christ will appear—“like unto” a bridegroom (that is, an ordinary middle-eastern bridegroom), who, having delayed long finds his entourage sleeping upon his arrival—an apt picture of the state of the church at the rapture, particularly in light of the general apostasy prophetically anticipated at the end of the present age (Matt. 13). Christ here does not *describe* himself as a bridegroom; he merely *compares* his return to a bridegroom arriving at an unexpectedly late hour. Also, the view that this passage describes Christ as an actual bridegroom fails to consider that it was Paul, not Christ, who first revealed the truth that the church is to be the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-30)—for Christ nowhere taught that doctrine. [For those who insist (against the many sound reasons presented above) that this is an actual description of Christ, perhaps I should point out that even in that circumstance it would still best fit the rapture. First, the multiplicity of the virgins is not a barrier to them representing the church; the body of Christ (the church), is, after all, composed of a multiplicity of members (1 Cor. 12:12). Second, that the wedding feast will take place on earth in the millennium is merely an assumption—the text says nothing about where this feast takes place. Third, the description does not have to be limited only to the second phase of the oriental wedding (the post-wedding feast). If the wedding and the feast are to be in the same location (heaven), then this could picture Christ claiming his bride and taking her to his home (heaven) where the wedding and the feast will take place. Fourth, it should be noted that at an unexpected hour there was a

“shout” saying, “Behold, the Bridegroom. Come out to meet him.” This could easily correspond to the shout of the archangel in the 1 Thessalonians 4:16, which is a description of the rapture. Also, we should note that in 25:6 the virgins are commanded: “Come out to meet him” (*exerchesthe* {from *ex* = “out” + *erchomai* = “to come”} *eis apantesiv* {“unto a meeting,” or “encounter”}). If this is taken as a description of the second coming, and if the unredeemed are the ones to be removed, leaving the redeemed to go into the earthly millennium (as Chafer and Walvoord insist), how is it that the redeemed are here called “out” (out of what?) to meet the bridegroom, and the unredeemed (represented by the foolish virgins with no oil) are left behind? Clearly the particulars do not fit the second coming proper as Chafer and Walvoord claim. However, as I said, I don’t think this is a description so much as a metaphor used to convey the unexpectedness of his appearing. In any case, it best suits the rapture, not the second coming.] As we have observed, Matthew 24:36-44 can only refer to the rapture of the church; and thus it follows that 25:1-14 (and so, 25:15-30) must also refer to the rapture of the church, at least as far as the element of imminency is concerned. (I will not comment on 25:15-30 since the pretribulationist interpretation of that passage is predicated upon the interpretation of 25:1-14 as being the second coming proper—as goes one, so goes the other.)

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