

Michael L. Brown
& Craig S. Keener

FOREWORD BY CRAIG L. BLOMBERG

NOT AFRAID

OF THE **ANTICHRIST**

WHY WE **DON'T BELIEVE** IN A
PRE-TRIBULATION
RAPTURE

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“Filled with hard-hitting, thought-provoking information on what the Bible says about the end times, this book will challenge and encourage you to understand what the future holds for believers.”

Mike Bickle, founder, International House of Prayer, Kansas City

“For the past thirty years, I have taught a course on 1 Thessalonians—the only book of the Bible to use the word translated “rapture” (*harpazō*). In the fourth chapter, the apostle Paul expresses the sequence of events associated with the return of Christ: (1) The Lord shall descend from heaven, (2) the dead in Christ will rise, and (3) believers who are alive shall be “caught up” (raptured) to meet the Lord in the air. The million-dollar question is, What happens next? Will believers accompany the Lord to the earth where He will begin His reign (the post-Tribulation view)? Or will believers remain with Christ in heaven while God pours out His wrath on the earth (the pre-Tribulation view)? Paul’s answer: “We will always be with the Lord!” The issue of the Rapture is a very difficult question and must be answered by inference from the collected testimony of many passages of Scripture. Brown and Keener have put together a well-articulated case for the post-Tribulational position, and they have done so with grace. This book deserves a very careful reading.”

Clinton E. Arnold, dean and professor of New Testament language and literature, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“Like the authors of this remarkable book, I was raised believing that the only biblical perspective on the Tribulation was that I need not worry about it, that Jesus would remove me from this earth before the sufferings of that time began. I, too, was nurtured and even encouraged by Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and later educated at a seminary known for its dispensational, pre-Tribulational theology. But I came to see what Brown and Keener so eloquently demonstrate in this book, namely, that the promise of Christ to His Church is not deliverance from suffering via a pre-Tribulation Rapture but His faithfulness in preserving us in the midst of it. This is, quite simply, the best and most informative book available on this subject. Highly recommended!”

Sam Storms, senior pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City; past president, Evangelical Theological Society

“I couldn’t wait to read *Not Afraid of the Antichrist*, and I was not disappointed! Two of my favorite theologians and authors have come together to write the best book I’ve encountered addressing Pre-Tribulation Rapture theology. Dr. Michael Brown and Dr. Craig Keener have managed to treat the subject with scholarly precision, while keeping it highly readable and even entertaining. I highly recommend this book.”

Daniel Kolenda, president and CEO, Christ for All Nations

“It is so refreshing and encouraging to hear Dr. Keener’s and Dr. Brown’s views of the Christian life. It is in fact about a Person, and pure and simple devotion to Him above all else. Nothing that God allows to happen in this world can take away our life in Him, who has become to us everything we need. May this book center you on Him and His Kingdom more than ever!”

Dr. Rolland Baker, founder, Iris Global

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To our friends and colleagues around the world who have suffered, or even died, for their faith in Jesus, without denying His name.

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Foreword

A generation ago, baby boomers and some of their parents were captivated by the end-times prophecies of Scripture. Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* became the bestselling nonfiction book in the U.S. during the 1970s. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, those same boomers and some of their children were titillated by the LEFT BEHIND series from Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which was clearly touted as fiction but not always treated as such. What these authors shared theologically was the staunch conviction that a pre-Tribulational, premillennial eschatology was the one correct interpretation of Scripture on the events of the last days. Their effects ranged far beyond churches and denominations that already held that perspective. I was invited to teach Revelation in a large adult Sunday school class in a Christian Reformed Church in the Denver metropolitan area shortly before the frenzy over the Y2K crisis that was going to turn the world into chaos on New Year's Day 2000. Except for one elderly gentleman, no one could articulate Calvin's view of the end times or amillennial eschatology, which is what the CRC has historically held, but they were all familiar with Lindsey, LaHaye and Jenkins.

As we near the end of the second decade of the 2000s, the scene is quite different. Many Gen Xers and most millennials care very little about eschatology. Often it is an overreaction to their parents' overreaction in the opposite direction, but often, too, it is a failure to grasp its practical relevance to a world of deep personal and social injustice. Especially if they are reacting against pre-Tribulationism, they recognize the escapist potential and would prefer to concentrate on helping meet people's needs in the present.

Keener and Brown have crucial things to say both to those who overemphasize and to those who underemphasize biblical eschatology. For the avid pre-Tribulationists, they make a compelling case for post-Tribulationism, both by surveying all the relevant Scriptures and by highlighting the amount of suffering that Christians in many parts of the world have already had to endure, making hopes or promises of escaping the worst of human suffering ring fairly hollow. For the apathetic panmillennialists (it will all just pan out in the end), they stress the need for Western Christians, who have had to make few sacrifices for their faith, to be much better prepared in case hard-core persecution and martyrdom should come their way. For all readers, they put the issues in sound, historical and contemporary perspective. And everything is made that much more interesting by the smattering of personal stories they scatter throughout the book, as both authors went through significant theological and ecclesiastical transformations throughout their own illustrious careers.

So thank you, Craig and Michael, for a wonderful, sane, challenging, inspiring, clear, biblical and convicting little book. It deserves a wide readership. Readers, bring an open mind and a warm heart with you, and you won't be disappointed.

Craig L. Blomberg, distinguished professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Jane Campbell of Chosen Books for pursuing us and this book until it became a reality, and for the commitment that Chosen has shown to this book all along the way. We also appreciate Kathryn Deering's editorial work on this book, and we give special thanks to Craig's student Chris Chandler for reading through the manuscript and providing feedback.

Preface

For several years now, we have thought it would be a real joy to write a book together, but in the midst of our very full writing and ministry schedules, it seemed more like a dream than anything else. Then Jane Campbell, Chosen's zealous and intrepid editor, asked us if we would like to team up on this subject for this book. Immediately, we said yes.

Even though it has been decades since either of us has believed in the "Left Behind" (escape before the final Tribulation) idea, we never divide from others over the subject. Plus, in our earliest days as believers, we were both in churches that taught that idea, and to this day we have friends and colleagues who hold to it.

At the same time, we are convinced that this teaching is not found in Scripture, and we believe it is important for God's people to have a right understanding of what the future holds. Also, since we have both ministered in parts of the world where it is very dangerous to be a Christian—in some places, your faith will cost you your life—we felt it is important to emphasize the scriptural message of courage and perseverance in the midst of suffering. In Jesus, we overcome!

This short book, then, is meant to educate *and* encourage, to inform *and* inspire. The chapters that follow are based on years of intensive study of the biblical texts in their original languages; in fact, except where otherwise noted, Scripture is referenced in our own translation. Despite this, the style is not academic. Accordingly, the endnotes are few and far between, and esoteric theological terms are kept to a minimum. At the same time, we welcome scholars to dissect our arguments to see if what we are saying is accurate. May the simple and clear truth of God's Word prevail in everyone's hearts and minds!

What if you change your beliefs because of this book? Holding the "right view" does not put us in a position spiritually superior to those who differ, nor does it give us license to put them down. Our dispensationalist, pre-Tribulation friends also love the Lord and His Word, and where we differ, we do so as brothers and sisters. Moreover, we also resist a fear-based theology that would try to scare anyone with tales of the coming Antichrist. The same promises that helped believers endure fiery trials in centuries past will help us endure fiery trials right until the end of this age. The Lord knows how to keep His people.

To give you a brief overview of the pages that follow, after an important introduction (penned mainly by Craig), we each tell our own stories: Why is it that we changed our views about Christians escaping the final Tribulation? Next, we review the history of end-time speculation, including dispensational beliefs in which the Left Behind idea originated. Then Michael reviews the relevant Old Testament material, looks at the key New Testament vocabulary and emphasizes the biblical teaching that there is only one Second Coming (rather than a Rapture and a Second Coming). Craig then tackles the most common pre-Trib arguments and lays out the strongest post-Trib arguments. (These arguments hold whether there is a Tribulation limited to seven years or a more general, lengthy time of tribulation.) Finally, we both weigh in with words of encouragement and hope as we give practical application to the texts we have discussed. There are minor variations in how each of us approaches some passages or arguments, but overall we independently came to basically the same conclusions by studying Scripture.

It is our heartfelt prayer that you will be strengthened in faith and enlightened in mind as you read the pages that follow, that Jesus will become all the more precious in your eyes and that, together with Him (indeed, in Him!) you will rise up as an overcomer.

Introduction

Christians Face Tribulation

In June 2000, I (Craig) taught sixty pastors in Yelwa, Plateau State, Nigeria. The setting was not quite like camping out, but it was the best they could offer. At night, despite dispersing dangerously heavy mosquito spray three times, I had to choose whether to endure mosquito bites or to swelter by wrapping myself with layers to protect me from the mosquitoes. What the mosquitoes missed, the bedbugs got anyway.

But the pastors were enthusiastic and eager to learn. Some had traveled for many miles, and they slept overnight on the floor of the church. My host, John, was very hospitable, and he and the other impoverished Nigerian pastors showed their sacrificial gratitude in the best way they knew how: They gave me a chicken. The leaders also took me to eat pounded yam at a restaurant, where we sat at a table outside under a tin roof. From the corner of my eye I could see a lighter-skinned man who appeared to be from much farther north, perhaps from North Africa or the Middle East, gesturing toward us and giving instructions. Although I knew much less Hausa than the pastors with whom I was eating, I could tell that he was unhappy about my presence.

Two years later, there were no known Christians in Yelwa. On February 24, 2002, some Muslims in Yelwa surrounded a church and massacred the men, women and children inside. The targeted violence spread, until tens of thousands of Christians and followers of traditional tribal religions were displaced from the area. Churches were destroyed and converted into latrines. One friend told me that Yelwa, though geographically in majority Christian Plateau State, had now declared itself part of a Shari'ah state.

This followed the periodic slaughter of Christians elsewhere, a mass slaughter that had begun with a coordinated attack on churches and Christians in Jos on Friday, September 7, 2001, after prayers in the mosques. I had spent three summers in Jos and was panicked for my friends' safety. One friend and former student, a Nigerian lawyer, spent three days in a church under siege with a corpse and no water. Over the course of that year, thousands died. Anxiously, I inquired about the safety of a young woman I knew who had lived in the most decimated area. Many church leaders were killed.

Because Plateau was majority Christian, eventually some younger men from Christian backgrounds attacked mosques and killed Muslims, thinking that such reprisals would teach jihadists that there was a cost to their actions. Civil war, however, was likely exactly what the jihadists wanted; if they could turn all Christians and Muslims against each other, it would require less work from them. They hated moderate Muslims as well as Christians. Probably most Muslims, like most Christians, wanted peace.

In May of 2004, some local Tarok tribespeople, angry at the Muslim takeover of Yelwa and that nothing had been done about it, attacked Yelwa and slaughtered a massive number of Muslims. Suddenly, the event made international news. One media report declared that Christians had massacred people in the "Muslim town of Yelwa." U.S. Christians, whose country had bombed Afghanistan in retaliation for 9/11 a couple of years before, chided Nigerian Christians for not turning the other cheek.

In response to media reports of the massacre in Yelwa, the governor of Kano, a predominantly Muslim state, urged young Muslims to defend their faith. Young Muslims took up arms and began slaughtering Christians in Kano. The media, which in northern Nigeria was largely controlled by Muslims at the time, reported to the outside world that in local violence fifty persons had died. The media reports I saw did not specify the faith of those who were murdered. Meanwhile, friends from northern Nigeria reported to me that all the morgues were packed with bodies. Many had lost friends and relatives in the carnage, and some of my friends estimated that thousands of Christians had died. In one account that I could not verify directly, a baby was burned alive and the desperate mother was murdered for protesting.

My comments here do not address Muslims in general, and international media have become more discerning about Nigeria since the rise of Boko Haram. My point in recounting this tragedy that tore at my heart is simply to illustrate that we in the West have too easily bought into the lie that because God loves Christians, we will be spared tribulation. That was not true in northern Nigeria. In recent years that has not been true in Eritrea, Iran, Sudan, North Korea or many other countries.

Why then would it be true here? Jesus said, "You will be hated by *all* nations because of My name" (Matthew 24:9 NASB, emphasis added). Why should we expect to be exempt from such tribulation? Does God have special

favoritism for the West? For the West where religion is declining, from which pornography is exported and where even Christians are growing increasingly biblically illiterate?

When Rome fell after several generations of Christian dominance, pagans insisted that this was the judgment of the gods against Christianity. The great North African theologian Augustine replied, in essence, “Far from it! Rome fell because its centuries of sins were piled as high as heaven, and because the commitment of the Christians there was too shallow to stay God’s judgment.”

And if we should not be exempt from such tribulation, what do we mean when we speak of being “raptured” to heaven before the “Great Tribulation”? Jesus tells us that the worst they can do to us is kill our bodies (see Matthew 10:28), and people have been doing that to us (and others) for a very long time.

Unrest in the West

Like many generations before us, we live in very troubled times. That observation is increasingly true even for Christians in America, who have often been spared the worst of sufferings faced by believers in many other parts of the world.

Surprisingly, in the West the radical secular response to Islamic terrorism has sometimes been loud denunciation of religion in general as dangerous and unthinking. Whereas social tolerance once meant respecting everyone’s diverse faith convictions, attacking and often stereotyping religion in social media has now become fair game. Those with limited exposure to positive expressions of Christian faith, including some university professors speaking far outside their sphere of expertise, denounce Christians as blind followers of ignorant myths they have been taught.

The authors of this book find such denunciations ironic, given that both of us were converted from unchurched, non-Christian backgrounds. One of us (Michael) holds a Ph.D. in Semitic languages from New York University and the other (Craig) a Ph.D. in New Testament and Christian origins from Duke University. One might hope that we have some understanding about what we believe and why we believe it!

Similarly, although Christians were on the forefront of movements to free slaves, promote women’s voting rights, abolish sex trafficking and so forth, a number of trendy thinkers now treat Christianity as oppressive, partly because in our quest for justice we value human life (including life before birth). Likewise, in following our faith we insist, at least for the Church, on exclusive sexual fidelity in heterosexual marriage—a view that until recently was the dominant moral conviction in society.

Especially because of these issues, some of those who disagree now denounce Christians as bigots to be lumped with the KKK or Aryan supremacists. (This again seems especially ironic to the authors of this book, one of whom is Jewish, and the other of whom is interracial married to a professor from central Africa.) Unfortunately, some poorly informed Christians loudly play into such widely promoted stereotypes, further undermining the Church’s witness in the culture.

So what happens if those with false stereotypes of Christians impose their values on the Church? If non-Christian values begin to encroach on what privately funded religious colleges can teach their students? If restrictions are placed on sharing our faith in public? We do not have to wait for such possibilities. What happens now when those with views hostile to Christians act out that hostility in public?

That would not be a new situation for Christians. One of the authors (Craig) was beaten for his witness more than once in the United States, in the late 1970s. The other author (Michael) was in a life-threatening situation when an angry Hindu mob shut down his preaching meeting in India. He has also been the subject of death threats from radical groups even in the United States.

Christians in Pakistan, Iran, Sudan and many other places already often suffer marginalization and sometimes open persecution for their faith. As already noted, Boko Haram (and before and besides them, other violent Islamists) have slaughtered thousands of Christians in northern Nigeria, sometimes kidnaping or torturing and regularly displacing them. (Although it is not the subject of this book, other minority religions are persecuted in many places, and speaking for justice for them is also important. Too few Christians openly condemned anti-Jewish policies in Nazi Germany.)

What Christians face in the United States is currently much less pronounced than what many of our brothers and sisters face around the world. It may be enough, however, to call our attention to where we have been living with false assumptions. We have often acted as if our nationality and rights will protect us. When Jesus says, “You will be hated by all nations because of my name,” that need not mean that every individual will hate us. But it does mean that we should never take nonpersecution for granted.

In fact, one widely held view in the Church has helped many American Christians take for granted that we will not be here when significant persecution comes. The view itself need not lead to that conclusion, but here is how we

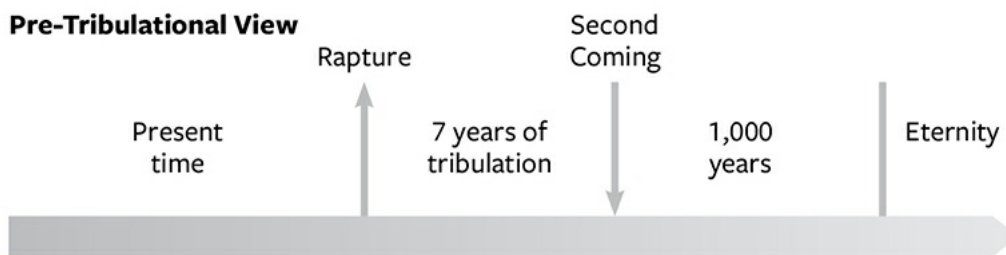
have heard many Christians express it. “Before things get really bad here (that is, for us, *American* Christians, who have our *rights*), the Lord will take us away,” some say. “Meanwhile, non-Christians will be ‘left behind’ to endure the horrors of the Great Tribulation.”

One serious problem with that way of thinking—it is not what the Bible actually says.

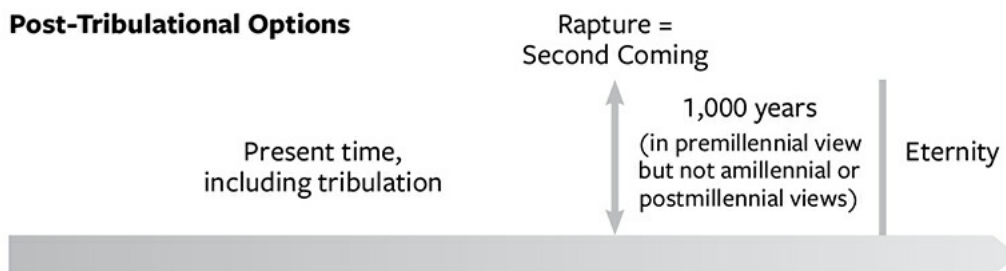
Left Behind?

The premise of the *LEFT BEHIND* novels and movies is intriguing. What would happen if all true Christians were suddenly raptured to heaven, leaving the world behind to face God’s judgments during the Great Tribulation? These novels often helpfully present the Gospel, but there is nevertheless a problem with their Rapture-before-the-Tribulation premise.

The problem is that there is no biblical text that actually explicitly says that the Church will be taken out before the Tribulation. If you think otherwise, try to find one! All the arguments for a pre-Tribulational Rapture require extra assumptions beyond what any passage simply says—and some passages suggest otherwise.



This book, then, rests on a different premise. What if *everybody* was left behind? Or to put it more plainly, what if nobody really could expect to escape before terrible tribulation? That Christians would not escape the world except in the way Christians have traditionally escaped from tribulation in other generations, namely by dying? How would that affect the way we live?



It should be noted that the word *rapture* appears nowhere in the Bible. Still, 1 Thessalonians 4:17 speaks of “catching up,” an idea that can be communicated, albeit usually negatively, by the Latin terms *rapio* and *raptus*. The verse makes clear that Jesus’ followers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. The question remains, however, as to whether this catching up happens before or after the final time of Tribulation.

One can of course understand how Left Behind theology became popular. Obviously, the idea that we would escape tribulation is appealing. Yet many of our brothers and sisters around the world have long been experiencing what many of us in the West would consider tribulation: martyrdom, suffering from wars, facing famines, the kidnaping of their children and so forth.

Getting Ready

The issue, then, should not be whether we would prefer to escape tribulation. The issues should be whether the Bible actually teaches that we will escape it, and if not, how we should live. Such readiness is important for *any* kind of suffering we may face.

Being ready does not mean stockpiling food and weapons in the mountains. Being ready means that we are completely sold out to Jesus and ready to testify for Him no matter what our situation. It means that we are ready to suffer for Jesus in the short term because we realize that we will live forever with Him in His presence. It means that we will not take a mark of loyalty to the Beast—whether that is figurative or literal—because we belong to a different master, the Lamb.

The best way to prepare for such challenges is to live as if we experience a foretaste of them now. Do not conform to what peers or other pressures demand; be conformed to Christ's image. Do not live for the values and rewards of this world; live for the promise of the coming one. Daniel and his three friends were ready for a fiery furnace and because they had already passed the test of the king's table. If we live radically for Jesus now we will be prepared to stand no matter what other tests we face. Of course, having some food ready for short-term emergencies is basic common sense that is widely recommended. Blizzards, earthquakes or hurricanes can close stores, for example, and it is simply smart to be prepared for such emergencies, whatever one's views of the end times.

But a pure survivalist mentality, perhaps apart from a setting in which people are actually already being hunted down, would miss this book's point. As Jonathan Cahn says, "We're not survivalists; we're revivalists." We are not in this world to live as long as we can, as if we have no future beyond it; we are in this world to make a difference for Christ. Living long to serve and influence more people is a good thing, but living long because we are afraid to die is still living according to this world's values. Instead, we as believers stay in this world while we can so we can share the hope of Christ with our fellow human beings who need Him. Because we find strength in Him in the midst of our hardship, others, too, can find courage to follow Him in the face of this world's hostility.

Conclusion

Why do we not believe in a pre-Trib Rapture? Most of us would not want to live in a building where all the screws and nails that held it together were loose. Why would we want to believe a doctrine in which every single verse used in support is loose—that is, out of context? Much of the rest of this book will survey texts used to defend pre-Tribulationalism, showing how all of them are out of context. But if your mind is open on the question you can simply examine those texts for yourself directly and come to the same conclusion.

Yet arguing against a pre-Tribulational Rapture is not so much about going through the Tribulation as it is about a triumphant hope. Our hope is not a halfway, secret return of Christ to earth and a secret Rapture of which Scripture offers no mention. Our hope is our Lord's glorious return, witnessed by the nations, vindicating those who have sacrificed and suffered for His name. It is the time when the kingdom of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and of His Messiah (see Revelation 11:15), and when we as God's servants, consecrated to Him, will receive our rewards (see verse 18).

PART

**Why Many Doubt
“Left Behind”
Theology**

1

Some Questions to Consider

This book challenges the premise of Left Behind theology: the idea that Christians will be raptured out of the world before the final period of tribulation. The biblical hope is instead that we will be resurrected when Jesus returns at the end of the age, establishes His rule and transforms the world. Part of the hope of Left Behind theology is that the last generation of believers, getting resurrected before the final Tribulation, will escape it. This hope naturally appeals to those who believe that they belong to that last generation, but it has not proved relevant so far to the other roughly fifty generations since Jesus' first coming. Such a theology is inconsistent with God's usual way of working in the Bible, and it also contradicts many specific passages in the Bible.

Moreover, the view that Christians are raptured and thus resurrected before the Tribulation makes biblical prophecy far more complex than it needs to be—even though in normal logic the simplest solution is typically the likeliest one. Left Behind theology divides the Second Coming into two parts, even though the Bible never distinguishes these parts in name or in timing.¹ It requires prophecy “experts” to perform the interpretive gymnastics sometimes necessary to disentangle these “separate” events in different clauses of the same verse, for example, 2 Peter 3:10: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away.”

Consider, for example, the following passages and the questions that follow them.

The context of 1 Corinthians 15:23–26 is the resurrection of our bodies. Here Paul declares about this resurrection:

But each will be in its own proper order: Christ the first fruits, and afterward those who are Christ's at His coming [*parousia*], and then is the end, when Christ delivers the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has nullified all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all the enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be nullified is death.

What is the *last* enemy to be put down? If death is the *last* enemy, how does its defeat at our resurrection leave room for an antichrist or other enemies *after* our resurrection, which we expect at the Church's Rapture?

Now read 1 Corinthians 15:50–52, which continues to address the resurrection of our bodies.

This is what I'm saying, brothers and sisters: flesh and blood aren't able to inherit God's kingdom; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Look, I'm telling you a mystery: we won't all sleep [a common euphemism for “die”], but we'll all be changed, in a flash, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet! For one will sound the trumpet, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

In 15:50–52, the resurrected inherit God's *Kingdom*, presumably needing resurrection bodies to do so. This resurrection happens at the last trumpet. But how many trumpets can sound after the *last* one? Granted, Paul cannot have in mind the trumpets in the book of Revelation, which had not been written yet. But as we shall see later, Paul surely knew Jesus' teaching about His return. Can this *last* trumpet, then, *precede* the trumpet of Matthew 24:29–31?

