

## The New Pretribulationism

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[This material was adapted largely from *The Olivet Discourse: A Reconstruction of the Text From Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with Commentary*, by the author, and includes most of footnote 12, beginning on page 155, as well as other material. For a more complete discussion of this subject see pages 149-190 in that volume.]

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: Thy Kingdom Come*, 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 was 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 was 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 based on Matthew 24:36-25:30 being a description of 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 would have been 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.)

The new pretribulationist solution also resulted in another significant problem: Matthew 24:36-25:30 is explicit in teaching the imminency of the appearing it describes. Thus, if one claims that the passage pertains to the second coming, they must conclude that the second coming will be imminent at such a time as described in the passage (i.e., when people are going about the ordinary activities of life, unaware that they are in imminent danger of impending global judgment). Clearly, given the prophesied conditions of the tribulation period just prior to the second coming, such an interpretation is impossible from the standpoint of a normal/objective hermeneutic. Nevertheless, this is the interpretation offered by the new pretribulationists (for examples see: Chafer's *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, p.367; and vol. 5, pp. 129-140; and John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, pp. 22-24).

If one denies that Matthew 24:36-25:30 describes the rapture, an enormous problem results, since Matthew 24:36-25:30 contains the only explicit biblical support for imminency. This is particularly problematic since other avenues for proving the imminency of the rapture, whether historical or deductive, have been inconclusive at best. Pentecost's book, *Things to Come*, which since its publication in 1958 has been considered the sine qua non of dispensational eschatology, is a classic example of the new pretribulationist quandary regarding support for imminency (see pages 168-169, 180-181, 202-204). Pentecost cites several New Testament passages in support of 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, upon examination none of these passages directly supports the doctrine. Pentecost does not expound any of these passages; the weight of his evidence falls heaviest on the beliefs of the early church, for which he quotes from 2 *Clement* and the *Didache* (pp. 168-169). However, when the contexts of these two quotations are examined it is apparent that they were both based on statements made in Matthew 24:36-25:30—which Pentecost and all of the new pretribulationists reject as pertaining to the rapture. The immediate quotation Pentecost 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 source of authority. Walvoord does the same, citing the same passage in the *Didache*, and also *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (Book VII, Section ii, Paragraph xxxi), which contains six allusions to the Olivet Discourse (John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1957, pp. 53-56). Neither Pentecost nor Walvoord comments on the illogic of appealing to early church history, while at the same time denying the validity of the biblical basis the early church gave for their belief in imminency.

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; hence, if one assumes a parallel 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. 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 erroneous. Note that the twin analogy of Lot's day found in Luke 17:28-29 (which is parallel to Matthew 24:37-40) does not support Walvoord's view that the unrighteous are the ones removed. Actually, it was Noah and his family that escaped judgment being borne above the water and returned to the surface of the earth after the judgment subsided—a fitting picture of the rapture of the Church, which is perfectly in agreement with the details of the parallel illustration concerning Lot's deliverance at the judgment of Sodom (Lk. 17:26-30, cf. vv.31-35). Thus, the assertion that Matthew 24:36-44 describes the second coming cannot be correct (see: *The Olivet Discourse: A Reconstruction of the Text From Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with Commentary*, by the author, Biblical Reader Communications, 2010, pp. 159-168).

The view Walvoord represents also implies an imminent second coming. How does he deal with this problem? Again, working from the perspective that those taken are taken in judgment, he 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: Thy Kingdom Come*, by John F. Walvoord, Chicago: Moody Press, 1974, 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 (cf. Lk. 17:26-29) 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. Likely this entire string of failed interpretation began with the mistaken presumption on the part of early dispensationalists that prophecy concerning the Church would not likely be found in such close proximity to a discussion of the second coming. However, any fully developed answer to the disciples' question in 24:3 would have been incomplete if it had not addressed the dual nature of Christ's future appearing, necessitating a discussion of both the rapture and the second coming.

While the introduction of the new pretribulationism occurred almost without notice, it eventually led to a significant reconfiguration of pretribulationist theology. First, it virtually destroyed the biblical foundation of imminency, forcing pretribulationists to construct their support for imminency from theological and historical arguments, all of which have proved to be weakly supported. Second, since the argument from imminency had been the principal argument for pretribulationism, the weakening of the case for imminency necessitated an adjustment to the underlying support for pretribulationism; this resulted in the wrath argument being advanced as the principal proof. Of course, in order for the wrath argument to support pretribulationism, one must be able to prove that the entire tribulation period is a time of divine wrath. Interesting, it appears that the earlier pretribulationists did not necessarily view the entire tribulation as divine wrath (see *The Scofield Reference Bible*, 1917 ed., p.1349, footnote 1; and Lewis Sperry Chafer's

*Systematic Theology*, vol. IV pp.11, 383, 398; and vol. VII, p.110). The lack of biblical or effective theological proof that the entire tribulation period is a time of divine wrath has made the wrath argument highly problematic. (I have discussed this extensively in “Does Pretribulationism’s Wrath Argument Prove Pretribulationism?” Biblical Reader Communications, 2007.) Third, the relegation of Matthew 24:36-25:30 to the second coming has resulted in significant alteration of pretribulationism’s view of the second coming (i.e., that it is to be an imminent event); this has resulted in considerable interpretive confusion and the misinterpretation of some passages, such as the Noah illustration (Mt. 24:37-39) and the parable of the ten virgins (Mt. 25:1-13), as well as the parable of the servants (Mt. 25:14-30). (See: *The Olivet Discourse*, by the author, pp. 153-190.)

Failing to see that Matthew 24:36-25:30 implies a dual appearing leads inevitably to the unitary view of posttribulationism. The reason is that the very concept of a dual appearing is predicated upon the fact that one aspect of Christ’s future appearing is described as imminent, while the other cannot be imminent. When we recognize that in this discourse Jesus introduced the concept of a dual appearing, then, and only then, we are able to discern a coherent theology of the rapture and the second coming.

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