Right after the tribulation of those days . . . all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on heavenly clouds with power and great glory, and He will dispatch His angels with a loud trumpet, and they will gather His chosen ones from the four winds.

Yet the visible appearing of Christ in Matthew 24:30 and the gathering of the chosen in 24:31 explicitly *follow* the tribulation described there.²

So let us look at 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10 (verse numbers have been retained for the sake of the discussion):

(5) This evidences God's just judgment, so you may be shown worthy of God's kingdom, on behalf of which you are suffering, (6) since it is just for God to pay back with tribulation those who put you through tribulation, (7) and to pay back with rest from it you who are enduring tribulation, along with us. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His powerful angels (8) in burning fire, executing punishment on those who don't know God and don't obey the good news about our Lord Jesus. (9) They will experience the just punishment of eternal destruction, away from the Lord's face and from His strong glory, (10) when He comes to be shown glorious among His holy ones and to be admired among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed [by you].

Consider some questions about this passage.

1. Notice when believers receive rest from tribulation: at the time when Jesus destroys those who oppose Him (see verses 7–8). Will the events of 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8, such as Jesus being revealed from heaven to burn up the wicked, occur even possibly before the Tribulation? If so, who would be left to go through the Tribulation?
2. When do our persecutors appear to be destroyed? Seven years after we receive rest from tribulation, or at the same time that we receive rest (see verses 9–10)?
3. Does this passage divide Jesus' return into two stages? For that matter, can you find *any* passage that explicitly does so?

While we are visiting 2 Thessalonians, let's read 2:1–3. (We will look at 2 Thessalonians 2:4–7 in chapter 7 under the subhead, "Removing the Restrainer.")

(1) Brothers and sisters, on the matter of the coming [*parousia*] of our Lord Jesus Christ, even our gathering to Him, we ask you (2) not to be quickly shaken in your mind or panicked, whether through a spirit or a message or a letter as if it were from us, as if the Day of the Lord were already present. (3) Don't let anybody trick you at all! For that day won't come unless the revolt against God comes first and the lawless one destined for destruction is revealed.

1. Note the end-time language throughout this context and especially "our gathering to Him" in the first verse. Does this passage offer any justification for separating the Day of the Lord (in verse 2) from Jesus' coming and our gathering (verse 1), or from our receiving rest from affliction (2 Thessalonians 1:7)?
2. What event or events must precede Jesus' coming in verse 3?
3. Has anyone been tricked, despite this passage, into expecting Jesus' coming before the lawless one appears?
4. 2 Thessalonians 2:1 associates Jesus' "coming" and our "gathering." (Our translation highlights another close association between them: in Greek, one article governs both *coming* and *gathering*, which could make them two sides of the same event.) What happens at the other mention of the "coming" (*parousia*) in verse 8? "The lawless one . . . whom the Lord will destroy with the breath of His mouth, annulling him when Jesus appears at His coming" (*parousia*). Does that happen before or at the end of the Tribulation?

Some interpreters believe that 2 Thessalonians 2:3 was already fulfilled in history and that Jesus could therefore return at any moment in His Kingdom. Probably more easily, others see this event as still future. Either way, does anything here support the removal of believers before the Tribulation?

More than four decades ago Arthur Katterjohn self-published a 68-page booklet called *The Rapture—When?* Although I (Craig) had already embraced the view before I read his booklet, the booklet influenced how I present it. Katterjohn very concisely treats all the New Testament passages about Jesus' return. Toward the end of his booklet, he poses 31 questions to anyone who wants to affirm a pre-Tribulational Rapture of the Church.³ Since not all those questions are relevant for all pre-Tribulationalists today, we present just a few of them here. Not all these questions require post-Tribulational answers, but they do offer some food to provoke thought before we proceed:

1. Pre-Tribulationalism says that believers will be snatched from this world to heaven suddenly and without warning. Can you find even a single Scripture that explicitly says this?
2. Pre-Tribulationalism says the Rapture will come before the Tribulation. Can you find even a single Scripture that explicitly says this?
3. Jesus commissioned the Church to make disciples of the nations (see Matthew 28:19–20) and declared that the end would come when the Kingdom had been preached among all nations (see Matthew 24:14). If the Church is raptured before the Tribulation, then people converted during the Tribulation will have to take over the job. Can you find even a single Scripture that explicitly says this?
4. Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 are explicit about any unexpected coming only *after* the Tribulation. Can you find any explicit reference to a coming *beforehand* in these passages?
5. The book of Revelation does not describe Jesus' return before chapter 19, and first mentions a resurrection of the righteous believers in chapter 20, where it is called the "*first* resurrection." (The meaning is debated, but by definition all premillennialists, which include all pre-Tribulationalists, see that as a bodily resurrection.) Some argue for an *implied* pre-Tribulational Rapture of all believers earlier in the book, although it is not clear in the context of the passages cited. Can you find any *explicit* reference in Revelation to a coming before the Tribulation?
6. Can you find any explicit biblical justification for the following distinctions associated with pre-Tribulationalism?

- Two Second Comings (or stages) (see Matthew 24:27, 37; 1 Thessalonians 4:15)
- Two first resurrections (see John 6:40; Revelation 20:4–5)
- Two judgment seats of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:10 vs. Matthew 25:31–46)
- Two last trumpets (see 1 Corinthians 15:51 vs. Matthew 24:31; possibly Revelation 11:15)
- Two gatherings of God’s people (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16 vs. Mark 13:27; Matthew 24:31–40)
- Two rewardings of the righteous (see 2 Corinthians 5:10 vs. Matthew 24:46–47)
- Two classes of believers (the Church, spared tribulation, and believers converted during the Tribulation, who must endure it)
- The Church will not go through the final Tribulation

As we shall repeatedly emphasize in this book, many texts explicitly mention the Lord Jesus returning after the Tribulation or at the end of the age to gather His faithful ones and to rule the earth. Why is not a single text explicit about any coming before the Tribulation?

Based on a theological system first devised in about 1830, some argue that the gospels and Revelation are silent about a pre-Tribulational Rapture because these books address only Israel, which will not be raptured. They argue that these parts of the Bible are not really meant for the Church (although 2 Timothy 3:16 says that *all* Scripture is useful for teaching). Yet we will not find explicit evidence of such a pre-Tribulational Rapture in Paul’s letters, either.

Meanwhile, whenever the context of passages that some people apply to a pre-Tribulation coming speak explicitly about timing, they refer explicitly only to events after any final Tribulation. If the theory of a secret Rapture is so secret that it is not even explicit in the Bible, why then should anyone be obligated to believe it? It is no surprise that nobody noticed this doctrine until about 1830. Even then, it was apparently discovered in the Bible only after a theological system originated that required it.

It may be no coincidence that Jesus’ warnings about tribulation and His return (see Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21) directly precede His own passion (see Matthew 26–27; Mark 14–15; Luke 22–23). Indeed, suffering before glorification does fit the pattern of Jesus’ own ministry: He Himself was crucified—falsely accused and then executed as an enemy of public order. Because our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, we can have confidence that we, too, have a wonderful future forever in Him no matter what we suffer in the meantime. In light of eternity, our present experiences of suffering will fade like infinitesimal points of a lengthy past, remembered mainly for the honor they bring God and us in the light of eternity.

Because this book is addressed to a wide audience, we will not include heavy documentation in it as we do in our scholarly books. It must, however, address a number of proof texts because we are addressing a teaching that actually has no one biblical passage explicitly supporting it—just syllogisms and inferences.⁴ Since explicit biblical justification for pre-Tribulational claims is missing, the best that pre-Tribulationalism can do is construct secondary arguments for why the doctrine is true even though not a single text explicitly affirms it. These are arguments such as “The Church will not go through God’s wrath,” even though the term used for wrath in the supporting texts normally refers to something other than the Great Tribulation. This book will examine the main arguments and show why they are without merit.

But first, we will share how we and some other people realized that Left Behind theology—the view that we were taught as new converts—was wrong.

2

How We Left Behind Our “Left Behind” Theology

In this chapter we will each share how we left behind our Left Behind theology. But before we do, let us note some consequences of Left Behind theology or, more precisely, of how some have misused Left Behind theology.

The Chinese Church

Earlier I (Craig) noted the suffering of Christians in Nigeria. This was not the first time I became aware of Christians suffering outside North America. I was at the headquarters of a major missions agency in the 1980s when news came about the Church in China. First the good news: It remained not only alive and well, but was now much stronger than it had been when the missionaries had been expelled from China.

Now the shocking bad news. This Western missions movement had brought many gifts to the Church, but they had also promoted the idea that the Church would escape the final period of tribulation. When the missionaries were expelled, local Christians believed that God had “raptured” these missionaries to heaven and left the local Christians to suffer the Great Tribulation by themselves. Happily, God then used them to evangelize their own people.

Now, after the worst period of suffering was subsiding, missionaries returned, to the astonishment of these local Christians. “You told us that we were not going to experience the Great Tribulation,” the local Christians accused. “We thought you had left us behind to endure this on our own. But God has used us. We do not need you here. We can do this task on our own now.” This was not the experience of all Christians in China, but it does illustrate how the idea of Christians escaping tribulation can leave us unready for sufferings we may genuinely face.

We should note that when we speak of Christians facing sufferings, we do not mean that God does not help us and sometimes deliver us. Both of us (Michael and Craig) have written extensively about healing and miracles. We have witnessed and experienced divine protection. Yet we also know brothers and sisters who have died for their testimony for Christ. Scripture declares that by faith many have shut lions’ mouths and escaped persecution, but in the same breath it praises others who were tortured and killed for their faith (see Hebrews 11:32–37).

In his early years of witness, Craig was more than once threatened, and Michael has sometimes had to speak with police protection even in the United States. Persecution is a daily reality for believers in Jesus in some parts of the world today. Open Doors, Voice of the Martyrs and other groups regularly report concrete examples of such suffering.

Indeed, readiness to suffer for Christ as needed is something that we should have resolved to be ready for the moment we committed our lives to the Lord. The same Lord Jesus who washed our feet and laid down His life for us also warned us quite plainly: “Whoever wants to be My disciple must . . . take up their cross and follow Me,” that is, to the site of execution (Matthew 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34 NIV, see also Luke 9:23; 14:27). “Whoever wants to preserve his or her life will lose it, but whoever loses his or her life for My sake and the Gospel’s will save it” eternally (see Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25). Indeed, sometimes God will allow us to be stripped of things that do not matter eternally so we can learn to truly value what does.

Of course, we should not deliberately provoke suffering or seek it for ourselves; but we should not be surprised when it happens. “The world hates you,” Jesus warned (John 15:18–19). Not every passage in the Bible is that black-and-white, but in certain kinds of times, such as under Hitler’s Third Reich or when Diocletian burned Christian Bibles, dividing lines become clear and Jesus’ true followers must be prepared to exercise great courage.

How Michael Left Behind “Left Behind” Teaching

I came to faith in Jesus in 1971 as a sixteen-year-old, Jewish, heroin-shooting, LSD-using, long-haired, hippie rock drummer. This was at the height of what became known as the Jesus People Movement (or Jesus Revolution), but at

that time, I had no idea any such movement existed. I just knew that Jesus was real, that God had transformed me and that I wanted to live the rest of my life for Him. I had become a new man.

The church that helped pray me into the Kingdom was a small, Italian Pentecostal assembly in Queens, New York, with perhaps one hundred people, max, on a Sunday morning. My two best friends (and fellow band members) had begun going there to spend time with two girls whom they liked, and the girls starting attending services because their dad had been praying for them and their uncle was the pastor. Soon enough, all of them were changed, so I went to pull them out. *Enough with this nonsense*, I thought.

The first time I visited the church was in August 1971, and one of the girls who knew me from high school wrote down, “Antichrist comes to church.” That was how wicked a sinner I was, and that was how my ungodly reputation preceded me. (Editor’s note: Michael did not turn out to be the Antichrist in our book’s title.) By the end of the year, I was gloriously born again, set free from drugs and starting a brand new life. It was a life that involved deep devotion to the Lord and frequent church attendance.

Now, you must remember that I had never been in a church prior to these days. (Although my family was not deeply religious, I was bar mitzvahed at thirteen and had only attended synagogue before this.) So this church was my only connection to the Gospel, and what I heard from the pulpit I understood to be gospel truth. I had nothing against which to measure it.

On the positive side, the preaching was simple and centered on the Lord, so I learned the importance of having a solid prayer life, of devouring God’s Word and of reaching out to the lost. I also learned the importance of corporate gatherings, and as the church added a second location and more services, I ended up going to Sunday school, Sunday morning service, Sunday night service, Monday night prayer meeting, Tuesday night service, Wednesday night service and Friday night service, and sometimes doing evangelism on off days. I was all in!

On the negative side, the church was somewhat narrow in its focus. We were very suspicious of a lot of other Christian teaching, and we were encouraged not to read outside books the first year or two after being born again to make sure we stayed primarily in God’s Word. I am actually grateful for this emphasis as a new believer, since I did get immersed in Scripture. But you can see how there can be a downside, too, since we were not exposed to lots of good material that could be helpful in our walks with the Lord. We also assumed (wrongly so) that whatever was coming from the pulpit was as pure as snow. We were a special church, or so we thought.

I did notice that when the pastor taught a Sunday school class on the end times, studying Daniel and Revelation, he did use some additional textbooks, written by one particular author. *Why not just use the Bible?*, I wondered. When I asked him, he explained that the author had incredible insight into the Scriptures and the great majority of what he wrote was right on target. *So not only is our church special. This author is special, too.* As for teaching on the end times, the theme was always in the air. Jesus is coming soon! Jesus is coming at any minute! You do not want to miss the Rapture! You do not want to be left behind!

But it was not only our church that was excited about the Lord’s imminent return. The bestselling Christian book was Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and it seemed as if everyone was reading it, even nonbelievers. In fact, many were coming to faith as a result of this remarkable book. Everything was lining up, the prophecies were being fulfilled, and the table was fully set for the Rapture to occur—at any moment. Not only had the nation of Israel been reborn, but a united Jerusalem was back in Jewish hands as the result of the miraculous Six-Day War in 1967, the evil Soviet Union was hell-bent on world domination and the younger generation was in complete rebellion, part of the end-time apostasy Jesus predicted. (Yes, this was the time of sex, drugs and rock and roll, of Woodstock and the Stonewall riots and of the massive generation gap.)

Soon enough, Jesus would whisk His people away—we would be snatched out, without a sound, disappearing without a trace—and then all hell would break loose on the earth. The Antichrist would arise and rule the world for seven dreadful years, which would be a period of unparalleled world suffering. This was the time of the Great Tribulation, lasting either the full seven years or just the last three-and-a-half years. (The first three-and-a-half years would then be the Tribulation; the last three-and-a-half years the Great Tribulation.) But thankfully we would be feasting with Jesus in heaven while millions were slaughtered on earth, only to return triumphantly with our King at His Second Coming.

All this was as sure as the Gospel that saved me—at least, that is what I came to understand. Of course, the pastor knew that there were different beliefs about the end times, but he was quite convinced that the pre-Tribulation Rapture was true, and because I so respected his views, I embraced it as well. We were also taught that when the Church was raptured out, the Holy Spirit would be taken from the earth, too, making it even more difficult for people to come to faith during the Tribulation. In addition, we were taught that, as followers of Jesus, if we were sinning when He came to catch us out, or if we had backslidden, we would miss the Rapture. That was one scary thought.

What did this mean on a practical level? It meant that you should always live in readiness, since you never knew when Jesus was coming. On a personal level for me, I realized that if, God forbid, I missed the Rapture, then the Holy Spirit would be taken from me. And if the Holy Spirit was taken from me, then I would not be able to speak in tongues. So if I did something wrong (perhaps thinking a wrong thought or slipping up in some minor way), I would immediately say, "Lord, forgive me, in Jesus' name." Then, without wasting a second, I would pray in tongues. *Thank God I didn't miss the Rapture.*

One time, in the fall of either 1972 or 1973, when it was time to set the clock back an hour, I forgot to do so, showing up on a Sunday morning one hour before Sunday school. For a moment, my heart skipped a beat. *Where are all the cars? No one is here! Did I miss the Rapture?* I quickly pieced things together, realizing what had happened, but this paints a picture of just how real this was to us.

To the church's credit, the pastor never taught that we should be irresponsible, leaving our debts for the Antichrist, and many of us lived in great joy in the Lord rather than in oppressive fear. The feeling of *Oh no! Did I miss the Rapture?* was fleeting and rare. But we knew for sure that the time was short. The handwriting was all over the wall. In addition, there was a man in the church whose mother was very old at that time, perhaps in her eighties. (When you are sixteen, eighty is *really* old.) We were told that the Lord promised her she would not die until He returned, so how many more years could she live?

For me, these were exciting times to be alive, and I began to seek the Lord more earnestly by the day. By the time I had been saved for one year, I would spend at least six or seven hours alone with the Lord every day, praying at least three hours (including one hour straight in tongues), reading the Word at least two hours a day, and memorizing twenty verses a day, which I could do in one hour. (Note from Craig: Michael is much smarter than I am.) By the time I had been saved for two years, I had read the Bible cover to cover five times and memorized more than four thousand verses, and if you challenged anything I believed, I would mow you down with Scriptures in machine-gun style. (What I was lacking in compassion and wisdom, I more than made up for in zeal!)

One day a friend whom I had led to the Lord in high school asked me to explain the difference between the Rapture and the Second Coming, since he was a little confused by it, especially in Matthew 24. When we looked at the passage together (I had it memorized for the most part by then), I had to admit that I really did not know much about the subject. Somehow, the pastor and the elders in the faith had this down pat, but with all my reading of the Bible, I could not fully explain it. Yet I could explain virtually everything else I believed based on Scripture (to this day, I hold to all the fundamentals I held to then). Was that not odd?

I realized, then that I needed to do more studying, so I devoured books by famous dispensational authors such as John Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, W. E. Blackstone and Clarence Larkin. (Larkin was also famous for his woodcut diagrams of the end times. Note that traditional dispensationalists are Christians who believe in a pre-Tribulational Rapture, among other distinctives.) But not only did I devour these writings, I fully embraced what they taught and became quite an expert in this theology, down to the last detail. And, as a zealous, still-very-young, strongheaded believer, to be an expert meant to be dogmatic. All other end-time beliefs were wrong (even though other fine Christians might hold to them); dispensationalism alone was right.

About two years later (about four years after I came to faith), a friend in the church gave me a book written by a man named Dave MacPherson, titled *The Incredible Cover Up: Exposing the Origins of Rapture Theories*, purporting to tell the true story of the pre-Trib Rapture. It was not, in fact, a biblical doctrine, the author claimed in this detective-like volume. It was the invention of some believers in Scotland in the 1800s who claimed to have received this by divine revelation. The whole thing was a hoax, MacPherson argued, not found in the Bible and not found in Church history. Could it be true?

Now by this time, I was studying in college and getting exposed to other Christian viewpoints, and I had come to realize that not everything I had been taught in my church was pure Gospel. And I had become familiar with the names of some of the top biblical scholars of the day, and one of those scholars affirmed the central thesis of MacPherson's book. *Perhaps there's something to this after all*, I thought to myself, as did my small circle of friends who read the book.

But even to think such a thought was traumatic for us. How could our beloved pastor be wrong? He prayed five hours a day and could quote the Bible left and right. And how could other men of God we knew be wrong?

I had once asked the pastor's wife how we got such pure doctrine. She explained to me that her husband got it from her father, the founder of the church. I then asked her—in almost reverential awe—where her father got such pure doctrine. She responded, "He got it from the elders." And where, I asked, did the elders get such sound teaching? "They got it straight from the Lord," she answered. How thankful I was to be in such a special church!

In truth, I am thankful that God saved me there, since those precious people prayed me into the Kingdom and put up with my folly in those early days. And they did direct me to radical devotion to the Lord and to prioritizing what mattered most. But I also came to realize that, when it came to eschatology, the study of the end times, the founders

of this little Italian Pentecostal church got some of their doctrine from the Bible and some of it from men like Clarence Larkin. It was hardly pure revelation from above.

Now, MacPherson's book promised much but did not fully deliver, making me wonder if what he was saying was true. But reading it reminded me of the question I had asked myself two years earlier: Why was it that, after reading the Bible day and night for two years, also memorizing thousands of verses, I could back up everything I believed with Scripture, but when it came to the Second Coming, I had to read other books? Why did I not just get this from the Word?

So once again I immersed myself in the subject, reading some books that argued for a post-Trib Rapture, along with books that held to very different end-time schemes. Most of all, I dug into the Word with fresh eyes, trying to read the Scriptures as if I had no preconceived ideas (not so easily done). I asked myself, *Does the Bible distinguish between a secret Rapture, immediately before the Tribulation, and a visible Second Coming, at the end of the Tribulation? What do the relevant texts say? What does the Greek vocabulary say?*

It did not take long to conclude that there was no such thing as a pre-Trib Rapture. The case was settled for me. I still lived with expectation, wanting to see the Lord return in my lifetime. (That remains my hope today, as a grandfather in my sixties.) I still thought we were living in the last days. (Scripturally speaking, from the time of Jesus' ministry until today, we have been in the period called the last days.) And I continued to attend the same church, the pastor simply asking that I not teach my views publicly, since that would be confusing for the flock. (I readily agreed and appreciated his attitude.)

From that time until now, I have not divided with others over this issue, recognizing that some of the finest Christians on the planet believe in a pre-Trib Rapture.¹ It is not even a subject that comes up a lot in my circles, to the point that I cannot even tell you what some of my closest ministry colleagues believe about a pre-Trib Rapture. We have ministered side by side with passion and commitment and urgency, also preaching about the Lord's return, but we have never had the need to say to each other, "So what, exactly, do you believe about this?" We have united on the main themes and not divided over the subplots.

Interestingly, it never once dawned on me that I should be afraid of the Tribulation (assuming it refers to a defined, future, seven-year period) or afraid of the Antichrist. I was convinced that God could protect us while His wrath was poured out and that His Spirit in us was more than enough to help us overcome. After all, if we could overcome Satan in Jesus' name, we had no reason to fear the Antichrist. That remains my attitude today, although I am quite sober about what it means to be a follower of Jesus in this world, and I have personally washed the feet of a martyr's widow (literally) and wept by the graveside of a spiritual son who was assassinated for his faith.

Others, however, are terrified by the prospect of enduring the Tribulation ("You mean, we won't be raptured before it?"), while still others remain confused as to exactly what the Bible says. And since I have been asked this question repeatedly over the years, I thought that now was as good a time as any to team up with my esteemed colleague Craig and explain why (1) we do not believe in a pre-Trib Rapture, and (2) we are not afraid of the Antichrist (and why you should not be afraid, either).

We hope you will be positively impacted as you read, and we encourage you to ask God to help you follow His truth, as revealed in His Word. If you agree with our conclusions, wonderful. If you differ but you remain devoted to the same Lord that we serve, we embrace you as our brother or our sister, and we will not divide from you over this issue.

Shall we pursue God's truth together?

How Craig Left Behind "Left Behind" Teaching

I was converted from a background in atheism, so the little children in Sunday school knew more about the Bible than I did. At the beginning, therefore, I assumed that I should accept whatever my new church taught me, although some ideas were very hard for me to swallow. I dutifully learned the church's teachings and all the verses that were used to back up those teachings.

At the same time, however, I was also reading the Bible myself. Eventually, to catch up with kids in Sunday school, I started reading forty chapters of the Bible a day, which allowed me to read through the New Testament once a week or through the Bible once a month. (Note from Michael: Craig is much smarter than me.) This is not by any means the only way to study the Bible, but what it did for me at that time was that it forced me to go beyond memorizing verses; I now had to see how these verses were part of larger contexts. They often belonged to a larger argument or story.

I quickly realized that none of the verses used to support the Left Behind idea actually said that in context. To this day, when someone asks me to suggest a book or two in defense of my position, I either tell them, "the Bible," or,

“Get a book that argues for the pre-Tribulation position and look up all the verses in context. By the time you are done, you will not be impressed with pre-Tribulationalism anymore.” Of course there are other helpful post-Tribulational books, including the present one, we hope.

But I believe that everyone could really answer the biblical question for themselves if they would try their best to simply set aside what they have been taught and to read the Bible honestly, asking themselves this question: “If I had not been taught either way, would I recognize a distinction between the Rapture and the Second Coming?” I do have very intelligent friends who do not see it this way, but I really believe that it is that simple—a simple matter of reading the texts in their context.

My pastor did not agree with me, but he was a very gracious and humble man; for him it was not a major issue. It was different for a guest evangelist visiting the church; some of his ministry focused on end-time teachings. He graciously spent an afternoon with me at the church, trying to show me why I was wrong. Each time he would quote a verse, however, we would look it up in context, and none of the verses actually supported his argument. Finally, exasperated, he silenced me. “You’ve just been a Christian for one or two years. But this view is held by all men of God—Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart and others. Who do you think you are to challenge them?”

I had to admit that he was right. I had already been beaten for my faith, but who was I to stand up to all these great men of God? (Apart from what you may think of the examples of the men of God that he cited, Jim Bakker has since changed his view.) So I determined to accept the pre-Tribulational teaching even though I could not honestly see it in Scripture; maybe someday it would make sense to me.

One day, however, I was visiting another church; Chuck Schumacker was the young pastor. He started his message by announcing, “Today I’m going to talk about the Rapture and the Tribulation.”

Oh no, I thought. Here we go again.

“But what I’m going to say today is probably different from what most of you have heard. You see, the teaching that the Church would be raptured before the Tribulation did not start until 1830. No men or women of God before that time believed in it—the early Church fathers, Luther, Calvin, Wesley or others. Leading figures today who have suffered for their faith—such as Corrie ten Boom or Brother Andrew—speak against it as a false teaching.”

I was astonished. The pre-Tribulational Rapture view was *not* the view of all men of God. I liked what Pastor Chuck said, but I determined to find out once and for all for myself. The next time through the New Testament, I took copious notes. My starting question was: *If I had not been taught about this subject either way, would I ever guess on my own that Jesus was coming before the Tribulation? Or would I simply assume that He is coming once, at the end of this age?* I quickly had my answer; the Bible seemed crystal clear.

From then on I determined that I would never accept something just because my church said that it was true. I would go back and study everything in Scripture for myself, to see what the Bible really said. To make the task more manageable, I started with one doctrine at a time and happily found that, for the most part, my church had inherited sound teaching from earlier centuries of Christian thought. Nevertheless, this was a turning point in how I read the Bible.

After this, I attended a pre-Tribulational Bible college. Looking back, I must say that my teachers were fair and patient; they did not mark me down for my views. (Some of them privately did not hold the official position, but even those who did hold it did not punish me for my challenges.) Some fellow students, however, insisted that my views would make me miss the Rapture, and they would tease that they would send me a postcard from heaven. I did not enjoy the teasing at the time (though we were all at a teasing age). Still, I figured that if I anticipated suffering more serious persecution for my faith I should be able to endure a bit of teasing for my views in the meantime.

Yet I quickly began to learn that nearly all of the mainstream Bible-honoring scholars I respected at that time—such as F. F. Bruce, D. A. Carson, Robert Gundry, William Lane, George Eldon Ladd, I. Howard Marshall, Leon Morris, Robert Mounce, J. Barton Payne, Herman Ridderbos and Merrill Tenney—were post-Trib. So was the main Pentecostal scholar I knew about, Gordon Fee. Not all held precisely the same perspective on what the Tribulation was—that is, whether it remained wholly future or also encompassed the sufferings of the Church through history. But regarding the Rapture and Second Coming, these scholars had read the Bible the same way I had, and this observation opened me up to appreciating biblical scholarship. That was another needed turning point for my own journey toward becoming a biblical scholar.

Yet I found the dialogue with my peers frustrating at times. One time in the cafeteria I was explaining to a fellow student, probably overzealously (considering it was breakfast), how the Bible disproved the pre-Tribulational position. At the end of our discussion, she concluded with a confession that went something like this: “You have shown me that the Bible refutes the pre-Tribulational position. But I was raised pre-Trib, and I will probably always be pre-Trib.” I think that she later did change her view, but at the time it frustrated me that someone would honor church teaching above the Bible. So much the more when one of the church’s primary teachings was that the Bible

was the final authority for doctrine! Such experiences further fueled my passion to call the Church back to the Scriptures—not only on this issue but also on the teaching of the Bible in general.

That is an irony: Today some will appeal to denominational traditions to insist that Jesus must return before the Tribulation, yet those same denominations insist that Scripture is paramount. If the post-Tribulation case is stronger than the pre-Tribulation one, then denominational traditions should be revised accordingly. The tradition of pre-Tribulationism formed under the influence of certain theological beliefs in the 1800s; in recent decades, the belief has been reinforced by novels and films on a popular level, but with astonishingly little solid biblical scholarship behind it. (This observation is not intended to deny that there are genuine biblical scholars in these traditions, some of whom are our good friends, but merely to explain that inductive study of Scripture does not naturally lead to a pre-Tribulation conclusion.)

Speaking Out

While working on my John commentary, I felt led to propose to Zondervan a work about Revelation. The feeling persisted, but I wanted to finish my John commentary before moving on to anything else. Further, I was not sure whom to contact at Zondervan, since at that time I had never written for them before. A few months later, an editor from Zondervan called and asked if I would write the Revelation commentary in their NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY series. He knew that I wrote commentaries, but he had no way of knowing that I had thousands of index cards full of research data ready for such a project, nor did he have any way of knowing my interest in Revelation in particular. I am sometimes slow to catch hints, even from the Lord, but this one seemed fairly obvious. That book, however, is written as a commentary meant to serve the Church more widely, so although I wrote it as a post-Tribulationist, I also wrote it in such a way that, in terms of application, it would be useful to Christians whether or not they share my views on that topic.

In a different way, my more recent Chosen book with my wife, *Impossible Love*, implies a time of coming hardship, although not necessarily the final one. The book narrates times when I sensed in prayer that such times lay ahead. It mentions my wife Médine's youthful experience of doubting that she would ever experience the suffering faced by Ethiopian refugees, and then her later experience of being a refugee herself for eighteen months. The implied subtext is thus that hard times may come even to those who do not expect them. Throughout, though, the book emphasizes God's faithfulness in the midst of that suffering. Although it does not specify anything about a future Tribulation, part of the book's purpose is to help prepare us for whatever sufferings lie ahead—by reminding us that we may suffer and that, no matter what, God will be faithful to those who love Him.

Conclusion

It is certainly possible to be pre-Tribulationist and still be ready to face persecution and suffering until the final Tribulation comes. Yet because many Christians on a popular level use the hope of a pre-Tribulation Rapture to evade the idea that they will have to suffer persecution or their nation's judgment, we felt that in this book we would need to address that issue head on. Christians have suffered persecution all through the course of this age. No one becomes exempt from such suffering simply by virtue of being a Christian. Indeed, Scripture teaches the opposite: "Whoever wants to live in a godly way in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

3

Pre-Pre-Trib

Views about the End throughout the History of the Church

Throughout history Christians have understood in various ways Jesus' and the Bible's teaching about the end of the age. Some have taken literally all the judgments listed in the book of Revelation, expecting these to be fulfilled in the final years before Jesus comes back. Others have argued that these judgments simply represent the kinds of judgments that God pours out throughout this present evil age until Jesus returns. Either way, we live in a world that faces judgment for how we human beings treat God and one another. And either way, the sufferings of this world are birth pangs of a better world, a world in which God will restore His wounded creation and wipe away all tears from His people's eyes.

Likewise, throughout history, Christians have wondered about the timing of the final persecutions Jesus warned about. Some believed that they were already experiencing such sufferings; others believed that the worst was yet to come. But for most of the Church's history Christians expected Jesus to return for the Church and to judge the world at the same time.

Left Behind: A Novel Idea

In 1830, one thinker came up with an alternative view of the end time. This interpreter, John Nelson Darby, argued that God would keep the Church from enduring the final, worst period of suffering. Even though many Christians had suffered and been martyred for their faith through history, this last generation would somehow be different and would escape the most intense sufferings.

Darby's personal interest was not in escaping sufferings; he was simply trying to explain how some different matters in the Bible fit together. Many of Darby's followers today acknowledge that Christians can and will continue to suffer until those final years. Unfortunately, many other Christians have latched onto Darby's view for the wrong sort of reason: They believe that they are the final generation and that they will escape severe persecution. Naturally, none of us relishes suffering, but we need to be ready for it if it comes.

Although the Christian hope has traditionally been Jesus' appearing to bring about a new world, for many a central part of the hope became escaping those final, terrible years of suffering that were somehow thought to be different from other kinds of sufferings—different from suffering under Nero or Hitler or Mao or ISIS.

In this book we show how Darby's idea is not biblical. It complicates Scripture and ignores context, sometimes dividing verses in the middle by attributing one line to one future event and another line to an entirely different event.

As stated previously, however, our interest in this book is more practical than simply challenging Darby's idea. Our interest is more in the way that Darby's idea has been twisted on a popular level to expect an escape from this world. Our interest is to remind us that we followers of Jesus are here for the long haul, as witnesses for Christ to our neighbors who need God's love and help just as we do. Christians need to have realistic expectations so that we are ready to stand firm when sufferings come, rather than complaining that we should have been exempt from them.

Viewing Views: Why Examine the History of Views?

Throughout history, Christians have held wildly different views about the future. Some of these views have made sense to many Christians; some of the other views have flourished only among radical fringes of the faith. Some views have been held by many Christians for centuries, such as premillennialism (a future thousand-year reign of Christ) and amillennialism (the same thousand years but as a symbol for the present age). Other views, such as

predicting a specific, near deadline for the Lord's return, have been immensely popular, though generally only until the coming of the predicted deadline proved them wrong.

Our brief survey of historic end-time views here will illustrate two matters.¹ First, God does not just bless and use people with a particular end-time view. If you were raised with a particular view and believe that it must be true because "all" godly people hold that view, think again.

Second, the pre-Tribulational view began with a faulty inference from Scripture and then collected proof texts to back it up. It is a minority view in Church history; no one articulated this view clearly until 1830, and it did not become widespread until the twentieth century. It flourished in particular denominations founded in its heyday, but was generally resisted by other equally evangelical movements (for example, Reformed and most Wesleyan churches) that began earlier. None of these observations makes the view wrong; they simply warn us not to assume that the view is as self-evident as those who have been schooled in it sometimes assume.

Left Behind theology's vigorous promotion on a popular level differs starkly from its treatment at a scholarly level. It was promoted first by the Scofield Reference Bible and prophecy conferences, later by Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* and most recently by LEFT BEHIND novels and movies. Yet most of the major academic commentaries on Matthew, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Revelation by Bible-honoring biblical scholars (academic works published, for example, by Eerdmans or Baker) have argued against this position or simply ignored it. This observation does not by any means disprove the position. It should, however, at least alert Christians to the recognition that views exist besides those they find in some movies or novels.

Major End-Time Views through Church History

So far as we can tell from their surviving work, the earliest Church fathers in the second century were premillennial and post-Tribulational. That is, they believed that Revelation 20 described a literal future thousand years, but they believed that they were currently in the Great Tribulation² or (in the case of the Didache or the Shepherd of Hermas)³ about to go through it. For example, the late second-century bishop and Church father Irenaeus wrote of "the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule."⁴

Supporters of this post-Tribulational-but-premillennial position included writer-bishops such as Papias and Irenaeus, as well as a defender of the faith named Justin, who was eventually martyred. (This is why he came to be called Justin Martyr.) Although Justin did observe that not all Christians shared his views about the future thousand years, he seemed unaware of any other views about the Tribulation.

Some later Church fathers, however, accused Papias and Irenaeus of "error" regarding the Millennium. Indeed, the fourth-century Church historian Eusebius called Papias a dimwit and said that premillennialists were the only sorts of heretics he knew of who could be talked out of their error! (Whatever view you hold on the Millennium, keep in mind that it appears explicitly in just one passage in one chapter of the Bible. One passage seems a slender basis for charging others with serious error!)

Many later Church fathers still expected a future Tribulation. After Constantine became a Christian emperor in 324, however, most Christians in the Roman Empire thought that their period of tribulation was over. Some Christians subsequently supposed that Christ was reigning on earth through the Roman emperor, and would do so for a literal thousand years until the final judgment. That view, of course, caused some problems in the 1300s. Yet it was promoted especially by some early Puritans centuries afterward.

A much more common version of the amillennial view today—the view that the Millennium symbolizes Christ's present reign—is what we normally mean by amillennialism. On this view, the Millennium stretches between Jesus' first coming and His Second Coming, and the particular number of years is not meant literally. By the late second and early third centuries, the philosophically oriented Alexandrian church leaders rejected the idea of a literal future thousand years as "fleshly." In the fourth and fifth century, Augustine developed the idea that the Millennium symbolizes the entire present age, and most medieval thinkers followed him. Sixteenth-century Reformers such as Luther and Calvin continued this view.⁵ They did not believe in a future Millennium, but they did accuse the Pope of being the Antichrist (others applied that designation to Turkish invaders or to the Reformers themselves).

Subsequently some Catholic scholars spoke of a future Tribulation, to show that the Pope could not be the Antichrist. Isaac Newton (1643–1727) expected a literal future Millennium but still had no inkling of any snatching out of Christians before the Tribulation.

Meanwhile, postmillennialism had begun to flourish in many evangelical circles. This was the view that Christians would successfully establish God's Kingdom on earth, setting up the throne for Jesus so He could return. After all, Scripture said that Christ would be seated at God's right hand *until* He made His enemies a footstool for

His feet (see Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:34–35). So instead of Christ returning before the thousand years, He would return afterward.

Jonathan Edwards, a leading voice in America's First Great Awakening, was postmillennial. So were Charles Finney and most leaders in the Second Great Awakening that evangelized much of the early nineteenth-century United States. As evangelical revivals worked to evangelize the world and bring social change (for example, by abolishing slavery), many evangelical leaders envisioned a world that would get better and better. Both the secular idea of Manifest Destiny in the United States and what some did with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution suited the optimistic spirit of the age. The tragedies of World War I, however, shattered both liberal and evangelical optimism about the future. Today some Reformed and charismatic circles have revived postmillennialism, but it remains a decidedly minority view among Christians generally.

A few thinkers during the Middle Ages and the Reformation period were premillennial, but premillennialism made its most splendid "second coming" in the 1800s. Dispensational (pre-Tribulational) premillennialism helped drive this resurgence, but there were also historic (post-Tribulational) premillennialists. This was true even in the Brethren movement where dispensationalism first flourished.

Yet none of the views circulating before the nineteenth century—original, historic premillennialism, amillennialism or postmillennialism—envisaged Christians being raptured before a special period of tribulation. Hundreds of Christian thinkers read and commented on prophecies in the Bible, yet the idea of a Rapture before the Tribulation does not seem to have occurred to anyone before about 1830. If it was clear in the biblical text, why did nobody notice it before it became part of a new doctrinal system? (Our opinion, of course, is that it is *not* clear in the biblical text.)

Some Christians today in pre-Tribulational circles would be shocked to meet an average nineteenth-century Christian in the United States, who would likely be postmillennial. The nineteenth-century Christian might be no less horrified to learn of some twenty-first-century Christians' premillennial approach. History shows us that no end-time view merits trust simply because it is the dominant view in a particular time or group. We need to go back to the Bible inductively to see what it actually says.

John Nelson Darby and Pre-Tribulationalism

Around 1830 John Nelson Darby formulated traditional dispensationalism, and with it the idea of a pre-Tribulational Rapture. Some post-Tribulationalists, especially Dave MacPherson mentioned earlier, have argued that Darby's view was influenced by Edward Irving and that Irving was influenced in turn by a vision seen by Margaret MacDonald. Others question whether even MacDonald's vision separated the Rapture from the Second Coming.

Pre-Tribulationalists often protest against their view originating with Margaret MacDonald's vision, and in this instance, their protest may be correct. Having read MacDonald's prophecy, I (Craig) believe that it sounds more post-Tribulational, and that Darby deserves more of the credit for the doctrine. (Though I do appreciate MacPherson's larger cause.) In any case, whatever his precedents, Darby was the first teacher to circulate pre-Tribulationalism. With possibly one or two exceptions not much earlier than Darby, those who claim earlier proponents of a pre-Tribulational Rapture generally have to read the idea into those proponents the way they have to read the idea into the New Testament.

How did Darby arrive at a pre-Tribulational Rapture? Darby emphasized distinguishing God's plan for the Church from God's plan for Israel, and he distinguished these plans so sharply that God would deal with only one at a time. (It is no surprise that he wrote before 1948.) The Tribulation and the Millennium, he argued, dealt with Israel, and therefore the Church could not be present on earth during these periods. The Second Coming had to be divided so that part was for the Church before the Tribulation and the other part was for Israel at the end. The unified picture of the Second Coming in Scripture and throughout Church history was suddenly split into two pieces.

In effect, Darby said that the Old Testament and the gospels were for the Jews. (If one follows this approach consistently, the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, for example, were exclusively for Israel.) Because Israel "rejected the Gospel," he said, God started the Church, not revealed in the Old Testament, and from Acts 2 onward we have the message for the Church. Except that not even all of that was for the Church. Acts, he believed, reported a "transitional" apostolic dispensation, while God still tried fruitlessly to reach the Jews; the gifts of the Spirit were for that dispensation, and when Jerusalem fell in AD 70, and the apostles died, God was done with Israel until the Great Tribulation, when He would be done (in *earthly* terms) with the Church. (Those of us who affirm spiritual gifts should note that Darby's system phased them out in the first century. It does not take an abundant knowledge of Church history to recognize that he was wrong about that.)

Many Bible readers opposed this new idea, including a number of Darby's fellow brethren; a number of its early proponents recanted it after further consideration. C. I. Scofield's reference Bible, however, eventually spread it widely in the early twentieth century. Under the influence of this study Bible, pre-Tribulationism spread widely, promoted by prophecy conferences as a special and novel insight. World War I challenged postmillennial optimism, strengthening premillennialism's appeal. The view dominated many mid-twentieth-century U.S. evangelical circles, which also promoted it widely on mission fields that now flourish with tens or hundreds of millions of zealous Christians.

Yet there is no record of anyone promoting a pre-Tribulation Rapture before about 1830; until that time virtually everyone, from any Christian or even semi-Christian tradition, expected that Jesus would resurrect the righteous and destroy the wicked at the same time. John Walvoord, a leading dispensational defender of pre-Tribulationism, contended that pre-Tribulationism cannot exist without dispensationalism,⁶ and he saw Darby as the doctrine's originator. Michael will address traditional dispensationalism much more fully in the next chapter.

As noted earlier, most biblical scholars have rejected pre-Tribulationism from the start. The primary exceptions are dispensational biblical scholars, some of whom are our friends and colleagues; but they remain in the minority. Yet the question must not be, "Who believes this idea today?" or, "What is the majority position among Bible-believing scholars?" but, "What does the Bible say?" For example, most semi-Christian religions (often called cults) are effectively post-Tribulation for the simple reason that they, like most Christians throughout history, were never taught to distinguish between the Rapture and the Second Coming. Unless one is taught to see it, one will almost certainly never see it.

Yet The Way International, a cult that denies Jesus' deity, is pre-Tribulation. Years ago, when I (Craig) tired of debating Christ's deity with some members of the group I had befriended, I would shift to debating their views about the Rapture. (These were obviously less important than Christ's deity, but I figured that once they realized that any of their teachings were false, they would be more open to searching the Bible afresh on other points.) Of course, The Way is exceptional in this combination of views; its founder, Victor Paul Wierwille, drew on a range of views popular in his time, not all of them traditionally compatible.

The relevant observation here is that movements often reflect the ideas of their founders, who in turn often reflect ideas dominant at the time of their founding. Some Christians do not personally know any godly people who hold end-time views other than their own; the point of this brief survey is to show that no specific end-time view is exclusively related to godliness. Except, that is, insofar as it calls us to look for our Lord's return to usher in a new world.

Failed Prophecy Predictions through Church History

Popular readers sometimes put too much stock in prophecy "experts." Prophecy teachers have been setting dates for a long time. Nearly eighteen centuries ago, Martin of Tours was certain that the Antichrist had already been born by his day. Martin died in 397, so if he was right, the Antichrist is by now rather old. The honorable third-century Church father and apologist Hippolytus gave himself more room for error, expecting the world to end in the year 500. He was not around for anyone to criticize his math when the world survived his prediction.

Although Luther believed that he was in the end time, he was dismayed by many prophecy teachers of his day. Melchior Hoffmann expected Strassburg to become the New Jerusalem, but he died in prison there ten years later. Thomas Müntzer expected the Peasants' Revolt of 1524 to precipitate the final Judgment; it ended up precipitating only death for him and thousands of peasants. Back then, end-time speculations frequently "died hard, unfortunately quite literally."⁷

Thomas Helwys, one of the early Baptist leaders, concluded that Baptists were now in the final Tribulation. Why? Any Baptists today who still use the King James Version might be unhappy to learn that it was because King James was persecuting Baptists. In the 1700s, English-speaking Christians divided over the moral status of King George III. John Wesley supported him, but many Americans considered him the final Antichrist. Not surprisingly, end-time interpretations of the nineteenth-century U.S. Civil War divided along geographic lines. Many ministers in both the North and the South expected this war to establish God's Kingdom on earth; they merely differed as to which side in the war was God's.

Anyone who still remembers the prophetic fanfare of some popular teachers surrounding the year 2000 will not be too surprised to learn that something similar happened just before the year 1900. On the last day of 1899, Christians sponsored newspaper ads warning that Jesus was about to return.

In the twentieth century, many prophecy teachers wrongly interpreted Jesus as saying that He would return within a forty-year generation of 1948, hence by 1988. (In context, the prophecy actually predicts the destruction of the

Temple within forty years. Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled right on schedule in the year 70.) In 1988, Edgar Whisenant's book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*, sold three million copies. A friend who worked in a Christian bookstore told me (Craig) that the owner urged her to sell as many copies of that book as possible by December 31, because in 1989 no one would buy it. The owner's prediction proved more accurate than Whisenant's, whose revised edition in 1989 did not sell well. As scholars have since pointed out, this sales debacle illustrates that Christians in the United States are not always deceived two years in a row by the same author.

Prophecy teaching has been a major pastime since the late 1800s, with interpretations changing regularly as newspaper headlines change. Like newspaper headlines, they sometimes fail to anticipate some major events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. (Like horoscopes, though, they are right sometimes.) It is one thing to say, "Current events might fit God's plans," or, "This fits the ways that God works in history," and quite another to try to match them point-for-point as if biblical texts were predicting *our* generation's newspaper headlines. So far every other generation that has used this technique of interpreting Scripture by news headlines has proved mistaken.

One may take as an example what Revelation says about the kings of the east. Because the Allied Western powers considered the Turkish Ottoman Empire a threat, many Western interpreters in the 1800s viewed the "kings of the east" in Revelation 16:12 as the Turks. (That this view could never have occurred to the seven churches of Asia Minor, located in what is now Turkey, seems to have escaped their notice.)

The close of World War I, however, led to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, so interpreters shifted their focus to imperial Japan, which remained a threat until the end of World War II.

After World War II, the West became friends with Japan but mistrusted Communist China. Prophecy teachers were now sure they understood the kings of the east: They were related to the great "red dragon" (Revelation 12:3), which surely meant China. Even though China is to the west of the United States, it is to the east of the seven churches of Asia Minor. Many Western interpreters remained convinced that it meant China until 1972, when U.S. relations with China began to thaw.

Did Revelation ever envision the "kings of the east" as specifically the Turks, Japan and China? Or were at least two-thirds of these interpretations wrong? The only consistency in Western interpretation was to assign this group to Asia, possibly as an expression of anti-Asian ethnocentrism. (These interpreters overlooked the fact that by ancient definitions even the Holy Land was in Asia.)

But whom would the first audience of Revelation have envisioned as the kings of the east? Revelation 16:12 says that these kings would cross the river Euphrates. The Euphrates appears throughout Roman literature as the boundary between the Roman and Parthian empires, and the Parthians were the most feared enemies of Rome. The Parthian empire covered much of the region of Iran, Iraq and parts of Syria. The Parthian empire fell centuries ago, but the idea of fierce invaders can still scare sense into some complacent sinners.

When the anti-Jewish *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* circulated in the 1920s, some prophecy teachers hailed the work as confirming their views. Unfortunately for them, it turned out to be a forgery written by the Russian secret police.

In the 1980s, prophecy teacher Colin Deal warned about a computer in Belgium known as the Beast, apparently oblivious to the fact that the source for this information was a novel. (Talk about novel interpretations!) Prophecy teacher Jack Van Impe predicted that the Soviet flag would be flying over Independence Hall in Philadelphia by 1976. I joyfully lived in Philadelphia from 1996–2011, and my students who grew up there assured me that this never happened, by or since 1976. Unless President Putin has some unexpected plans beyond the Soviet Union's former boundaries, it is probably too late to expect it in Philadelphia now.

So returning to Darby: Why did his theological system separate the Rapture from the Second Coming? Michael, who has a unique perspective as both a Hebrew scholar and a Messianic Jewish believer, offers a critique in the next chapter.

4

Shall We Dispense with Dispensationalism?

Inherent in the term *dispensationalism* is the idea that history (along with the future) can be divided into distinct periods of time called dispensations. It is impossible to fully understand the pre-Trib Rapture position without understanding this concept. (This chapter addresses especially the traditional form of dispensationalism on which pre-Tribulationism was originally based, not the more nuanced form today that is called progressive dispensationalism.)

Arbitrary Periods

Traditionally, these distinct periods of time are summed up under seven headings: (1) the Dispensation of Innocence, referring to the (very short) period of time from the creation of Adam and Eve until the Fall; (2) the Dispensation of Conscience, beginning with Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden until the time of Noah, after the Flood; (3) the Dispensation of Human Government, dating from God's commands to Noah after the Flood (in Genesis 9) until the calling of Abraham; (4) the Dispensation of Promise, beginning with God's word to Abram in Genesis 12 until the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt; (5) the Dispensation of Law, from Mount Sinai until the death and resurrection of Jesus; (6) the Dispensation of Grace, from the Lord's resurrection until the Rapture and (7) the Dispensation of the Kingdom, referring to the thousand-year reign of Jesus on the earth (that is, the Millennium).

Now, it is clear at once that some of these categories are quite arbitrary, as if God dealt with Noah in a distinctly different way than He dealt with Abraham, or as if human government has not been here for millennia. It is also clear that something is missing, namely, the future, seven-year Tribulation period, which is a staple of dispensational theology. Somehow, that finds a distinct category of its own between the last two dispensations, since, according to pre-Trib teaching, it is clearly not a time of grace, nor has the Kingdom arrived.

Israel versus the Church

But these issues are relatively minor. The big issue is that, according to dispensational theology, the period of time in which we now live is a great parenthesis of sorts, a time known as "the Church age." Before this time, God's focus was on Israel, and after this time, His focus will again be on Israel. But now, during this age, He is focusing on the Church.

As explained by Stephen R. Miller in his commentary on Daniel,

Just as God focused his attention on the Jewish people for about two thousand years, these past two thousand years his attention has been focused on the Gentiles. However, just as many Gentiles were saved during the Old Testament period, in this present age there are many Jewish believers. At the end of the present age, God will again deal with Israel in a special manner.¹

That is why, we are told, Paul referred to this as "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" (Ephesians 3:9 ESV), "the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations" (Romans 16:25–26 ESV). No one saw this coming, and that is because it was hidden between God's past dealings with Israel and His future dealings with Israel. After all, when you read the Old Testament, you see God's past, present and future interaction with Israel, as a result of which the nations of the world will come to know the God of Israel. But where is there anything about a period of two thousand years (or more) during which the Lord will focus on those nations (i.e., the Church) while the people of Israel languish in exile?

To put this in graphic form, dispensationalists see the three periods of Law, Grace and Kingdom like this:

- Law: God focuses on Israel
- Grace (the Church age): God focuses on the Church
- Kingdom: God focuses on Israel

So, just as you can safely remove parenthetical comments from a sentence without changing the overall meaning, when you remove the Church from the earth, the focus returns to the original subject, namely, Israel.

To illustrate this in sentence form, I could say: “I have been married to Nancy (whom I met in 1974) since 1976, and we have two children and four grandchildren.” Those parenthetical words (“whom I met in 1974”) do not affect the overall sentence, which reads just fine without them: “I have been married to Nancy since 1976, and we have two children and four grandchildren.” In the same way we could say: “God chose Israel to bring salvation to the world, and Israel failed for a season (during which time God raised up the Church), but in the end, Israel will turn back to the Lord and fulfill her mission and calling.” Those parenthetical words about the Church can be safely removed without changing the overall thrust of the sentence: God chose Israel, and Israel failed for a season, but God will use Israel in the end.

That is why the early dispensationalists divided up the New Testament as well, teaching that some of it was for Israel and some of it was for the Church, since, they taught, Israel was saved by works, the Church by grace.

In their view, Jesus came into the world as Israel’s Messiah, offering His people the Kingdom. Israel rejected the offer, which was then withdrawn, and God turned His attention toward the Church, comprised of Jews and Gentiles who believed in Jesus. Accordingly, the Sermon on the Mount was not intended for believers today. Instead, it was meant to be the constitution of the Kingdom of God, which the Jewish nation rejected. But, we are told, in the future it will be the law of the land during the millennial Kingdom.

Some dispensationalists, such as E. W. Bullinger, had an even more extreme view, relegating all but Paul’s prison epistles to Israel. Very little of the New Testament was left for the Church! But even though his views were repudiated by the vast majority of dispensationalists, the fundamental divisions between the Dispensation of Law (Israel), the Dispensation of Grace (the Church) and the Dispensation of the Kingdom (Israel again) remain. Without these, there is no dispensationalism, and without these, there is no need for a pre-Trib Rapture.

After all, if there is only one people of God, why remove hundreds of millions of them by way of the Rapture while leaving another group behind? Why does the Church get to feast for seven years in heaven while the Jews get slaughtered on the earth? Why does one group enjoy heaven itself while the other group experiences hell on earth? And why is it that God’s timetable for Israel cannot begin again until the Church is taken out of the way?

Israel not-so-versus the Church

There is no question that the Scriptures speak of the “times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24) and the “fullness of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:25), and it is clear that the Spirit is moving around the globe in unprecedented ways. This is in sharp contrast with Old Testament times, when most of God’s saving activity took place within the nation of Israel. So no one is denying that the Gospel has opened the door to the nations of the earth. Who would argue with that?

But there is also no question that God’s purposes for Israel and the nations culminate together in Jesus, in “the Church,” as opposed to the Lord taking His Church out and then fulfilling His purposes for Israel. As Paul explained in Ephesians 2:

For He is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In His flesh, He made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that He might create in Himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace. He did this so that He might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross and put the hostility to death by it. When the Messiah came, He proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. The whole building, being put together by Him, grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord. You also are being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:14–22 HCSB

Did you grasp the significance of Paul’s words? Did you see any hint that the Church and Israel were distinct and separate entities? To the contrary, Paul stated that God “made both groups one,” meaning He joined together Jewish believers and Gentile believers in one spiritual family, with these Gentile believers now becoming part of the larger commonwealth of Israel. So, while Jews remain Jews and Gentiles remain Gentiles, and while Israel is not confused with the nations and the nations are not confused with Israel, God has called together one family of all believers in

His Son, Jesus. And that family is called the *ekklesia*, meaning the Congregation, the Messianic Assembly, the Church.

To be sure, dispensationalists have the merit of taking the Old Testament promises to Israel very seriously, believing that they will literally come to pass in the future. And they recognize the importance of Israel in God's plan of redemption. But you can take these promises seriously and recognize the importance of Israel without accepting a pre-Trib Rapture. And you can do all this in the context of the Great Commission, which begins in Jerusalem, goes into all the world and ends in Jerusalem. It is one sacred movement, starting with the Messiah leaving Jerusalem and culminating with the Messiah returning to Jerusalem, as God gathers together His great worldwide family consisting of saved Jews and saved Gentiles alike.

The order basically looks like this:

1. God calls Israel to be His agent of salvation in the earth.
2. The Messiah comes to His own people, the people of Israel, but they reject Him on a national level.
3. The Messiah dies for our sins and rises from the dead, being followed by a Jewish remnant.
4. This Jewish remnant now shares the Good News with the nations, who become the dominant majority in God's family (called "the Church") during the time between the Messiah's first and second comings.
5. At the culmination of this age, there will be a vast spiritual harvest of both Gentiles and Jews.
6. The Jewish nation will then function as the lead nation in the millennial Kingdom, thereby serving as a light to rest of the world.
7. This will lead into the eternal age, when the fullness of God's purposes will be accomplished, with Jesus at the center and with one people, both Jew and Gentile, worshiping Him forever.

Many dispensationalists will actually agree with this outline, but that only underscores our basic question: Why then make such a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church? Is it not one family the Lord has been building the whole time?

Without a doubt, God has specific purposes for the nation of Israel, and without a doubt, the Church does not negate those purposes. At the same time, Israel fulfills its destiny as part of the larger family—the Church—as opposed to fulfilling its destiny outside the Church. That is why, in Romans 11, after affirming God's irrevocable calling on Israel, even while they were in a state of unbelief, Paul has this to say:

Just as you [meaning Gentile believers] were formerly disobedient to God, but have now received mercy due to their disobedience [meaning, the disobedience of Jewish nonbelievers], so they too have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all people to disobedience so that he may show mercy to them all.

Romans 11:30–32 NET

So Israel disobeyed, because of which mercy came to the Gentiles and by which they were saved; now it is time for the Gentiles to show mercy to Israel, through which Israel will be saved. This hardly speaks of the Church being taken out of the way in order for God's purposes for Israel to be fulfilled. Rather, it puts the Church right in the middle of God's final dealings with Israel, reaching out in love, praying and interceding, sharing the Good News, showing mercy.

Some Radical Interpretive Gaps

The dispensational approach to the Scriptures also creates some radical interpretive gaps, seen most clearly in Daniel 9:24–27, which speaks of what God will accomplish during a period of seventy sevens, normally understood to mean 490 years (70 x 7 years). Although there are many different approaches to this passage, due to some of the language used, what is clear is that the 490 years are divided into 49 years (7 x 7), 434 years (62 x 7) and 7 years (1 x 7) during which time God would carry out His plan of redemption. This period of time begins somewhere in the fifth century BC and culminates with the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, which took place in AD 70, and it focuses on Jesus' redemptive work on the cross toward the end of this 490-year period (see Daniel 9:24).

But that is not how dispensationalists understand the text. Instead, they see the first 69 weeks culminating with the death of Jesus—in other words, they see these first 483 years occurring consecutively—but they believe that the seventieth week is still future, meaning that there is roughly a 2,000-year gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks.

Is there the slightest hint of such a scenario in Daniel 9? Not at all. Is there any indication that the first 483 years are consecutive while the last seven years are separated by two millennia? Absolutely not. Why then do

dispensationalists read the text in such a disjointed way? It is part of their interpretive grid, one which puts the entire Church age in a parenthetical category. Once the Church is removed from the scene, the clock begins ticking again, or, in this case, the counting of the weeks of years continues. In the end, a prophecy that clearly speaks of what would take place during the days of the Second Temple, which, again, was destroyed in AD 70, is now interpreted with reference to a future Temple, one not yet built. And all this without the slightest hint in the text.

It is true that non-dispensational interpreters might see some minor gaps between the three groups of years (49, 434, 7), perhaps allowing for several decades to unfold. But that is a far cry from having an unexpected gap of 2,000 years, almost minimizing the importance of what took place in the first 483 years. This would be like an NBA coach telling his players, “Men, I want you to go out and give me your very best 48 minutes of basketball, especially in the closing 2 minutes, when it is so easy to win or lose the game.” But what he really meant was, “Men, I want you to play hard for the next 46 minutes, but the final 2 minutes won’t be played for another 50 years. Until then, everything is on hold.” That is what I meant by the so-called Church age being parenthetical. God’s plans for Israel are on hold until the Church is raptured. Then He will get back to finishing His plan of redemption.

Of course, dispensationalists believe that during the Church age, God is setting the stage for Israel’s salvation, and that is one reason they have been such faithful supporters of Israel. But they firmly believe that Israel’s redemptive clock will not start ticking until the Church is taken out of the way. And it is only then, during the Tribulation period, that Daniel’s seventieth week will be fulfilled.

To be sure, there are verses in the Old Testament that are intentionally divided by the authors of the New Testament, such as Isaiah 61:1–2. Jesus quoted this about Himself in Luke 4:18–19, ending with “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” which means that He stopped before reading “the day of vengeance of our God.” In this, His inaugural sermon in His hometown, He was putting His emphasis on God’s mercy, on a season of the Lord’s special favor, a time of offering grace to His nation. But throughout His ministry, He warned about divine judgment in very strong terms, describing the punishment that would come if His people rejected Him (see, for example, Luke 19:41–45; 21:20–24; 23:26–31; Matthew 21:33–45). One generation later, that judgment came, just as He predicted. There was hardly a gap of two thousand years, which dispensational interpretation of passages like Daniel 9 requires.

Now, read through Daniel 9:24–27 without getting hung up on every interpretive detail, focusing on one question only: Does it seem like these “sevens” are consecutive, or does there seem to be an immense gap between the sixty-ninth “seven” and the seventieth “seven”? Here’s the text for your reading convenience:

Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.

Daniel 9:24–27 ESV

Again, you might have questions in terms of the meaning of specific words and phrases, and we can debate exactly when the prophecy began (in other words, exactly when in the fifth century BC the word went forth “to restore and build Jerusalem”). But it seems very clear that we are dealing with a period of 490 years, with minimal, if any, gaps. The idea that a whole age (the Church age, or the Dispensation of Grace) must be inserted between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of years is a perfect illustration of how the pre-Trib reading of the Scripture must be imposed on the text rather than read out from the text.

Conclusion

Historically, the pre-Tribulational view is relatively recent, rare and at least sometimes not the most obvious approach to the text. But the more crucial question is, Is it biblical? That is where we turn next. Michael will lead us through Old Testament passages and the issues sometimes raised about these passages, and then turn to the vocabulary of Jesus’ return. Craig will lead us through the New Testament passages used for or against pre-Tribulationalism.

PART

**What Does
the Bible Say?**

5

Does the Old Testament Support a Pre-Trib Rapture?

Before God rained down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, He rescued Lot and his two daughters. (He wanted to rescue more of Lot's family, but only those three followed the instructions for escape.) Does this point to a larger pattern, namely, that God removes the righteous before pouring out His wrath? And are there other Old Testament examples that would point in this direction?

The most important Old Testament accounts to consider are: (1) Noah and the Flood; (2) Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; (3) the children of Israel and the ten plagues and (4) the inhabitants of Jerusalem when the city was destroyed. After reviewing these accounts, we will examine a key text in the book of Isaiah that is directly relevant to our discussion.

Noah and the Flood

Genesis 6 tells us that in Noah's day the human race became so wicked that God determined to destroy the earth with a flood, wiping out all mankind, with one notable exception:

When the LORD saw that man's wickedness was widespread on the earth and that every scheme his mind thought of was nothing but evil all the time, the LORD regretted that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. Then the LORD said, "I will wipe off from the face of the earth mankind, whom I created, together with the animals, creatures that crawl, and birds of the sky—for I regret that I made them." Noah, however, found favor in the sight of the LORD.

Genesis 6:5–8 HCSB

Because Noah pleased the Lord, and because He wanted to save the human race, the Lord determined to save Noah and his family:

Then God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to every creature, for the earth is filled with wickedness because of them; therefore I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it with pitch inside and outside."

Genesis 6:13–14 HCSB

And the Lord continued,

Understand that I am bringing a flood—floodwaters on the earth to destroy every creature under heaven with the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will die. But I will establish My covenant with you, and you will enter the ark with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives.

Genesis 6:17–18 HCSB

We all know how the rest of the story goes. God sends the rains, and the fountains of the deep erupt (see Genesis 7:11), and every human being and animal is destroyed, aside from Noah and his family, along with the animals preserved in the Ark.¹ Jesus draws attention to this event as well, teaching,

As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. They didn't know until the flood came and swept them all away. So this is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be: Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and one left. Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming.

Matthew 24:37–42 HCSB (see also Luke 17:26–27)

(Craig will address Matthew 24 in greater detail later in the book.) Hebrews and Peter also speak of Noah and the Flood: "By faith Noah, after he was warned about what was not yet seen and motivated by godly fear, built an ark to deliver his family. By faith he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Hebrews 11:7 HCSB). And Peter tells us that,

God patiently waited in the days of Noah while an ark was being prepared. In it a few—that is, eight people—were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter also tells us that God “didn’t spare the ancient world, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others, when He brought a flood on the world of the ungodly” (2 Peter 2:5 HCSB). We should also point out that both Jesus and Peter reference the flood side by side with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, as we will see when we look at that important passage of Scripture.

Does the account of Noah and the Flood support a pre-Tribulational pattern in which God delivers His people and then pours out His wrath? Or does it support a post-Tribulational pattern in which God protects His people in the midst of His wrath being poured out? To be candid, either position can be argued with equal passion.

Those arguing for a pre-Tribulational pattern would say that Noah and his family were taken out before the flood destroyed the rest of the world. Those arguing for a post-Tribulational pattern would say that Noah and his family were protected by the Lord while remaining in this world and enduring the flood—they did not go anywhere, did they?—noting that Peter uses this very word (*protected*) when writing about this in 2 Peter 2.

In response, pre-Tribbers could say, “But 2 Peter, along with Jesus in Luke 17, connects the rescue of Noah and his family with the rescue of Lot and his daughters, which points to deliverance rather than protection.” But the post-Tribbers could say, “You’re missing the point that Jesus was making. Look in Matthew 24. Jesus is telling us there that the ones taken are being taken in judgment and those left behind are the ones being saved.” And on and on it could go.

In the interest of being as unbiased as possible, I would propose we put this in the category of unclear when it comes to discerning a pre-Trib or post-Trib pattern in the Old Testament. Fair enough?

Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah

When it comes to Lot and his family, a better case can be made for the pre-Trib position, since the angels removed Lot and his family before destruction came. Genesis 19 recounts the stirring narrative, as the angels ask Lot:

“Do you have anyone else here: a son-in-law, your sons and daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of this place, for we are about to destroy this place because the outcry against its people is so great before the LORD, that the LORD has sent us to destroy it.”

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were going to marry his daughters. “Get up,” he said. “Get out of this place, for the LORD is about to destroy the city!” But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.

At daybreak the angels urged Lot on: “Get up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.”

Genesis 19:12–15 HCSB

It is true, of course, that Lot and his daughters took refuge in a nearby town, but they were clearly taken out of Sodom and Gomorrah before God’s wrath was poured out. As Genesis states, “So it was, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, He remembered Abraham and brought Lot out of the middle of the upheaval when He demolished the cities where Lot had lived” (Genesis 19:29 HCSB).

In the New Testament, Jesus spoke of this event as well, and in this context, you could argue that those who are taken are like Lot, rescued from the coming wrath, while those who are left behind are left for judgment. And note that Jesus had just spoken about Noah and the Flood here in Luke 17:

It will be the same as it was in the days of Lot: People went on eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building. But on the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be like that on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, a man on the housetop, whose belongings are in the house, must not come down to get them. Likewise the man who is in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife!

Luke 17:28–32 HCSB

Note also that Peter speaks of Lot, immediately after Noah, in the context of God’s ability to deliver the godly from trials:

And if He rescued righteous Lot, distressed by the unrestrained behavior of the immoral (for as he lived among them, that righteous man tormented himself day by day with the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, especially those who follow the polluting desires of the flesh and despise authority.

2 Peter 2:7–10 HCSB

Does this account, then, support the pre-Trib position more than the post-Trib? Does it point to God taking His people out before pouring out His wrath? I believe pre-Tribbers could easily say that this text supports their position, although there are surely some good, post-Trib responses that could be offered. For example, we could say that Lot was removed from a one-time act of destruction, just as believers will be caught up with the Lord when He descends

to bring judgment (see Craig’s treatment of this passage in chapter 7). But once more, in an attempt to be as unbiased as possible, we will put this in the category of potentially supporting the pre-Trib paradigm.

The Children of Israel and the Ten Plagues

What about the children of Israel in Egypt? It appears from the book of Exodus that, when God poured out the first three plagues—turning the waters into blood, flooding the land with frogs and bringing swarms of gnats—that the Israelites were affected by these as well (see Exodus 7:14–8:19). But from the fourth plague on, the Lord makes a distinction between His people Israel, living in Goshen (in Egypt), and the Egyptians:

The LORD said to Moses, “Get up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh when you see him going out to the water. Tell him: This is what Yahweh says: Let My people go, so that they may worship Me. But if you will not let My people go, then I will send swarms of flies against you, your officials, your people, and your houses. The Egyptians’ houses will swarm with flies, and so will the land where they live. *But on that day I will give special treatment to the land of Goshen, where My people are living; no flies will be there. This way you will know that I, Yahweh, am in the land. I will make a distinction between My people and your people. This sign will take place tomorrow.*”

Exodus 8:20–23 HCSB, emphasis added

So for all the remaining plagues—the plague on the livestock, the boils, the hail, the locusts, the darkness and the death of the firstborn—God poured out His judgments on Egypt but *not* on the people of Israel. This is drilled home in the verses that follow:

All the Egyptian livestock died, but none among the Israelite livestock died.

Exodus 9:6 HCSB

Throughout the land of Egypt, the hail struck down everything in the field, both man and beast. The hail beat down every plant of the field and shattered every tree in the field. The only place it didn’t hail was in the land of Goshen where the Israelites were.

Exodus 9:25–26 HCSB

So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness throughout the land of Egypt for three days. One person could not see another, and for three days they did not move from where they were. Yet all the Israelites had light where they lived.

Exodus 10:22–23 HCSB

I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night and strike every firstborn male in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. I am Yahweh; I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt. The blood on the houses where you are staying will be a distinguishing mark for you; when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No plague will be among you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

Exodus 12:12–13 HCSB

So Moses said, “This is what Yahweh says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt, and every firstborn male in the land of Egypt will die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the servant girl who is behind the millstones, as well as every firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a great cry of anguish through all the land of Egypt such as never was before, or ever will be again. But against all the Israelites, whether man or beast, not even a dog will snarl, so that you may know that Yahweh makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.’”

Exodus 11:4–7 HCSB

What an extraordinary account! And note especially the Lord’s directives regarding the last plague, the killing of the firstborn: The children of Israel were to slaughter one lamb per family, then put the lamb’s blood on the doorposts and lintels of their homes, then eat the lamb with their families inside those doors. Consequently, when the Lord’s destroying angel passed through Egypt, killing all their firstborn, not an Israelite family was touched.

Without a doubt, this account confirms the post-Tribulation position, namely, that God can preserve His people *here on the earth* while He pours out His wrath *on the very same earth*. And as He does this, it is a sign and a wonder, as He makes a distinction between His own children and the children of the world.

I imagine a pre-Tribber might have an angle where they could argue that this also supports a Rapture—honestly, I do not know what that argument might be—but again, seeking to be as unbiased as possible, this account clearly supports the post-Trib viewpoint. God can protect us without taking us out, even in times of devastating judgment.

The Inhabitants of Jerusalem When the City Was Destroyed

The city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. At that time, the Temple was destroyed, the king deposed and many of the people brought into exile. It was a time of great bloodshed and horrific suffering, and it is introduced by this haunting word in Ezekiel 9:

Then he [meaning, the Lord] cried in my ears with a loud voice, saying, “Bring near the executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand.” And behold, six men came from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with his weapon for slaughter in his hand, and with

them was a man clothed in linen, with a writing case at his waist. And they went in and stood beside the bronze altar. Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist.

Verses 1–3 ESV

Talk about getting the prophet’s attention. Almighty God cried in his ears in a loud voice, calling for “the executioners of the city” to come near, each of them armed “with his destroying weapon.” This is an ominous message, even though translators understand the phrase “executioners of the city” in different ways: “you who are to visit destruction on the city” (NET); “those who have charge over the city” (NKJV); “those who are appointed to execute judgment on the city” (NIV); and “the men appointed to punish the city!” (NLT). These men (or really, angelic messengers) had the authority to destroy.

The text continues:

Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. And the LORD said to him, “*Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.*” And to the others he said in my hearing, “*Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.*” So they began with the elders who were before the house. Then he said to them, “Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out.” So they went out and struck in the city.

Verses 3–7 ESV, emphasis added

Ezekiel was already a captive in Babylon when this was taking place, since Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had already marched against Jerusalem and taken the first wave of captives about twenty years earlier. But now the city would be destroyed with a horrible slaughter, to the point that Ezekiel cried out to the Lord in prayer, asking Him if He was going to totally wipe out His people. God replied that the guilt of Judah and Israel was too great, and so He would carry out His sentence without pity (see Ezekiel 9:8–11). There was only one exception: God spared those who sighed and groaned over all the abominations that were committed in Jerusalem, putting a mark of protection on them. And when the destroying angels came through the city, smiting without mercy, they did not touch those with the mark.

This text, then, fully supports the idea that God can protect His people as His wrath is poured out, just as He protected the children of Israel in Egypt when His plagues were poured out. Not only so, but in the Old Testament the destruction of Jerusalem is set forth as the ultimate example of God’s wrath, since in this case, He actually destroyed His own house (meaning the temple; see, e.g. 2 Chronicles 36:15–16). Yet even during this season of fiery wrath, God made a distinction between the righteous and the wicked, sparing those who were brokenhearted over the sin of the nation. And although they did go into exile with the rest of the nation (see Jeremiah 24), this was also God’s way of preserving their lives. When so many others were butchered in Jerusalem, by the Lord’s gracious intervention, they were not.

This is reminiscent of what is written in Malachi 3, about a hundred and fifty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, but at a time when, once again, God’s people were in sin:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. “They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.”

Verses 16–18 ESV

God knows how to make a distinction between those who serve Him and those who do not, and with pinpoint precision at that. He can mark us in such a way that no one can touch us outside of His will, right in the middle of the outpouring of His judgment and wrath. He does not need to rapture us out.

Factoring in the Words of Jesus and Paul

Now, there is one more Old Testament text we are going to consider, and at this point, the scales are clearly tipped against the idea that God must take us out of this world in order to protect us. That makes this text all the more decisive. But before we look at this text, let’s reconsider the evidence we have evaluated so far, but let’s do it in light of the teaching of Jesus and Paul. (For the importance of Old Testament patterns, see Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:1–11.)

Jesus famously said to His disciples shortly before His crucifixion, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation [*thlipsis*]; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 NKJV). And note that this is the same Greek word used elsewhere in the New Testament for

“great tribulation” (see Matthew 24:29 and Revelation 7:14). Then, in direct confirmation of the words of Jesus, we read,

And when [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations [again, Greek, *thlipsis*] enter the kingdom of God.”

Acts 14:21–22 NKJV

In fact, the Greek for tribulation, *thlipsis*, which can also mean “trouble, pressure,” is found frequently in the New Testament. See Matthew 13:21 (where *thlipsis* and persecution arise because of the Word); Acts 20:23 (*thlipsis* awaits Paul in every city); Romans 5:3 (*thlipsis* produces perseverance in our lives; see also Romans 8:25; 12:12); 2 Corinthians 1:4 (God comforts us in our *thlipsis*); 2 Corinthians 4:17 (in this world, we have only light *thlipsis*; see also 2 Corinthians 6:4; 7:4; Ephesians 3:13; Philippians 1:17; 4:14; Colossians 1:24); 1 Thessalonians 1:6 (the Thessalonians received the Word in much *thlipsis*; see also 1 Thessalonians 3:3, 7; 2 Thessalonians 1:4, 6); Hebrews 10:33 (the believers were made a spectacle because of the *thlipsis* they suffered); James 1:27 (we visit the fatherless and widows in their *thlipsis*); Revelation 1:9 (John is our companion in *thlipsis*); Revelation 2:9–10 (the believers in Smyrna are suffering *thlipsis* and will continue to suffer *thlipsis*) and Revelation 2:22 (the Lord will afflict Jezebel and her followers with great *thlipsis*).

These verses confirm what Jesus and Paul said: We will have lots of *thlipsis*—tribulation!—in this world. And that leads to an obvious question: Why would we think that at the end of the age, God would spare His people from *thlipsis*? Why the final generation alone? That would seem to violate a biblical pattern, would it not? And what about the way that Jesus prayed for His disciples? Could that be the way He prays for us, too? He said, “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15 NKJV).

You might say, “But what about Lot and his family? Did not God call them out of Sodom before destruction came?”

Yes, exactly, He did. It is similar to the call to believers in Revelation 18 to come out of Babylon, as John recounts:

And I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.”

Revelation 18:4–5 NKJV

So we come out of the sins of the world system lest we suffer God’s judgments on a sinning world. But we do not leave the world itself, any more than Lot and his family did. They simply moved from one area to another one nearby. That is hardly a picture of the pre-Trib Rapture of the Church (see Craig’s treatment of these relevant passages in chapter 9).

A Decisive Old Testament Text

This leads me to what I believe is the most decisive Old Testament text in our discussion, Isaiah 26:20–21 (NIV):

Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by. See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins. The earth will disclose the blood shed on it; the earth will conceal its slain no longer.

At a time in the future, when God’s anger will be poured out on the earth, we are not promised escape. We are told to take refuge. The text is straightforward and clear.

As for the context, this is part of what scholars call the Apocalypse of Isaiah, which refers to Isaiah 24–27. And it has that name because it speaks of cosmic events, of end-time upheaval, of the final coming of God’s Kingdom and the destruction of His enemies. Here is just a sampling of some of the verses. The text speaks of the future destruction of the earth:

See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants—it will be the same for priest as for people, for the master as for his servant, for the mistress as for her servant, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor. The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The LORD has spoken this word.

Isaiah 24:1–3 NIV

Then God will come with power!

The earth is broken up, the earth is split asunder, the earth is violently shaken. The earth reels like a drunkard, it sways like a hut in the wind; so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion that it falls—never to rise again. In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above . . . they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days. The moon will be dismayed, the sun ashamed; for the LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders—with great glory.

Isaiah 24:19–23 NIV

At that time, God will abolish death from His people:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

Isaiah 25:6–9 NIV

And at that time, He will crush the serpent’s head (cf. Romans 16:20): “In that day, the LORD will punish with his sword—his fierce, great and powerful sword—Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent; he will slay the monster of the sea” (Isaiah 27:1 NIV).

And when the judgment is over, the Lord will gather His people Israel together:

In that day the LORD will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, Israel, will be gathered up one by one. And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.

Isaiah 27:12–13 NIV

Clearly, this is speaking in terms of the end of the age, the final conflict and the last great war. And during this time, when God’s wrath is poured out on a rebellious, sinning world, He gives a directive to His people: “Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by.”

The Lord will provide a place of refuge for us right in the midst of the storm (as He did for Noah). He will give us a way of escape from His judgments (just as He did for Lot). He will make a distinction between His people and the world (just as He did for the Israelites in Egypt and for the righteous in Jerusalem). Yet we will not escape all tribulation and suffering for the Gospel. In other words, we will not be exempt from the hatred of people and the attacks of Satan. To the contrary, we were promised this as part of our faith. But we will be protected from God’s wrath—right here, in this world. The storm will be great, but our God will be greater, and we will take refuge in Him. “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe” (Proverbs 18:10 NKJV).

Is There Any More Old Testament Support for a Pre-Trib Rapture?

Some have pointed out that Zechariah 14:1–15, which speaks of the Lord’s return to Jerusalem to set up His Kingdom, does not mention a resurrection. This is an Old Testament picture of Jesus returning to earth at the Second Coming. Again, no mention of a resurrection.² The argument, then, would be that the resurrection of the righteous had taken place seven years earlier at the Rapture (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17). This, however, is not only an argument from silence. It is also an argument contradicted by the explicit testimony of Scripture.

Revelation 20:4 (HCSB) tells us what happens after Jesus returns and casts Satan into the abyss for a thousand years (in other words, what happens after the Tribulation):

Then I saw thrones, and people seated on them who were given authority to judge. I also saw the people who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of God’s word, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and who had not accepted the mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with the Messiah for 1,000 years.

Does Zechariah 14 mention this resurrection, one which Revelation speaks of explicitly, and in a post-Tribunational context? Not a word. Yet we know it will happen. (Even if one interprets Revelation 20 differently, the believers who preach during the Tribulation must get resurrected somehow.) The same can be said for the resurrection of all believers, together with the catching up of the living saints: Zechariah 14 does not record it—among many other things we expect to see at that time—but plenty of other Scriptures mention it.

In the same way, Matthew 24:29–31³—to be referenced several times in this book—tells us that,

Immediately after the tribulation of those days . . . the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the peoples of the earth will mourn; and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. He will send out His angels with a loud trumpet, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Matthew 24:29–31 HCSB

Here, too, we have a specific time frame for this event—after the tribulation—with a detailed description of what will happen. Does Zechariah 14 mention it? Not a word. Yet we know it will come to pass. So much for Zechariah 14 proving a pre-Trib Rapture.

Other pre-Trib teachers have pointed to passages like Jeremiah 30:7, which speak of the time of Jacob’s trouble, arguing that “the Tribulation is for Israel’s redemption.”⁴ But this argument is also quite specious.

First, Jeremiah 30:7 initially applied to Judah’s suffering at the hands of the Babylonians in the early sixth century BC. It is secondarily applied to a final Tribulation period. Second, there is not a single verse in the Bible that states that God cannot deal with the Church and Israel at the same time. Nowhere in the Word is it stated (or implied) that there cannot be persecution (and purification) of the followers of Jesus while God simultaneously turns the hearts of Jewish people to Himself. Really now, is the Lord of the universe unable to multitask?

Equally specious is the claim by Nathan Jones that “the Old Testament and Revelation leave the Church out of the Tribulation.”⁵ Craig will address the question of Revelation in chapter 8. As for the Old Testament, the very concept of “the Church” (referring to one Body of redeemed Jews and Gentiles) was hidden within the pages of the Hebrew Bible, a “mystery” to be revealed with the first coming of Jesus into the world (see Ephesians 3:1–11; Romans 11:25–26; 16:25–26). Why would we expect to find explicit reference to the Church going through tribulation in the midst of texts speaking to the people of Israel on a national level? We might as well argue that the psalms are not part of the Bible because they are not mentioned in Leviticus.

On the flip side, did Paul not write that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4 ESV)? That means that Christians can take the words of encouragement spoken to the Jewish people in the Old Testament—words of hope in the midst of tribulation and despair—and apply them spiritually to their own lives. And they can do this while recognizing that those words remain eternally relevant to Israel and Judah, the original recipients of the promises.

The simple fact is that the Old Testament provides no evidence for a pre-Tribulational Rapture. But we are just getting started. Let’s continue to dig into God’s Word.

6

There Is Only One Second Coming

Imagine this scenario. I ask you to pick up my Uncle Fred at the airport on Friday night at 7:00 p.m., then bring him to my home, after which I need you to go back to the airport to pick up my Uncle Fred at 11:00 p.m. and bring him to my home.

Confused, you say to me, “I thought you said Uncle Fred was arriving at 7:00 p.m. How can he also be arriving at 11:00 p.m.?”

I answer, “Yes, you have it right. Uncle Fred will be arriving at 7:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m.”

You ask, “Do you have two Uncle Freds?”

“No,” I answer quickly, “but it’s complicated.”

You are even more confused now, but since you have your assignment, you say to me, “Well, since I don’t know your Uncle Fred, how will I recognize him?”

I reply, “Well, he’s about five feet nine, weighs about 175 pounds and has short dark hair and a beard. And he’s about six feet four, weighs about 225 pounds and has long, wavy gray locks but no facial hair.”

Uncle Fred and the Vocabulary of Jesus’ Return

Does this sound ridiculous? Well, it is the very scenario we have to imagine based on the vocabulary of the New Testament if there is, in fact, a pre-Trib Rapture followed by the Second Coming (in my example, the two arrivals of Uncle Fred).

Let me explain it like this. I am teaching a Sunday school class on the end times, and I say, “We are looking forward to the Second Coming of Jesus, when we will be caught up to meet Him in the air and will return to heaven with Him. This will happen immediately before the Tribulation, which will last for seven years. At the end of the Tribulation, the Second Coming will take place, and we will return with Jesus to the earth.”

Would that not be confusing? First the Second Coming, followed by the Tribulation and then the Second Coming.

You reply, “But you’re the one making things complicated. We refer to the first event as the Rapture and the second event as the Second Coming. In other words, the return of Jesus has two phases to it: the Rapture and the Second Coming.”

Unfortunately, the New Testament authors did not make that distinction, using the identical vocabulary for both of the alleged phases of the Lord’s return. That is why I used the Uncle Fred analogy. This is confusion, not clarity. And simply stated, the idea that the Rapture and Second Coming are two distinct events is contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures. So when numerous websites and studies address the question, “Does this verse refer to the Rapture or the Second Coming?” they are asking a question the Bible does not ask.

But this is only part of the problem. Another problem is that the primary Greek words which supposedly speak of the Rapture, in distinction from the second phase of the Second Coming, cannot possibly describe the Rapture. That is because the pre-Trib Rapture is said to be a secret, invisible event in which Jesus comes as a thief in the night. And then suddenly, without warning and without a sound, we are taken away to be with the Lord. As for Jesus Himself, He never arrives on the earth. He hovers in the sky (invisibly, I emphasize again) and catches us up to meet Him in the air.

But the primary Greek words that speak of the Lord’s return—in some of the very verses that allegedly speak of a pre-Trib Rapture—describe a *visible, audible* event. Not only so, they speak of an actual *arrival*, just like a plane arriving at a particular gate of an airport, not a plane that flies by in the air.

So the first problem is that the same Greek words are used to describe two supposedly separate and quite different events. This is as confusing as my Uncle Fred analogy. The second problem is that the Greek words used by the New Testament authors to speak of the Lord’s return describe His literal, physical return to the earth, but they do not describe a secret, near-return of Jesus to a point in the sky.

Are you with me so far? Then let's take a look at the first problem (that is, the two arrivals of Uncle Fred) in a little more depth.

Coming and Coming

What are some of your favorite Rapture verses? How about 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18? Let's quote it in full:

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the *coming* of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be *caught up* together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:15–18 ESV, emphasis added

So the “dead in Christ will rise first,” then we who are still alive at that time will be caught up (the Greek is quite forceful and could easily be translated “snatched up”) to meet the Lord in the air. This is what is commonly referred to as the Rapture, the time when we are raptured away to be with the Lord. And when will this take place? Paul says it will be at the “coming” (Greek, *parousia*) of the Lord.

When does Paul next use the word *parousia* in his letters to the Thessalonians? It is 1 Thessalonians 5:23, where he prays that we will be preserved blameless “at the *coming* of the Lord Jesus Christ” (emphasis added). Does that sound like the Rapture to you as well? It would seem logical.

Next is 2 Thessalonians 2:1, where Paul writes to these same believers “concerning the *coming* of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him” (2 Thessalonians 2:1 ESV, emphasis added). That is certainly the Rapture, correct? Absolutely. This is exactly what Paul wrote about in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18. And in both cases, he speaks of the Lord's *coming* (*parousia*).

Then, just a few verses later, he speaks of Jesus destroying the Antichrist: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his *coming*” (2 Thessalonians 2:8 ESV, emphasis added). What is this referring to, according to those who hold to a pre-Trib Rapture? This is the Second Coming, not the Rapture, since this takes place at the end of the Tribulation period when the Antichrist is destroyed. Yet Paul uses the identical word to describe both events: the *coming* of the Lord. Shades of Uncle Fred and Uncle Fred! (And note also that Paul speaks of the *coming* of the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:9. This is undone by the *coming* of Jesus.)

But it is not just Paul who used *parousia* in this way (meaning, to speak of both the Rapture and the Second Coming). James (whose original name is Jacob) urges us to remain patient until the Lord's *coming* (see James 5:7), which dispensationalists take to mean the Rapture. Yet Peter tells us that, at the Lord's *coming*, the universe will be melted with blazing heat (see 2 Peter 3:12). This cannot refer to the Rapture but must refer to the Second Coming. But then 1 John 2:28 speaks of the *coming* of Jesus in terms of our hope and expectation, which would seem to refer to the Rapture. So which is it?

To go back to my Sunday school class, if I were to teach the dispensational view using New Testament vocabulary, I would say, “First, we have the coming of Jesus, when we will be caught up to meet Him, followed by the coming of Jesus seven years later, when He destroys the Antichrist. So first the coming of Jesus, then the coming of Jesus.”

To make matters worse, Jesus Himself would have added to the confusion by referring to both the Rapture and the Second Coming with the same word, *coming* (*parousia*). (Jesus did not teach His disciples in Greek, but there are different Hebrew or Aramaic words that He could have used, which are rightly translated as “coming” in Greek.) So in Matthew 24:3, when His disciples asked Him when the destruction of the Temple would take place and what would be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age, He answered at length, referring to His coming several times. (Craig will revisit this chapter in Matthew later in the book, but I want to point out especially the use of vocabulary here.)

First, He said, “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the *coming* of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:27 ESV, emphasis added). Then, a few verses later, He explained,

For as were the days of Noah, so will be the *coming* of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the *coming* of the Son of Man.

Matthew 24:37–39 ESV, emphasis added

Based on pre-Trib thinking, Matthew 24:37–39 definitely refers to the Rapture, when Jesus takes us away (just as He rescued Noah), after which judgment falls on the earth. So the “coming” of Jesus there refers to the Rapture. But

what about Matthew 24:27, spoken by the Lord just a few moments earlier? According to John Walvoord, one of the most respected dispensationalist scholars of the previous generation, Matthew 24:27 refers to the Second Coming, not the Rapture:

Christ warns them, "I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not" (Matthew 24:25–26). Why not? Because His second coming will be a very public event. Everybody will see Him. The rapture of the church may be an event that is quite unseen by the world. Although the Bible never calls it a secret rapture because it is not a secret at least to Christians, it will take place very quickly. First Corinthians 15:52 speaks of the rapture as taking place "in the twinkling of an eye." The world possibly will only be dimly aware that something has happened until it is all over.

The second coming of Christ to the earth is quite a different event. According to Matthew 24:27, it will be a glorious event: "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." Lightning is something that everybody can see, and the glory of the Lord will illuminate the heavens with brilliant light just as lightning illuminates the heavens in a storm. According to Revelation 1:7, "Every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him."¹

So, according to this esteemed Christian author, while the Rapture will be an event invisible to (or, largely unseen by) the world, the Second Coming will be seen by all, a glorious public event. But how does Jesus describe *both of these events* in the space of just a few verses? He refers to them both as His *coming*. Can I say shades of Uncle Fred again?

To complicate matters even more, Jesus says something very important in Matthew 24:29–31, this time with the Greek verb *erchomai*, to come, which often refers to His return in the New Testament:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will *appear* in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man *coming [erchomai]* on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will *gather* his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Matthew 24:29–31 ESV, emphasis added

So, when He comes, the whole world will see Him, and that is when He will gather His elect together. But this sounds just like 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1, which told us that He will come with His angels to snatch us away to be with Him (see also 1 Corinthians 15:23, also with *parousia* [coming]). And that event, we have been told, is basically secret, unseen by the world, while this event is totally public. How can this be?

To return to my Sunday school class, it would go like this: "So, friends, we are looking forward to the coming of Jesus with His angels when He will gather His people together to be with Him, after which there will be terrible tribulation, and then Jesus will come with His angels and gather His people together to be with Him."

What is the pre-Trib explanation? (I do not say this in mockery. To repeat again, some of the finest Christians on the planet are pre-Trib, along with some top Christian scholars.) The pre-Trib version goes like this: First, Jesus comes with His angels secretly, to gather up His elect, meaning the Church. Then, seven years later, He returns with His angels (and His Church) in a very public event, destroying the wicked and gathering up His elect, meaning the people of Israel.

Unfortunately, Matthew and Paul used the same words to describe these supposedly different events, first, *coming*, then, *gathering* (Matthew uses the Greek verb for *gather* in Matthew 24:31 while Paul uses the related Greek noun in 2 Thessalonians 2:1). Based on a pre-Trib reading of the texts, could the New Testament writers have made this any more confusing if they tried? "We're looking forward to the coming of Jesus and the gathering of the elect to Him, and then seven years later, we're looking forward to the coming of Jesus and the gathering of the elect to Him." Really?

May I present you with a much simpler (and more accurate) solution? There is one Second Coming, and it has different aspects to it. First, Jesus appears in the clouds for the entire world to see, accompanied by His angelic hosts and with great fanfare. Next, we are caught up to meet Him in the air. Then, we descend to earth together with Him as He defeats His enemies and establishes His Kingdom on the earth. This all happens at the one and only *coming* of the Lord—the Second Coming, which includes both the Rapture and the Lord's arrival on the earth at the end of the Tribulation period.

In fact, Paul makes this explicit in 2 Thessalonians 1, where he urges the persecuted believers to await their deliverance when Jesus returns, explaining that this will happen

... when the Lord Jesus *is revealed* from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when *he comes [erchomai]* on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

2 Thessalonians 1:7–10 ESV, emphasis added

This is really clear! Persecuted Christians will receive relief *when Jesus comes publicly in flaming fire*, inflicting vengeance on His enemies. And *that* is the time when He will be "glorified in his saints" and "marveled at among all

who have believed.” Dare I say, “Boom!”?

All this happens at one and the same time, which is why it is described with the same Greek words: the Rapture is part of the Second Coming. Or, put another way, *there is only one future coming of the Lord, not two*. That is why Revelation 1:7, which pre-Tribbers say is a reference to the Second Coming, not the Rapture, says, “Behold, *he is coming [erchomai]* with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen” (ESV, emphasis added). But Revelation 3:11, which according to pre-Tribbers refers to the Rapture, says, “*I am coming [erchomai]* soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown” (ESV, emphasis added).

Yes, indeed, *He is coming again*, but once, not twice. There is only one Second Coming! And at that time, all these wonderful things will take place: His glorious appearing, His catching us up to be with Him, His descent to earth (with us!), His destruction of the wicked. What an event it will be!

The Last Trumpet

This is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 (ESV), another favorite Rapture passage:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

When does this take place? When the *last trumpet* sounds. And what do we learn in Revelation 11, which speaks of the events taking place during the Tribulation period on the earth?² “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever’” (Revelation 11:15 ESV). So when the *seventh of seven* trumpets sounds—that would be called “the last trumpet”—the kingdom of this world becomes the Kingdom of our Lord and His Messiah, and He will then reign forever and ever.

Do you see it? Paul tells us that we will be changed—instantly glorified and resurrected—when the *last trumpet* sounds. In fact, he speaks of the sound of this trumpet in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (remember, this is also a favorite Rapture verse). And Revelation tells us that when the last trumpet sounds—the seventh of seven—the Lord will establish His Kingdom on the earth.

Is the light going on now? It is one and the same event, one and the same trumpet blast. In other words, the last trumpet *is* the last trumpet. And would it not be odd for Paul to call it the “last trumpet,” when, in reality, seven major trumpets were to follow? How, then, would it be last?

Let’s put these verses together, this time adding in Matthew 24:31 (which speaks of the Lord gathering together His elect when He returns):

... in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the *last trumpet*. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ... And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. ... For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:52; Matthew 24:31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 ESV, emphasis added

And what is the perspective from heaven while this is taking place? “Then *the seventh angel blew his trumpet*, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever’ (Revelation 11:15 ESV, emphasis added).

This makes me want to shout! All this takes place as the seventh (and last) trumpet is being sounded. What a glorious day that will be!

So Uncle Fred will be arriving at the airport once, not twice, but he will do several things when he arrives. It is really not complicated at all, and that is why the same words are used to describe both the Rapture and the Second Coming.

Parousia and Parousia

But before we dig more deeply into the New Testament vocabulary of the Second Coming—this is the second part of our twofold argument—let’s review what a popular website states. You could call this the classic dispensational viewpoint:

Question: “What is the difference between the Rapture and the Second Coming?”

Answer: The rapture and the second coming of Christ are often confused. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a scripture verse is referring to the rapture or the second coming. However, in studying end-times Bible prophecy, it is very important to differentiate between the two.

The rapture is when Jesus Christ returns to remove the church (all believers in Christ) from the earth. The rapture is described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50–54. Believers who have died will have their bodies resurrected and, along with believers who are still living, will meet the Lord in the air. This will all occur in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye. The second coming is when Jesus returns to defeat the Antichrist, destroy evil, and establish His millennial kingdom. The second coming is described in Revelation 19:11–16.

... The rapture will be secret and instant (1 Corinthians 15:50–54). The second coming will be visible to all (Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:29–30).

... The rapture and second coming are similar but separate events. Both involve Jesus returning. Both are end-times events. However, it is crucially important to recognize the differences. In summary, the rapture is the return of Christ in the clouds to remove all believers from the earth before the time of God's wrath. The second coming is the return of Christ to the earth to bring the tribulation to an end and to defeat the Antichrist and his evil world empire.³

As we have seen, though, this perspective is not in harmony with the testimony of Scripture, which describes these two events as part of the one and only Second Coming, making clear that the catching away of the Church takes place as Jesus descends to earth—in other words, when He *comes back*.

This event is described by two angelic messengers in Acts 1, who said to the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11 ESV). And note that He left from the Mount of Olives (see Acts 1:12), and it is to the Mount of Olives that He will return. He will come back to earth the same way He left: literally and visibly! As described in Zechariah 14:

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward.

Zechariah 14:4 ESV

This speaks of a literal coming, of an arrival, of a physical return. In stark contrast, dispensationalists tell us that the Rapture describes an event where Jesus almost returns to earth—He comes secretly in the sky—and snatches us away like a thief in the night, taking us back to heaven where we feast at the marriage supper during the time of the Tribulation. Unfortunately for the pre-Trib position, the vocabulary used by the New Testament authors describes something very different, starting with that important word *parousia* (coming). And for some reason, the Bible nowhere *specifies* a secret pre-Tribulational coming in the sky alone.

As recognized by all Greek dictionaries and lexicons, *parousia* can refer to someone's actual presence, or it can refer to their arrival. So, for example, in the context of everyday events, Paul wrote, “I rejoice at *the coming* of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence” (1 Corinthians 16:17 ESV, emphasis added). Or, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the *coming* of Titus, and not only by his *coming* but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you” (2 Corinthians 7:6–7 ESV, emphasis added). Or, “so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my *coming* to you again” (Philippians 1:26 ESV, emphasis added). Then, in the sense of “presence” Paul uses *parousia*, just a few verses later in this same letter: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my *presence* but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12 ESV, emphasis added).

So the word *parousia* refers to someone's actual *presence* in a place or, more commonly, to their *arrival* to a place. Yet, according to pre-Trib teaching, when Jesus comes to rapture us, He never arrives here on earth. He is never *present* on earth. Instead, He comes *close to earth*, but He does not *arrive* on earth. This is not a *parousia*. Yet, as we have seen, this is the word used in famous Rapture passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18.

But there is more. Greek scholars tell us that the imagery of the *parousia* is often found in the extravagant events marking the arrival of a major dignitary and, most conspicuously, the Roman emperor. From an earthly perspective, this was the ultimate *parousia*. According to Ceslas Spicq, a foremost Greek scholar:

In line with these usages, the NT uses *Parousia* for the glorious coming of the Lord Jesus at the end of time, his Second Coming. This return of Christ must somehow be filled out with the pomp and magnificence that characterized royal and imperial “visits.” There were great feasts, *pannēgyreis*, including speeches of praise, gifts, games, sacrifices, dedications; statues and buildings were erected, coins and medallions were struck, sentences were commuted, gold crowns were given, . . . honors were multiplied. Glory and joy on the part of the people were in response to the prince's active and beneficent presence. All of this pales in comparison to the coming of the Pantokrator [Almighty], but it explains why the NT uses the term *parousia*.⁴

This is anything but a secret event, the Lord's alleged near-coming to earth to snatch us away. Far from it. This is a glorious, public event, the Lord's glorious arrival in the sight of the whole world. That is what we are looking forward to by faith! Can you imagine how glorious it will be?

An Appearing Must be Visible

Let's look at another key word use in the New Testament to describe the Second Coming. It is *epiphaneia*, which means "appearing," and it is found in well-known verses such as this: "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his *appearing*" (2 Timothy 4:8 ESV, emphasis added).

It is used together with *parousia* (coming) in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, where we read that Jesus will destroy the Antichrist by "the *appearance* of His *coming*," which clearly cannot speak about the Rapture. Yet in 1 Timothy 6:14, Paul urges rich believers "to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the *appearing* of our Lord Jesus Christ" (ESV, emphasis added). Do you see it? We are not looking forward to a secret Rapture; we are looking forward to the Lord's public appearance, at which time He will destroy the Antichrist along with all those who oppose the Gospel, just as we read in 2 Thessalonians 1. It is one and the same event! We are looking forward to Jesus coming back for the whole world to see, "taking vengeance with flaming fire on those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thessalonians 1:8 HCSB).

Note also that in 2 Timothy 1:10, Paul speaks of the first *appearing* of Jesus, when He came into this world to die for our sins—that was hardly a secret appearance—while in 2 Timothy 4:1, Paul writes that Jesus will judge the living and the dead by His *appearing* and His Kingdom. Once again, this refers to the final event of this age, when Jesus will come to earth, save His people and judge the wicked. Yet in Titus 2:13, Paul says that we are "waiting for our blessed hope, the *appearing* of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (ESV, emphasis added), and, as we just saw in 2 Timothy 4:8, Paul spoke of "all who eagerly look forward to his *appearing*" (2 Timothy 4:8 NLT, emphasis added).

So not only would it be completely confusing to speak of both a secret Rapture and a public event with this same word *epiphaneia* (appearing), but it would be completely inappropriate to describe the Rapture, which the world will not see, as "the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." Not a chance! The New Revised Standard Version actually renders this "the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." This is in harmony with Hebrews 9:27–28, which states,

And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment—so also the Messiah, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will *appear* a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.

Hebrews 9:27–28 HCSB, emphasis added (The Greek for "appear" is "to be seen.")

A Revealing Must be Visible

But there is more. Another word that speaks of our blessed hope is *apokalupsis* (revealing), a word we know from the book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse (see Revelation 1:1, where the word for "revelation" is this same Greek word, *apokalupsis*). (The only coming ever depicted in the book of Revelation is Jesus' public appearing—Revelation 1:7; 19:11–16.)

In 1 Corinthians 1:7, Paul writes to the believers "so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the *revelation* of our Lord Jesus Christ" (NASB, emphasis added). What, then, are we eagerly awaiting? It is the *revelation* of Jesus—a revealing, not a hiding; a public manifestation, not a secret event. And it is this word that Paul uses in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, part of a section we have quoted several times already: The believers will receive rest "at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with His mighty angels."

Speaking of this same, very public event, Peter encourages his readers "so that the genuineness of your faith—more valuable than gold, which perishes though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the *revelation* of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7, HCSB, emphasis added). And he speaks of it again twice more in this letter:

Therefore, with your minds ready for action, be serious and set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the *revelation* of Jesus Christ. . . . Rejoice as you share in the sufferings of the Messiah, so that you may also rejoice with great joy at the *revelation* of His glory.

1 Peter 1:13, 4:13 HCSB, emphasis added

Can it get any clearer? We are looking forward to His *revelation*, at which time we will receive grace, at which time our suffering will end, at which time we will share in His glory, at which time He will appear in blazing fire to destroy His (and our!) enemies.

Now, look again at Luke 17:28–30 (HCSB, emphasis added), verses always used to refer to the Rapture, but verses which speak of Jesus being *revealed* (this time, using the verbal form, *apokaluptō*): ⁵

It will be the same as it was in the days of Lot: People went on eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building. But on the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be like that on the day the Son of Man is *revealed*.

And if you have any doubt that this is used as a Rapture verse, doubt no longer. Just look down a few more verses: “I tell you, on that night two will be in one bed: One will be taken and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding grain together: One will be taken and the other left” (Luke 17:34–35 HCSB).

The better understanding is that those who are taken are taken in judgment, not taken in a secret Rapture. This is what happens when *Jesus is revealed* for the whole world to see. As described also in Matthew 13 at the end of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds,

Therefore, just as the weeds are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather from His kingdom everything that causes sin and those guilty of lawlessness. They will throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom. Anyone who has ears should listen!

Matthew 13:40–43 HCSB

So this is the sequence: The Lord *appears* for the whole world to see—gloriously, publicly, wondrously—and catches us up to meet Him in the air (this is almost surreal!), as we descend to Jerusalem with Him and His holy angels. He then separates the wicked who will be taken in judgment and establishes His Kingdom on the earth. As for those who are left—those who were not taken in judgment—“Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths” (Zechariah 14:16 ESV).

Even if you differ with me on some of these details, what is undeniable is that the event we are looking forward to, the moment we are longing for, is public and visible for the world to see. It is an *appearing*; it is a *revealing*; it is an *arrival*.

Look at how this same event—when we will be changed!—is described elsewhere in the New Testament, here using the verb *phaneroō* (to manifest, to cause to become visible, reveal): “Dear friends, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet been *revealed*. We know that whenever it is *revealed* we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is” (1 John 3:2 NET, emphasis added). Or, as rendered in the English Standard Version, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet *appeared*; but we know that when he *appears* we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

This same verb is used for the Lord’s *postresurrection* appearances in Mark 16:12, 14, and John 21:1, as well as for His being revealed or made known to Israel through John the Immerser (the Baptist) in John 1:31. So the verb clearly speaks of someone or something being revealed or manifested for everyone to see. John said he came baptizing so that Jesus would be revealed to Israel (John 1:31; see also 1 Timothy 3:16, with reference to the Lord’s first coming). John 21:1 describes this postresurrection appearance of the Lord with these words, as He sat on the shore cooking fish: “After this Jesus *revealed* himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he *revealed* himself in this way” (ESV, emphasis added). In the same way, in the future, He will be revealed again, and the whole world will see Him. To repeat: That is when we will be changed.

In this same context, look at 1 John 2:28, which uses both *parousia* (coming) and *phaneroō* (to reveal, appear): “And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he *appears* we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his *coming*” (ESV, emphasis added). That is what we long for and await! Yes, “When the Messiah, who is your life, is *revealed*, then you also will be *revealed* with Him in glory” (Colossians 3:4, HCSB, emphasis added). When He is revealed, we will be transformed and become like Him, and everyone will see it. This is truly amazing.

And here is something to consider. In Romans 8, Paul tells us that “the creation eagerly waits for the *revelation* of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19 NET, emphasis added), and he uses that same Greek word *apokalupsis* (revelation). So at the *revelation* of Jesus we too will be revealed—changed, glorified, transformed, like Him—and this will bring the redemption the creation so longs for.

Not a word of this makes sense with a secret, nonarriving Rapture. Every word of it makes sense with one glorious, public Second Coming. To repeat the Lord’s words once more:

But immediately after the trouble of those days, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” with power and great glory. He will send out His angels with a great shofar, and they will gather together His chosen from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Matthew 24:29–31 TLV⁶

I know that some of you automatically reread many of these verses in your mind, not looking at what they say but rather at what you were taught they say. I encourage you to look again, and let the simple meaning of the texts speak to you plainly. When the light goes on, it is more than exciting.

He Is with Us Always, until the Very End of the Age

After Jesus rose from the dead, He commissioned His disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of the nations (Matthew 28:18–20). And even though He would be leaving them physically, He promised that He would not really leave them at all, saying, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20 NET).

Interestingly, the Greek word for “end” is *sunteleia*, and in the New Testament, it is only found in this same phrase “the end of the age” (Matthew 13:39–40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Hebrews 9:26). In Hebrews, it refers to the time when Jesus came into the world to die for us, which ushered in the period called “the last days,” the time of His death and resurrection until the time of His return. But the other times the phrase is found, all in Matthew, it clearly means the end of this current age—in other words, the time when He returns to establish His Kingdom on the earth.

Let’s take a look at the verses, beginning in Matthew 13, where Jesus explains the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds:

The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

. . . So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 13:39–50 ESV, emphasis added

There can be no doubt as to what Jesus was describing, and it was certainly not a pre-Trib Rapture. Rather, “the end of the age” here speaks of the time when Jesus sends His angels to root out and destroy the wicked, and by all counts, that is associated with His visible return to earth, not a secret Rapture to remove the righteous.

Then, in Matthew 24, as Jesus is telling His disciples that the Temple will be destroyed, they ask Him a question, assuming that this will happen when He returns: “As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be *the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*’” (Matthew 24:3 ESV, emphasis added). Clearly, in their understanding, His “coming” and “the end of the age” were the culminating events of the era, the final things to take place. What they did not know was that the Second Temple would be destroyed in forty years while two thousand years would pass before the time of His coming and the end of the age.⁷

Finally, in Matthew 28:20, which we quoted above, Jesus tells His disciples that He will be with them until “the end of the age,” which can only mean until everything is completed, until the culmination of all things, until He returns to destroy the wicked and establish His righteous Kingdom in Jerusalem.

And if we look back into the Septuagint, which is the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible done by Jewish scholars in the few centuries before Jesus, we see that this word *sunteleia* (the end) occurs frequently in the prophetic passages in Daniel, with several of them referring to this same time of the end, the time of the Antichrist. See especially Daniel 11:35–36, and then note Daniel 12, where *sunteleia* occurs repeatedly:⁸

But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until *the time of the end*. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.

Daniel 12:4 ESV, emphasis added

And someone said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, “How long shall it be till *the end* of these wonders?”

Daniel 12:6 ESV, emphasis added

And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes *to an end* all these things would be finished.

Daniel 12:7 ESV, emphasis added

But go your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place *at the end of the days*.

Daniel 12:13 ESV, emphasis added

Once again, as in Matthew 13 and 24, the “end” that is spoken of takes us right until the last moments of this age, through times of tribulation, through times of severe testing for God’s people, through the rise of wicked powers and through the defeat of those wicked powers, right until Jesus returns in flaming fire to crush all rebellion and to deliver His people. Until then, He is with us always, even until the end of the age.

In another chapter, we will explain how we endure these times of hell on earth, not in hopelessness and despair, but as overcomers. And all the while, as we labor and serve and reach out to a dying and lost world, there is a prayer of hope and expectation on our lips: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20 NKJV).

Evaluating Some Pre-Trib Arguments

Pre-Tribulation advocates have a number of arguments, although it should be noted that they have no direct texts that explicitly claim that the Church will be raptured before the Tribulation or that Jesus will return before the Tribulation as well as afterward. One must wonder why Scripture explicitly and repeatedly tells us of Jesus' coming to judge the world at the end of the age yet never mentions Him coming before the Tribulation. It is plain that Jesus will gather His chosen ones at the end of the Tribulation (Matthew 24:29–31), yet *no* text explicitly informs us that He will gather anyone at its beginning.

Here are some of the basic pre-Tribulational arguments and our responses.

1. We Will Not Go through God's Wrath

One major argument rests on an inference from two texts that refer, in context, to different matters. *The Church will not go through the wrath of God* (see 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 5:9) and *the Tribulation is God's wrath* (see Revelation 15:1).¹ Yet the Tribulation is not uniquely a time of God's wrath. We see in history that God often poured out wrath (e.g., 2 Chronicles 34:21, 25; Lamentations 2:4; Jeremiah 6:11; 7:20; 42:18; 44:6; Ezekiel 20:8, 13, 21; 21:31); in fact, it continues to happen right now (see John 3:36; Romans 1:18).²

During these times, God was not wrathful toward His servants and He often protected them from the judgments while they were present (for example, as Michael has noted, the Israelites in Goshen during the plagues on Egypt). But since they were not taken out in any of these cases, why must we assume that they would be taken out during the Tribulation? Indeed, whereas the book of Revelation never explicitly mentions Jesus returning before the Tribulation, it does depict God *protecting* at least some of His servants from His own judgments (see Revelation 7:3; 9:4). God's wrath often falls during the present age; though it is not directed against us, we are still *here* (see Romans 1:18; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:16).

Yet the Tribulation is not what Paul means by being saved from God's wrath anyway. When Paul refers to God's future wrath in other passages, he gives no indication that he thinks of a Tribulation; rather, he refers to destruction at Christ's return. All believers made right with God through Christ's blood are saved from God's wrath (see Romans 5:9) and thus from eternal destruction (see Romans 2:5; 9:22).

These passages refer to Jesus saving us from damnation at the final judgment, not to Him saving us from a seven-year Tribulation, experienced by a single generation. Indeed, it cheapens the message of Christ's blood to apply it only to the latter. Paul might get his language of "wrath to come" (see 1 Thessalonians 1:10) from John the Baptist, but when John warns of the coming wrath (see Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7), he is warning about unquenchable fire (see Matthew 3:10, 12)!

In the immediate context of 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Paul warns about sudden destruction in the Day of the Lord (see 1 Thessalonians 5:1–4). This is the wrath of which he speaks here. The opposite of this wrath is not the last generation being spared from going through the Great Tribulation, but salvation (see 5:8–9). Paul's concern here is not with the Great Tribulation (which he does not mention in this context), but with deliverance from eternal judgment at the Second Coming, as described for the wicked in 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10.

Since when did Paul's language of salvation get demoted from addressing eternal judgment to addressing several years of suffering for a single generation of believers? If we count generations as forty years, since Jesus' first coming there have been fifty generations of Christians (closer to one hundred if we envision instead reproductive generations of half that length). One may compare similar salvation language in 2 Thessalonians 2. In contrast to the future destruction of those who reject God's truth (see 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12), those who were not saved (see verse 10), we are chosen for salvation because we believed the truth and were set apart for God by the Spirit (see verse 13). This contrast between judgment on the wicked and salvation for the righteous at Christ's coming appears elsewhere as well (see Hebrews 10:39; cf. 10:36–38).

When Paul wrote about deliverance from wrath in 1 Thessalonians, his Thessalonian audience could not have ignored his context and flipped over to Revelation, which had not been written yet, to infer that he thought of a future Great Tribulation. First Thessalonians is one of the first pieces of the New Testament written, and Revelation one of the last.

But even if we do flip over to Revelation, what do we find? Paul's word that is translated "wrath" in 1 Thessalonians is the Greek term *orgê*. Every occurrence of this term in Revelation refers not to the Tribulation, but to the catastrophic judgment at its conclusion (see Revelation 6:16–17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15)! It is true that a different Greek term, *thumos* (anger), in one cycle of judgments refers to a period of tribulation before the end (see 15:1, 7; 16:1). Yet even this term, which is different from Paul's, often refers to the final judgment (see 14:10; 16:19; 19:15).

Transferring Paul's message of salvation to the Great Tribulation risks warping his presentation of the Gospel. In fact, if we wanted to use the same kind of argument from 1 Thessalonians in the other direction, it would be no less simple. The Church is appointed to tribulations (see 1 Thessalonians 3:3; Acts 14:22; John 16:33), and the Tribulation is tribulation; therefore, the Church will go through the Tribulation. Yet pre-Tribulationists would surely object to this approach.³ This, a major popular pre-Tribulationism argument, takes Scripture out of context. The context shows Paul only to be claiming that the Rapture will precede the final Day of Judgment.

2. Jesus Can Come at Any Moment

Does Jesus' coming as a thief for His Church precede the Tribulation or does it bring the Kingdom? Another popular argument for a Rapture before the Tribulation is the argument from imminence, namely, that Jesus can come at any moment. The argument runs like this: *Jesus will come at an unexpected time, which must be before the Tribulation. After all, after the Tribulation begins, we can count down seven years and know when Jesus will return after the Tribulation.*⁴

Before answering how Jesus' coming as a thief addresses timing, we should challenge the association that some make between the thief image and a supposedly invisible coming of Jesus.⁵ A thief comes unexpectedly, but his arrival itself is hardly secret. Old Testament law allowed a homeowner to kill a thief only if the thief came in the night, precisely because in the night the residents could be presumed home, so a thief who came then was presumably ready to kill them to seize their possessions (see Exodus 22:2–3). Jesus' coming like a thief means that He comes suddenly and unexpectedly, not that He will not be seen when He comes.

Moreover, New Testament imminence involves keeping ready for an unexpected time, but not necessarily one in which believers are unprepared. The wicked are caught by surprise, but this surprise does not entail that Jesus comes without there being signs of the times (though these signs seem ambiguous enough to keep us ready always, rather than predicting a particular era as necessarily the one). Since believers are always in the light (see 1 Thessalonians 5:4–8), we should *always* be prepared for our Lord's coming.

The specifics of a post-Tribulation answer to the unexpected/any-moment argument will vary depending on one's understanding of the Tribulation and its length (which we will address later in this book). One point, however, is clear: Every passage about Jesus' coming being unexpected, if it specifies anything in the context about timing, explicitly refers to Jesus' coming at the end of the age, not to a time at the beginning of the final Tribulation several years before!

Consider this one first:

And the day of the Lord will come like a thief—in which the heavens will disappear with a terrible sound, the elements will be destroyed with consuming heat, and the earth and the works done on it will be laid bare.

2 Peter 3:10

This passage is clear enough that it cannot refer to the beginning of the Tribulation, since no place remains to *have* a Tribulation. It becomes more complicated for millennial questions, which are not the subject of this book. (One controversy at a time!) Some protest that since 2 Peter does not leave room for the Millennium, but there must be one, then the same could be true for a Rapture before the Tribulation. Yet at the least, a pre-Tribulationist who offers this protest thereby concedes that this and similar texts by themselves offer no support for a pre-Tribulation Rapture, which ruins their use of the imminence argument from such passages. They also must concede that it is not the obvious meaning of this or similar texts. Again, if the pre-Tribulation Rapture idea is biblical, why is there not even a single obvious text supporting it?

Leaving aside such questions for now, 2 Peter is at least clear that what we are to be looking for as imminent is not a secret Rapture before the Tribulation, but the glorious appearing of Christ.

And again, if we take the passage at face value, if this is the beginning of the Tribulation, on what planet will the Tribulation occur? Peter goes on to repeat that the heavens and elements will be consumed on account of the coming of that day (see 3:12). The promise in verses 9 and 13 of 2 Peter 3 refers to the promise of Jesus' coming in verse 4. In this passage, consider the following questions:

1. What comes as a thief in 2 Peter 3:10—the beginning of the Tribulation or the end of the age?
2. In verse 10, will this be a quiet, secret coming?
3. What are we looking for and hastening in 2 Peter 3:12–13: the beginning of the Tribulation or the end of the age?
4. What is the reason to live godly lives in verse 14—a pre-Tribulational Rapture or the end of this age?

The expression “the Day of the Lord” comes from the biblical prophets who warned of sudden destruction for the nations that oppose God (see Isaiah 13:6, 9; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:14–18).⁶ It will be preceded by the sun turning to darkness and the moon into blood (see Joel 2:31; 3:14–15; Acts 2:20). It will be the time of Armageddon (see Revelation 16:14, 16), the Day of Judgment (see Isaiah 2:12; Zephaniah 1:15; Romans 2:5), a day that Peter identifies with the burning of the heavens and earth (see 2 Peter 3:7; cf. 2:9; Matthew 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36; 1 John 4:17).

Yet *this* is the day that will come like a thief in the night, also in 1 Thessalonians (see 5:2), a day that Paul also identifies with the *sudden* destruction of the wicked (see verse 3). Believers, by contrast, are expected to be *ready* for that day (see verses 4–8)! That is why, when the wicked people will experience consuming wrath, we believers instead will experience final salvation in that day (see verse 9).

In his next letter to the Thessalonians, Paul insists that this same Day of the Lord will not come until the apostasy and man of lawlessness come first (see 2 Thessalonians 2:2–3). Paul regards this day as the day of God's judgment, the Day of the Lord Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14). (Contrary to some interpreters, Paul identifies the day of Jesus with the Day of the Lord; Jesus is, after all, Lord, and Paul is affirming Jesus' deity in these passages.)

In the gospels, Jesus Himself emphasizes the unexpectedness of His return, warning that He will come as a thief (see Matthew 24:43) and that no one knows the time of His return (see Matthew 24:36). Yet the context of these passages never identifies any coming before the Tribulation; these passages speak only of His coming afterward. Thus His coming will be visible, like lightning from one end of the sky to the other (see Matthew 24:27); it happens after the Tribulation, and after the stars will fall from the sky (see verse 29). That is when the Son of man will appear on the clouds to gather His chosen from throughout the world (see Matthew 24:30–31; cf. Mark 13:26–27). It will be a time of sudden destruction (see Matthew 24:39). Despite considerable detail about the end, nowhere in the context is there any suggestion of a coming or gathering before the Tribulation.

In Revelation, Jesus promises to come like a thief (see Revelation 16:15). Granted that this is a parenthetical statement, it is interesting where it appears: not before a record of the Tribulation, but before Armageddon (see verse 16). Revelation swiftly narrates the catastrophic end of the age afterward, as mountains and islands are removed and the nations' cities collapse (see verses 17–21).

What about concerns that once the Tribulation begins one could simply count down seven years until the end? The period is more accurately depicted as three and a half years, but in any case the days are shortened (see Matthew 24:22). Moreover, there have been multiple tribulations (e.g., Acts 14:22; Hebrews 10:33), antichrist figures (1 John 2:18), and even abominations of desolation in history (e.g., Jeremiah 7:10–15, 30; Ezekiel 5:11–14; Daniel 9:2; 11:31). Our Lord said that no one knows the day nor the hour, including Himself at that time; certainly the devil does not know, so he must always have an antichrist in waiting, whether Nero, Hitler, Stalin or others. “You've heard that an antichrist is coming,” John observed, “but even now there are many antichrists” (1 John 2:18). The spirit of antichrist has been in the world for a long time.

In any case, the only coming whose hour is said to be unknown is the only return of the Lord that the Bible mentions: His coming at the end, after all tribulation. So the Bible is explicit that we *cannot* count down to the time of the end. Perhaps it would have been easier to calculate had it been marked by a Rapture seven years earlier, but the Bible does not provide such a marker.

3. Noah and Lot (Matthew 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–30)

One argument requires little discussion here, in part because Michael has already addressed it among Old Testament passages. This argument is that Jesus will come at a time when the world is oblivious, delivering His people from

the Tribulation just as God delivered Noah and his family from the Flood, or Lot from Sodom (see Matthew 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–30). The problem with this analogy is that it suggests the opposite of the pre-Tribulational position. Noah’s generation and Lot’s city both faced unexpected and sudden *destruction*, not several years of tribulation. The New Testament elsewhere applies these analogies this way explicitly: God will spare the righteous from the destruction of the wicked in the Day of Judgment (see 2 Peter 2:5–9).

4. Taken Away (Matthew 24:40–41; Luke 17:34–35)

The analogy from which the LEFT BEHIND novels get their name is based on part of the same context as the preceding argument, on texts about one being taken and another being left (see Matthew 24:40–41; Luke 17:34–35). The problem again is context: in Matthew, this mention of taking directly follows the mention of the *wicked* being taken away to *judgment* (see Matthew 24:39). The Greek terms for “taking away” differ, but if one must interpret the taking based on context, this taking to judgment is the closest idea in the context. Even if this were not the case, though, the context is referring, as just mentioned, to sudden destruction, not to a Great Tribulation.

What about the context in Luke? When Jesus speaks of one being taken and another being left, the disciples ask, “Where, Lord?” That is, Where will they be taken? Jesus’ answer is that they will be taken, not to where His chosen are gathered, but to where the vultures gather around corpses (see Luke 17:37). (Luke’s Greek term for “body” here is neutral, but the parallel passage in Matthew 24:28 explicitly understands the body as a corpse.) This was a familiar depiction of the fate of the wicked nations gathered against God (see Ezekiel 39:4, 17–20). It is also elaborated upon in Revelation (see Revelation 19:17, 21). I certainly *hope* this is not the Rapture!

5. Pray That You May Escape (Luke 21:36)

Some have cited Luke 21:36 to support a Rapture before the Tribulation: “But be alert, praying at every time that you may have strength to escape all these things about to happen, and to stand before the Son of man.” Both the wording and the context offer serious obstacles against understanding this as a promise of escaping the Great Tribulation. First, the Greek text suggests “having strength” or “overcoming” to escape these things, so to “stand” before the Son of man might mean to persevere for Him. Luke elsewhere uses the same term translated “escape” to refer to physically fleeing (see Acts 16:27; 19:16) and in this context uses a related term for fleeing into the mountains to escape the suffering coming to Jerusalem (see Luke 21:21).

Nevertheless, it is possible that Jesus speaks simply of strength to endure until He comes and preserves His people from global judgment. If so, however, *when* does He remove them? Before Jerusalem’s suffering, or before the coming of His Kingdom that destroys the kingdoms of the earth?

This brings us to our second observation about this passage; context rules out a pre-Tribulational Rapture. Judeans who survived the traumatic fall of Jerusalem were taken prisoner and enslaved among the nations (see Luke 21:24); this happened in the year 70. Gentiles would continue to trample Jerusalem until the end of the times of the Gentiles (see verse 24). At a time of dramatic signs in the sun, moon and stars (see verses 25–26; compare Mark 13:24; Acts 2:20), the terrified nations will witness the Son of man coming in a cloud (see Luke 21:27). “When these events start occurring,” Jesus warns, “your redemption is drawing near” (verse 28); in the same way, when the signs are evident, “the kingdom of God is near” (verse 31). Jesus did not come back soon after Jerusalem’s fall, but He will come. Yet the only coming specified in this context is His coming visible to the nations.

Some argue, “Ah, but these verses address the redemption of Jerusalem, whereas verse 36 addresses the Church.” Those who argue in this way are deliberately reading their own theory into the text. Why should the “you” in Luke 21:36, the final verse of Jesus’ teaching here, suddenly mean something different from the “you” in verses 28, 30–31 or 34? If one does not read one’s view into the text, the context suggests just the opposite. Jesus warns His followers to be vigilant not only in verse 36 but already in verse 34. There He warns us not to be distracted by life’s issues and so let that time come on us unexpectedly (see verse 34), “for it will rush suddenly on everyone who lives on the face of the whole world” (verses 34–35). In context, this may refer to Jesus’ Kingdom (see verse 31).

Alternatively, it may refer to the fall of Jerusalem and escaping and standing firm (see Luke 21:34–36); the best way to translate verse 19 may well be, “By your endurance you will preserve your lives.” This interpretation would fit Luke’s focus on the events that would occur within a generation of Jesus speaking of them (see verse 32). History does tell us that the Jewish believers of that time, following Jesus’ teaching and encouraged by Christian prophets, did escape Jerusalem. But they did so on foot, not by a Rapture. That is, whether one applies this passage to the end

(see verses 27–28) or to the fall of Jerusalem (see verses 20–24), it does not speak of a Rapture before the Tribulation.

Nothing in the context here suggests a Rapture before the future Tribulation; one can find it here only by reading one's prior assumptions into the passage. Those prior assumptions might possibly seem justifiable if other passages clearly supported them, but as we shall continue to see, other passages likewise can be interpreted that way only if assumptions are read into them. Although many texts depict Jesus returning after the Tribulation, there is not a single text that explicitly depicts His coming beforehand.

6. Kept from the Hour of Testing (Revelation 3:10)

One of the best possible arguments for pre-Tribulationism, I believe, is Revelation 3:10:

Because you have kept [observed, obeyed] the message about my endurance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come on the face of the whole inhabited world, to test those who live on the face of the earth.

The normal pre-Tribulationist assumption is that Jesus will keep believers, like those in the church of Philadelphia, from going through the Great Tribulation.

Nevertheless, this argument quickly runs into problems. What is the hour of testing? And in what way are they kept from it? Elsewhere in Revelation (perhaps 17:12), the "hour" might refer to a brief period near the end, but more often seems to refer to the very end (see Revelation 11:13; 14:7, 15; 18:10, 17, 19); that is the case in this context in verse 3. Here, being kept from that hour might simply mean being spared the final judgment. The one other reference to believers being tested could, by contrast, refer to suffering for Christ in this age (see Revelation 2:10).

Thus we must examine the phrase "keep from." Does "keep from" mean "prevent one from being present during"? That interpretation is not impossible, but can it not equally mean "protect from while present"? The phrase is not a common one elsewhere in biblical Greek or other Jewish sources; it appears here because it plays on the image in the same verse of "keeping" God's message. "Keeping" a message is how this Greek verb translated "keep" functions in its other occurrences in Revelation (see Revelation 1:3; 2:26; 3:3, 8; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15; 22:7, 9).

There is, however, one other New Testament use of the Greek phrase translated here as "keep from," and that one other passage uses it to mean "protect from." This, too, is John recording words of Jesus: "I am not praying that you take them out of the world, but rather that you keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). So the wording definitely does not have to mean "take out of."

When we expand this query to the larger context of the book of Revelation as a whole, the pre-Tribulationist interpretation becomes even more problematic. Nowhere in Revelation do we read of believers taken alive from the earth; nowhere do we read of them being raptured before the Tribulation; nowhere do we read of Jesus coming before the Tribulation. Instead, we see some believers protected from judgments (see Revelation 7:3; 9:4) but suffering in the world at the hands of their enemies (see Revelation 12:11; 13:7). These believers, like those in Philadelphia, "keep" God's message (see Revelation 12:17).

In Revelation 3:10 Jesus addresses a church that has been facing hardship with a little strength, keeping the word of His endurance; He goes on to warn them to continue to hold fast to what they have. Jesus did not preserve the Philadelphian church from eventual extinction; but as long as they persevered, He preserved them, for He is faithful.

7. Come up Here! (Revelation 4:1)

Some have used Revelation 4:1 to argue for a pre-Tribulationist Rapture. Here, after the letters to the seven churches and a couple of chapters before the series of judgments, a trumpet-like voice says, "Come up here." Those who argue for a pre-Tribulationist Rapture here normally admit that the voice is merely speaking to John, but point out that if there is any pre-Tribulationist catching up in Revelation, it must be here, and so John functions as a "type" of the Church being raptured before the Tribulation.

Most observers would not regard this as a very strong argument. Types can be quite elastic, used to argue almost anything unless we use careful controls (such as clear patterns or biblical precedent). Further, why would John become a type of the Church only here? John is told to "Come here" also in Revelation 17:1 and 21:9 so that, as in 4:1, he could be shown something. The voice like a trumpet also spoke to him in Revelation 1:10. No one understands any of these other passages as a type of the Rapture. When John speaks in the first person elsewhere, he

refers to himself: in Revelation 1:9–13, 17, and repeatedly in 4:2–4; 5:1–4, 6, 11, 13; 6:1–9, 12; 7:1, 4, 9, 14, and so forth.

Pre-Tribulational interpreters usually insist on interpreting passages more literally. Why would some of them construe Revelation 4:1 as a type of the Rapture and not these other passages? Presumably because if one wants to have the Church taken up before the Tribulation passages, this is the only possible place to find it. In the rest of Revelation, there is no example of the Church being taken up, or of a coming before the Tribulation or the like. (Jesus' coming is promised in 1:7, but this is a coming that "every eye" will see, including His enemies!)

8. Why No Church on Earth in Revelation?

Related to the previous argument, some contend that the Church must be taken from the earth before the Tribulation because the title *church* appears nowhere in Revelation after chapter 3. But churches are mentioned so much beforehand not because John is narrating something about the present Church age but because he includes prophetic letters to seven first-century churches before narrating the following visions. (That is why churches are also mentioned later in 22:16, not because these churches will all exist again in the New Jerusalem.) We should allegorize the seven churches of these letters no more than we allegorize Corinth or Philippi in Paul's letters. (It makes sense to treat many images in the apocalyptic parts of Revelation as symbols, but we do not ordinarily understand addressees of letters in this way without good reason.)

Those who argue that the term *church* does not appear by that name on earth during the descriptions of the Tribulation fail to note that it also does not appear by that name in heaven. Certainly it is nowhere described as taken away. Yet the believers are called "saints" (as translated in the KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV) or "God's people" (in the NIV) thirteen times after the letters to the churches—whether on earth (usually) or in heaven (possibly Revelation 5:8; 8:3–4). These are also God's servants (see Revelation 11:18), the people to whom Revelation is addressed (see 1:1; 22:6), who will be with Him in the New Jerusalem (see 22:3). The fact is that believers remain on earth, where they are persecuted, and Revelation nowhere offers any suggestion that these believers differ in kind from other believers through history, just as it nowhere offers any indication of previous believers being raptured.

Some pre-Tribulationalists argue that since these believers keep God's commandments as well as their testimony about Jesus (see Revelation 12:17; 14:12) they must be only Jewish believers, but in John's other writings *all* believers keep God's commandments (see John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 2:3–4; 3:22, 24; 5:2–3; 2 John 6).

If one simply reads Revelation without deliberately applying a pre-Tribulational lens, it is clear that the Lord's return is not narrated before chapter 19, and that is when He comes to judge the nations. No taking out of believers appears before this. There are saints in heaven, but it is not clear that they have bodies (see Revelation 6:9). This book is not focusing on the millennial question, but if one reads Revelation premillennially, as all pre-Tribulationalists do, no resurrection of the saints appears before the first resurrection. That first resurrection appears in Revelation 20:4–5, where it contrasts with the second death. Since those resurrected there include those beheaded for not worshiping the Beast (see verse 4), it seems a bit late for a pre-Tribulational Rapture.

9. The Marriage Supper (Revelation 19:9)

Some have argued that believers must be raptured before the Tribulation so that they can participate in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb during the Tribulation. Yet no text actually says that we eat with Christ during the Tribulation. On the contrary, it is only as Jesus is about to return to judge the earth in Revelation 19:11–16 that the Marriage Supper of the Lamb has come and the Bride has made herself ready (see verse 7). Such announcements about what "has come" can precede the event (see Revelation 14:7, 15). If the context tells us anything about the timing, it certainly does not precede the Tribulation. This announcement follows celebration of evil Babylon's demise (see Revelation 19:1–4), precedes Christ's return and contrasts with the great supper of God in which the corpses of Christ's enemies are devoured by birds (see verse 21).

This is also what we would expect. Jewish people expected the Messianic banquet (cf. Isaiah 25:6–8) to begin with the consummation of God's Kingdom (cf. Luke 14:15). Jesus also spoke of eating and drinking with us "in the kingdom" (Mark 14:25; Luke 22:30) and of Gentile believers joining that banquet "in the kingdom" (Matthew 8:11; Luke 13:29). The banquet belongs not to the Tribulation but to the Kingdom, which pre-Tribulationalists normally associate with the Millennium.

10. Removing the Restrainer (2 Thessalonians 2:6–7)

Another argument for a pre-Tribulational Rapture is that it is the Church (or the Spirit in the Church) that restrains the man of lawlessness from appearing in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7. Interestingly, some pre-Tribulationists suggest that the man of lawlessness is revealed when he desecrates the temple (cf. verses 3–4; also Daniel 7:25; 8:11; 9:27; 11:36)—which occurs in the middle of their Tribulation rather than at the beginning or end. But there is no reason to quibble about such details as the length of the Tribulation when no argument for a coming before it is compelling.

This pre-Tribulational argument would become more plausible if the passage actually identified the removed restrainer as the Church (or the Spirit in the Church), but it does not. It speaks ambiguously about the restrainer, appealing to the Thessalonian believers' memory of what Paul explained to them when he was with them (see 2 Thessalonians 2:5). It might not even be safe for Paul to be more explicit in a letter, depending on what he means by the restrainer.

There are in fact a wide range of views (more than thirty) about what could restrain the man of lawlessness from being worshiped on the site of the Temple. If Paul speaks politically, he could speak of Judean strength; the Temple would be desecrated only once Judean resistance was crushed. (After this, Jerusalemites faced a new exile; cf. Luke 21:24; perhaps Revelation 12:6.) If he speaks spiritually, some suggest that he refers to Michael, the guardian angel of Israel who would stand, perhaps meaning "out of the way," when Israel would face its final tribulation before the raising of the dead (Daniel 12:1). Some think that the restrainer is simply God's restraining hand.

Since the phrase "taken out of the way" can also be rendered literally, "come forth from the midst," it might refer to the presence of God leaving the sanctuary, as happened before the Temple's destruction in an earlier era (see Ezekiel 10:4, 18; 11:23). (This may have already occurred in at least one sense, however, at Jesus' death; see Mark 15:38.) It might also refer to the community of believers in Jerusalem leaving when they recognize that judgment is at hand, thus coming "out of the midst" of the city (cf. Luke 21:21, which uses the same term for "midst"). Perhaps their prayers had prevented the earlier attempt of an evil emperor to install his image in the Temple (the emperor Gaius Caligula, in the 40s). If Paul refers to believers in Jerusalem, it might be indiscreet to say so in writing, given the Roman penchant for suspecting treason (and circumstances in Thessalonica, cf. Acts 17:7).

Since the restrainer holds back the full revelation of the man of lawlessness (see 2 Thessalonians 2:7), maybe it refers to respect for the Law, the Torah (or perhaps even for customs that respect morality). Perhaps it could refer to the Church in a different sense—the organized Church being driven underground, or Christendom (or morally related religion in general) losing all public influence.

If, by contrast, Paul were speaking of the Church being removed from the earth, one would have to ask how and why these saints restrain the man of lawlessness yet the saints elsewhere depicted during the Tribulation do not do so (see Revelation 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24). If Paul were speaking of the Spirit in the Church, one must ask how the saints in the Tribulation are converted and testify for God without the Spirit, and how there can be prophets (see 11:10, 18; 16:6; 18:20, 24) without the Spirit. After all, the saints testify for Jesus (see 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 20:4), and the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy (see 19:10). (And if one argues from silence that the Spirit is not explicitly mentioned with these saints during the Tribulation, what is one to make of the lack of explicit association of the Spirit with them in the New Jerusalem? Admittedly, the river of life in Revelation 22:1 probably does imply this.)

In fact, the passage cannot speak of the Church (or the Spirit in the Church) being removed before the Tribulation, because the context of the passage explicitly indicates that we will not be gathered to Jesus before the man of lawlessness appears and is seated in the Temple (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4). If the passage refers to the Great Tribulation at all, it is certainly not speaking of believers being exempted from it. We will discuss the relevance of 2 Thessalonians 1–2 more fully in our arguments for a post-Tribulational gathering of believers below.

Conclusion to Pre-Tribulational Arguments

The pre-Tribulational arguments listed above share a common trait. In many cases the context of the passages cited makes the arguments indefensible; in some other cases, the arguments remain at best a possibility that could be used *if* other texts explicitly showed us that the pre-Tribulational doctrine was widely understood and taken for granted in the early Church.

Yet no text by itself indicates a pre-Tribulational Rapture. By contrast, *many* texts announce Jesus' return *after* the Tribulation.

If someone were not taught about a pre-Tribulational Rapture, one would simply read the texts about Jesus' return as if every aspect of Jesus' return happened essentially at once: Jesus gathers His followers to Himself and judges

the world. No one would assume a seven- (or three-and-a-half-) year gap between these events.

Post-Tribulational Passages

Jesus Returns for His Followers Only after the Tribulation

The Bible speaks of our resurrection on one “last day,” the triumph over one “last enemy” (death), our resurrection at one “last trumpet,” one “first resurrection” and the like. The meaning of some of these passages is debatable, but on the surface, at least, such language makes it difficult to find a gap between Jesus’ coming for His followers and Jesus’ coming to judge the world, especially since we lack explicit evidence for such a gap.

For example, the resurrection will be on the “last day” (see John 6:39–44, 54); this phrase at least makes it seem as though we receive our new bodies at the very end of the age. Perhaps it even alludes to Daniel 12, the most explicit Old Testament passage about the future resurrection, which also connects that resurrection to “eternal life” (see verses 1–2). An angel promises Daniel that he will be raised “at the end of the age” (verse 13 NASB), apparently after a period of tribulation (see verses 6–12). Literally, he will be raised at the “end of the days” (verse 13, many versions), presumably the “days” of tribulation already mentioned in Daniel 12:11–12.¹

Granted that the text may be speaking in general terms, if our being raised defeats death as the “last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26; cf. verses 20–23), how can the Antichrist be a still later enemy than death? Granted that Paul cannot expect the Corinthians to think of the trumpets in Revelation when he speaks of Jesus raising us at the “last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:52), he certainly can be alluding to Jesus speaking of gathering His people with a trumpet (later recorded in Matthew 24:31). Yet that gathering explicitly happens at a public appearing after the Tribulation (Matthew 24:29), and Paul’s mention of a “last” trumpet precludes him from associating our resurrection with any earlier ones.

Interpreters divide over the meaning of the “first resurrection” (see Revelation 20:5–6), but those who envision it as a bodily resurrection at the beginning of a future thousand years should not envision believers being resurrected *before* the *first* resurrection.

Supporters of a pre-Tribulational Rapture typically dismiss the relevance of such arguments, but an examination of more detailed passages reinforces this point.

1. Matthew 24

Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 overlap considerably. Because Matthew is one of the fuller and clearer accounts, I focus my comments there, making reference to the other passages only where needed.

In Matthew 24:3, Jesus’ disciples ask two questions: (1) When will the Temple be destroyed? (“These things” in “When will these things happen?” refers back to Jesus’ prediction of the Temple’s destruction in verse 2; cf. Matthew 23:38). (2) What will be the sign of Your coming and of the completion of the age? (Note that the second question grammatically involves a single “sign” that predicts both Jesus’ coming and the end of the age; in 24:30, that “sign” occurs at His public, post-Tribulational appearing.)

Part of Jesus’ answer to this twofold question thus deals with the then-future destruction of the Temple (certainly including at least Matthew 24:15–20), and part of it deals with Jesus’ coming (*parousia*; explicitly including at least Matthew 24:27, 37, 39). Some reasonably coordinate the passage’s two time frames with these two answers: the Temple’s destruction will come within a generation (see verse 34), i.e., by the year 70, whereas no one knows the timing of Jesus’ return (see verse 36).

What would be the “sign” of Jesus’ coming? Jesus dismisses the direct relevance of some sorts of disasters that His contemporaries considered signs of the end (see Matthew 24:6–8), and expressly identifies only one sign: “the sign of the Son of man will appear in heaven,” just before Jesus comes on the clouds (see verse 30). In other words, those who want to wait for a sign of the end before repenting will wait until it is too late.

The coming (*parousia*) depicted in Matthew 24 is no secret removal of believers; it will be as visible as lightning, from one end of the sky to the other (see Matthew 24:27). The mention of the corpse and vultures in verse 28 may

suggest the final battle (cf. Ezekiel 39:17–20). In Matthew 24:30, the peoples of the world will witness Jesus’ glorious coming. All of this happens “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (verse 29).

At this point many pre-Tribulationists will say: “This is fine. We don’t deny that Jesus returns after the Tribulation, as is depicted here. We simply believe that He *also* comes *before* the Tribulation, to take His saints out.” Interestingly, here, as elsewhere, no such before-the-Tribulation coming appears in the text’s chronology. Here, as elsewhere, no one would think of it happening if they had not been taught to assume it.

For when Jesus comes with clouds after tribulation in Matthew 24:30, He also gathers His chosen ones with the sound of a trumpet in verse 31. The only gathering of the righteous in this passage appears after the Tribulation. Ah, many pre-Tribulationists will argue: “This explicit gathering is the gathering of Israel; the pre-Tribulation gathering of believers happens not to appear in this passage.” Is this, however, the most obvious understanding of “chosen ones” here (cf. Matthew 22:14; 24:22, 24)? Early Christians usually understood this term with respect to themselves (see Romans 8:33; Colossians 3:12; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1).

Moreover, it seems that this is the word of the Lord to which Paul refers in his classic Rapture passage. He speaks of believers being gathered to Jesus with the sound of a trumpet when Jesus comes in the clouds (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 he uses the term *parousia* for this coming just as it is used in Matthew 24. That is, Paul seems to interpret this explicitly post-Tribulation gathering as the “Rapture” of believers.

Some other points in the passage repeat what we noted earlier when answering pre-Tribulation arguments. Paul elsewhere connects our bodily resurrection with the “last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:52). Yet if Paul knows that Jesus spoke of an end-time gathering at a trumpet after the Tribulation (as appears in Matthew 24:31), why would he refer to an *earlier* end-time trumpet gathering as the *last* one? Paul surely does not expect any antichrists or tribulations after this last trumpet, for the resurrection that it signals coincides with the decommissioning of death, which is the “last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26). If our resurrection defeats the *last* enemy, how can Paul envision any enemies after that one?

Returning for the moment to Matthew 24: Although pre-Tribulationists often insist that in order for it to be unknown, the time of Jesus’ coming must precede the Tribulation, the unknown time in Matthew 24:36 presumably must refer to the same coming that Jesus has just been describing in verses 30–31. He goes on to compare this coming (*parousia*) with the flood of Noah’s day (see verses 37–39), which produced not an extended period of torment (comparable to the Great Tribulation) but *sudden destruction*. The wicked were taken by surprise (see verse 38) but then were all “taken away” (see verse 39), as will happen also at Jesus’ “coming” (*parousia*).

Ignoring the context, some find in Matthew 24:40–41 a pre-Tribulation Rapture: Where there are two in the field or at the mill, one will be taken and the other left. Yet in context, those being “taken” are those taken to sudden destruction (see 24:39; cf. Matthew 13:41–42)! The parallel passage in Luke 17:34–35 also follows descriptions of sudden destruction at the Flood and for Sodom. Nevertheless, the disciples request clarification. Jesus has said that one would be taken, so the disciples ask, “Where, Lord?” Jesus replies enigmatically: “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (Luke 17:37 *ESV*). Far from being a Rapture of the righteous, this is judgment on the wicked.

Jesus’ sudden and unexpected coming will be like a thief in the night (see Matthew 24:43–44). Jesus goes on to connect (note “then” or “therefore” in verse 45) this coming like a thief with the destruction of disobedient servants (see verse 51). Other early Christians also applied Jesus’ “thief in the night” warning to sudden destruction at the end of the age (see 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15–16). The parables of Matthew 25 also go on to speak of the Day of Judgment, which separates those destined for eternal punishment from those destined for eternal life (see verses 12, 30 and especially 46).

Nowhere does Matthew 24 speak of any coming except Jesus’ coming after the Tribulation. Some pre-Tribulationists concede this, contending that Matthew 24 is only for Israel. But if Jesus’ coming like a thief and in the clouds is only for Israel, why should anyone insist that these same images elsewhere must depict a *distinct* pre-Tribulation coming for the Church?

2. First Thessalonians 4–5

First Thessalonians 4:15–17 is the classic Rapture passage, the one passage that speaks of us being caught up in the air to meet the Lord. Yet it also belongs to a context that refers to the “day of the Lord” and “sudden destruction” for God’s enemies, which should come only at the *end* of the Tribulation. Worse yet for pre-Tribulationism, Paul’s wording alludes to Jesus’ own teaching about His return after the Tribulation!

Pre-Tribulationists sometimes contrast Jesus coming *for* His saints at the Rapture and Him coming *with* His saints at the end of the Tribulation. This argument insists that He cannot come with them and for them at the same

time. Thus 1 Thessalonians 3:13 speaks of His coming (*parousia*) “with all His consecrated ones” (saints; evoking the public Day of Judgment in Zechariah 14:5). But so does this letter’s clear Rapture passage, one verse before the verses often cited. In 1 Thessalonians 4:14, God will bring with Jesus those who have already died; only after these dead are resurrected, Paul explains, will those who are alive be caught up to meet Him in the air (see verses 15–17). This event, like the one in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, Paul calls the *parousia* (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15). Why then should we see them as different events? And in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, Paul prays for believers to remain blameless in God’s sight until this coming with the saints; why would he need to pray for that if he expected the believers to be in heaven for seven years before that coming?

At best, one could try to read pre-Tribulationism into Paul’s writings by saying, “Well, he believed in pre-Tribulationism, therefore he just takes for granted that his audience knew to interpret him that way.” But if that were the case, why does he clarify so many other end-time details but never clarify this one? He never says that the Church will be raptured before the Tribulation, and in fact always speaks of the “Rapture”/resurrection of believers and Jesus’ Second Coming interchangeably.

Moreover, arguing that maybe Paul believed something that he does not state simply concedes that one lacks any evidence that he believed it. One can argue almost anything by making loose inferences (“If A, then B”), but what does the Bible actually say? It is clear that Jesus will come once more at the end of the age—and it is clear about only one such coming—no stages are mentioned. (One could argue that we have a revelation that Paul lacked. But then one should admit that one has a postbiblical teaching, and one still must explain the explicit passages that pre-Tribulationism seems to contradict.)

Jesus’ Public Coming

Paul speaks of Christ’s coming (*parousia*) in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17. He expounds on the subject “by the word of the Lord,” which could mean Paul’s own prophecy, but given its overlap with Jesus’ teaching Paul probably refers instead to Jesus’ own teaching. This passage refers to believers being caught up in the air to meet the Lord and is thus the passage on which the specific concept of the Rapture (the catching up) is based.

Paul declares in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 that the dead in Christ will be raised when the Lord descends from heaven. Pre-Tribulationists will normally say that Christ descends here only to meet believers and then returns to heaven; in contrast to Christ’s coming after the Tribulation, they say, He does not descend all the way to earth. Interestingly, however, every other New Testament use of this expression “descend from heaven” that we can test from context refers to a descent all the way to the earth (see Matthew 28:2; Luke 9:54; John 1:32, 51; 3:13; 6:33, 38, 41, 50–51, 58; Acts 11:5; Revelation 10:1–2; 13:13; 16:21; 20:9, 21:2). Waiting for Jesus to come “from heaven” (see Philippians 3:20; 1 Thessalonians 1:10) means not simply His coming *in* heaven, but His coming *from* heaven. (Ancient readers contrasted “heaven” and “earth”; today we realize that earth is a lot smaller than heaven—i.e., everything that is not earth. But since all people except occasional astronauts live on earth, we still get the basic idea.²)

If the extent of Jesus’ descent might be debated, the sound effects are much harder to dispute. Paul does not depict a secret call to believers that the world cannot hear. He speaks of a shout and God’s trumpet. When shouts were conjoined with trumpets in ancient sources, the shouts were typically battle cries. Moreover, trumpets and shouts are the antithesis of secret signals; this is certainly no secret coming or secret Rapture; nor does any other passage depict His coming as secretive instead of public.

When we are “caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, it is to “meet” the Lord in the air. What does it mean to “meet” the descending Lord? The term used here for “meeting” was sometimes conjoined with *parousia* (coming). When an important personage was coming to a city (in a *parousia*), a delegation from the city would go out to “meet” him and then escort him on his way into the city. That is, the term used here for “meeting” most often means meeting someone on his or her way and then accompanying that person the rest of the way. That is also its sense in its other New Testament uses (see Matthew 25:6; Acts 28:15). Jesus does not meet us on our way up to heaven; rather, we meet Him on His way down to rule the earth.

That idea is consistent with the rest of Scripture as well. Scripture says that Jesus remains in heaven until the time of restoration, and until His enemies are all subjected, including the last enemy, death (Acts 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:25–26; Hebrews 1:13). That is the time in which He will return to rapture us—and to rule the world.

Again, 1 Thessalonians already spoke of Jesus’ coming in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, when He comes “with His saints” or “with His holy ones.” That language clearly echoes Zechariah 14:5, which belongs to a context in which the Lord stands on the Mount of Olives and judges the nations gathered against His people (see Zechariah 14:1–5). The same passage is echoed in Acts 1, predicting Jesus’ return just as He departed, presumably both in clouds and at the Mount of Olives (see Acts 1:9–12), probably at the coming of His Kingdom (see verses 6–7). First

Thessalonians 3:13 refers to Jesus coming in His Kingdom; why would the Thessalonian believers assume that Paul uses the term differently in 4:15 in his same letter to them?

Echoing Jesus

Some pre-Tributionalists want to distinguish this coming from Christ’s coming after the Tribulation because this one is “in the clouds” (see 1 Thessalonians 4:17) whereas His post-Tribulation one will include Him touching down to the earth. But clouds do appear at Jesus’ post-Tribulation coming to the earth (see Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7)—which is, as we keep reiterating, the *only* future coming explicit in the New Testament. As for Jesus touching down on earth, does a writer have to mention every feature of an event every time the writer mentions it? Making that a requirement would be an argument from silence.

The following context in 1 Thessalonians warns that we do not know the times or seasons (see 1 Thessalonians 5:1), a warning that Jesus originally offered concerning the timing of Israel’s restoration (see Acts 1:7). It speaks of sudden destruction for the unprepared wicked (see 1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Paul is still apparently interpreting Jesus’ teaching: Too many parallels exist to dismiss these as coincidence, in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians.³ These parallels are crucial in showing that, contrary to what skeptics say, Jesus’ teachings were preserved very early: They influenced some of the earliest New Testament writings within twenty years of Jesus’ public ministry. Yet they also reveal that Paul applied Jesus’ teachings about His post-Tribulation coming to the gathering of believers.

Themes	Jesus’ teachings in the gospels or elsewhere	1 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians
Temple desecrated	Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14	—	2:4
False prophets	Matthew 24:5, 11, 24; Mark 13:6	—	2:9
False prophets’ signs	Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22	—	2:9
Future/end-time “distress”	Matthew 24:21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24	3:3	1:4, 6
Birth pangs	Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8	5:3 (though probably applied differently)	—
Lawlessness	Matthew 24:12	—	2:3, 7–8
Apostasy	Matthew 24:10, 12; Mark 13:12	— (although cf. Paul’s concern in 1 Thessalonians 3:5)	Possibly 2:3 (though this more likely is part of the lawlessness)
<i>Parousia</i>	Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39	4:15 (cf. 2:19; 3:13; 5:23)	2:1, 8 (cf. 2:9)
Coming on clouds	Matthew 24:30; cf. 26:64; Mark 13:26; cf. 14:62	4:17	—
Trumpet for gathering	Matthew 24:31	4:16 (see also 1 Corinthians 15:52)	—
Gathering	Matthew 24:31; Mark 13:27	4:15–17	2:1
Unknown time	Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32	5:1–2	—
Unknown “times and seasons”	Acts 1:7	5:2	—
Unexpected destruction for the wicked	Matthew 24:38–41; Luke 17:26–30, 34–35	5:3	—
Coming like a thief in the night	Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39	5:2–4 (cf. 2 Peter 3:10)	—
Stay alert (in explicitly future/end-time context)	Matthew 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:33–37; Luke 12:37–38; 21:36	5:6	—
The ungodly asleep	Mark 13:36	5:7	—

3. Second Thessalonians 1:5–2:13

Here Paul writes of the future reward for believers’ present sufferings and notes that “God acts justly to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to repay relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well” (2 Thessalonians 1:6–7). He then specifies when this event will occur: “when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His powerful angels in flaming fire, meting out punishment to those who don’t obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And

these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from His powerful glory” (2 Thessalonians 1:7–9).

That is, the righteous receive rest from suffering at the same time that the wicked receive the verdict of eternal destruction. And then he specifies the time of rest and judgment once more. The wicked face eternal destruction “when He comes to be glorified, on that day,” among those consecrated to Him (verse 10).

Note that, according to this passage, God repays both the wicked and righteous at the same time. We might suppose that this is merely a picture of the *general* time of the end, except that the context makes the unity of the time even more explicit.

Antichrist before Rapture

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1, Paul defines his subject: Jesus’ coming and our gathering to Him. A single definite article in Greek connects these phrases, probably suggesting that Jesus’ coming and our gathering are the same event. Jesus’ coming (*parousia*) frames much of the section (verses 1, 8), making it clear that the coming involves not only our gathering (verse 1), but also the destruction of the wicked (verse 8), as suggested already in 1:6–10.

Paul warns the Thessalonian Christians not to be tricked into thinking that this promised “Day of the Lord” has come (2 Thessalonians 2:2). What does Paul mean by the “Day of the Lord”? Context suggests that he refers to Jesus’ coming and our gathering (see verse 1). Paul’s previous letter to the Thessalonians refers to this “Day of the Lord” as coming like a thief in the night (see 1 Thessalonians 5:2). In Paul’s letters, it is the day of reward that believers look to (see 2 Corinthians 1:14). It is the day of Jesus’ public revelation that believers await (see 1 Corinthians 1:7) and until which we trust the Lord to preserve us, to “the end” (see 1 Corinthians 1:7–8).

But in the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:3 and in light of the Old Testament it is also the day when God will destroy the wicked (see Isaiah 13:6, 9; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18–20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:17, 14). That is, it is the Day of Judgment (cf. Matthew 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:7; 1 John 4:17). Again, we see that the hope for the righteous appears at the same time as judgment for the wicked, not seven years before.

To ensure that the Thessalonians are not tricked into supposing that the Day of the Lord has come, Paul lists two events that must precede it: (1) the apostasy/rebellion; and (2) the revelation of the man of lawlessness (see 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4). Scholars differ as to whether the term *apostasia* refers to an apostasy of once godly people or a rebellion (matching lawlessness in the context). It could refer to anything from the falling away of many believers (see Matthew 24:10) to the Judean revolt of AD 66 that would climax in Romans worshiping the emperor on the site of the Temple in AD 70. The term means “defiance, breach of faith” and the like, and cannot signify, as a small minority of pre-Tribulationists have argued, the Church’s Rapture.

The other prerequisite for the Day of the Lord is that the man of lawlessness, the one destined for destruction, claims to be God and enthrones himself in God’s seat in the Temple. Here again there is some debate about the precise event in view. Roughly a decade after Jesus warned about an abomination of desolation in the Temple, Gaius Caligula, claiming to be divine, tried to set up his image in the Jerusalem Temple. Death cut his plans short, however, and Paul writes this letter perhaps less than a decade after Caligula’s death. A few years after Paul’s last surviving letter, however, Judea revolted against Rome and Rome ultimately destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Soldiers then offered sacrifice to Caesar as a god on the site of the Temple.

Does Paul refer to an event like this one, now already fulfilled, or to an event yet future, which this one merely portends? Perhaps in imitation of Jesus, this lawless one has his own revelation (see 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 8) and his own coming (see verse 9: *parousia*), along with signs and fake wonders (see verse 9). Some emperors did purport to do signs and wonders, and a couple of healings are associated with the very emperor honored at the site of the Temple when it was destroyed in AD 70. But 2 Thessalonians 2:9–11 sounds like a broader, full-scale deception with many signs. Thus, it may focus on a future lawless one, although he simply culminates the lawlessness already at work even in Paul’s day (see verse 7).

Whether the passage applies to a past or (more likely) future antichrist, however, there is certainly no warrant here for envisioning Christians gathering to Christ before the activity of the antichrist depicted in this passage; the gathering coincides with Christ’s coming to destroy the wicked (cf. verse 1). Pre-Tribulationists normally see a future antichrist here; yet this antichrist shows himself before the Rapture.

An Escape from (Post-) Tribulation?

Pre-Tribulationists find one opportunity for a pre-Tribulation Rapture in this passage: the restrainer that must first be removed in verses 6–7. Yet as noted in the previous chapter, there is a wide range of views concerning the

identity of the restrainer. Could the restrainer be Jewish resistance against this abomination, so long as ability to resist remained? Or could the restrainer be a spiritual power, such as Israel's guardian angel Michael standing aside to allow this judgment (see Daniel 12:1)?

There are some thirty major academic views about the identity of the restrainer (not including more contemporary guesses or possibilities, such as the United Nations or the power of some influential and at least nominally Christian countries). ("Taken out of the way" in verse 7 may refer to the restrainer, or, if referring to the man of lawlessness, may be translated, "come out of the midst.")

Paul may be reluctant to be more explicit in a letter to a persecuted church lest his concerns sound seditious; implying something negative about evil rulers could sound like treason and get Christians in Thessalonica in even more trouble. (After all, the trouble there started partly with accusations that Paul preached Jesus as a ruler who was a rival of the emperor, as we read in Acts 17:7.) Thus he simply refers the Thessalonians to information that he shared with them by word of mouth when he was among them (see 2 Thessalonians 2:5).

What then makes some pre-Tribulationists see the restrainer here specifically as the Church (or the Spirit within the Church)? This interpretation conveniently matches their inferences from other texts, though none of those other texts support their view any more plainly than this one does.

The pre-Tribulationist interpretation is, in fact, one of the few interpretations that explicitly *contradicts* this context. The context is clear that our gathering to Jesus (see verse 1) will not precede the revelation of this man of lawlessness (see verses 3–4), so we can hardly be raptured (and so gathered to Jesus) before the man of lawlessness is revealed. One could argue that the Church's voice or ability to restrain lawlessness is removed, but not that the Church itself is raptured.

Here is the timeline that emerges from 2 Thessalonians 1–2:

1. Whatever is restraining lawlessness can no longer do so.
2. Then the man of lawlessness is revealed, with signs and deceptive wonders.
3. Then Jesus comes, gathering His saints and giving them rest from affliction, while destroying the man of lawlessness and his followers.

This is plainly a post-Tribulationist timeline, not a pre-Tribulationist one.

4. Revelation

The book of Revelation apparently recounts Jesus' coming more than once. The two clearest descriptions follow, though only the second offers much detail. First, Jesus comes with clouds, and every eye and all peoples will see Him (see Revelation 1:7). Because everyone will see Him and people will respond with mourning, interpreters, whether pre-Tribulationist or not, usually apply this passage to Jesus' coming after the Tribulation. Second, in chapter 19, Jesus comes with the armies of heaven and a sword to strike the nations (see Revelation 19:11–16). The world's armies gather to war against Him and end up becoming a giant meal for vultures (see verses 17–21).

Despite its elaboration of tribulation, Christ's coming and the New Jerusalem, Revelation nowhere has anything close to a clear description of a pre-Tribulationist Rapture. As noted earlier, the closest example that some find is John being caught up to heaven with the sound of a trumpet in Revelation 4:1. But as noted before, this is simply John's vision; he hears the same sound in Revelation 1:10 and is invited to view other scenes in Revelation 17:1 and 21:9, but no one considers those raptures of the Church. The Spirit (Revelation 4:2) carries him away also in Revelation 17:3 and 21:10.

Those who use Revelation 4:1 as a type of the Rapture, so that John in this and exclusively this case represents the Church, do so because it is the only place where they can stick in a Rapture before Revelation begins talking about the Tribulation. Whereas depictions of Christ's coming after the Tribulation are explicit, Revelation really offers no depiction of any coming beforehand. In this, it remains consistent with the rest of Scripture.

What about the resurrection of believers? If Revelation depicts this experience at all, it does so in Revelation 20:4–5. Premillennialists and amillennialists differ in how they interpret the passage, but since all pre-Tribulationist are also premillennial, they take the resurrection here as literal and physical. This interpretation, however, challenges their own expectation. The passage promises resurrection for those who were beheaded for their testimony about Jesus, rejecting allegiance to the Beast, so it presumably follows the period of tribulation.

A pre-Tribulationist might object, "But this post-Tribulationist resurrection of believers mentioned in Revelation just happens to be in *addition* to a pre-Tribulationist resurrection of believers that just happens to never be explicitly mentioned." The problem is that the wording of this passage seems to explicitly exclude any earlier resurrection of

believers: This post-Tribulational resurrection of believers is expressly called “the first resurrection” (Revelation 20:5). How that leaves room for another resurrection before it seems difficult to fathom.

But of course, this fits the pattern of pre-Tribulational arguments: Pre-Tribulationalists are stuck with a post-Tribulational first resurrection, last trumpet resurrection, last-enemy/death-defeating resurrection, resurrection at the last day (John 6:39–54; 12:48) and so forth, all of which they must explain away on the basis of a hypothesis of a pre-Tribulational Rapture for which there are no explicit supporting texts. (The Father’s house and Jesus’ coming in John 14:2–3 also do not help the case, since in context they refer to Jesus bringing believers into the Father’s presence by His coming after His resurrection; see John 14:5–6, 18–20, 22–23, 28; 20:22.)

As I (Craig) learned early on while debating Jehovah’s Witnesses, any theological system can appear consistent from the inside. But we have reason to question any system that falls apart when one steps outside it to probe its evidence.

The only imminent hope that Revelation presents comes after the Tribulation.

PART

**Implications
for Us Today**

What Is the Tribulation?

In the New Testament, this present age is characterized by affliction (see 1 Thessalonians 3:3) and many antichrists (see 1 John 2:18). The Tribulation, then, is but an intensification of the satanic design that has corrupted the whole course of this age. The mystery of lawlessness may flower more fully later (see 2 Thessalonians 2:8–9), but it is already at work (see verse 7).

A few years before his passing, Billy Graham warned that the American church’s general “immunity to persecution . . . in the past two or three centuries is unusual.” Christians should get ready to face persecution here as Christians have had to endure it elsewhere.¹

When Are the Last Days?

When Christians speak of the Great Tribulation, they do not always mean the same thing. In fact, there may be different (but complementary) applications of the image of tribulation in different New Testament passages. Although there may be a special period of intense tribulation just before the end, some passages apply the image of end-time tribulation to believers’ experience throughout this age. Individual believers have suffered and been martyred all through history and many have learned from the examples in Revelation (e.g., overcoming by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony in Revelation 12:11). Sometimes the New Testament reminds us that we are *already* experiencing end-time tribulation, perhaps as a foreshadowing of the final one.

The New Testament seems to suggest a period of final, particularly intense birth pangs at the very end of the age (see 1 Thessalonians 5:3). Nevertheless, it also speaks of prior events as merely the beginning of birth pangs (see Matthew 24:6–8), which were already occurring even in the first century. Jesus said of those initial birth pangs, “that is not the end” (verse 6).

Jewish people also often spoke of the period of final sufferings as the “birth pangs” of the Messiah, that is, the suffering that would lead to the Messianic age. Thus, it is no surprise that Paul speaks of the entire creation groaning with birth pangs throughout the present age, preparing to birth the new creation (see Romans 8:22). Creation groans, we groan and God’s own Spirit groans (see verses 22–23, 26), yearning for this new creation, which will be birthed in connection with God’s children being raised in glory (see Romans 8:19–23).

The New Testament is often explicit that we are already in the last days. In Hebrews 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:20, Christ’s coming marks the last days. Peter also declared that the outpouring of God’s Spirit on the Day of Pentecost marked the last days (see Acts 2:17). The New Testament repeatedly speaks about the evils of the last days in contexts that show that the writers were referring to the time in which they were already living (see 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3). Although Paul expected a coming man of lawlessness, he recognized that the mystery of lawlessness was already at work (see 2 Thessalonians 2:7).

Not only were the first Christians already living in the last days but 1 John 2:18 goes so far as to declare, “We know that it is the last hour.” This is because, besides what John’s first audience had heard about a final, future Antichrist, there were already many antichrists (see 1 John 2:18).

When Is Revelation’s Tribulation?

Most important for understanding Revelation in particular is the question of how the book of Revelation portrays the period of tribulation. Daniel spoke of a period of three and a half years (see Daniel 9:24–27; 12:1, 11), but Jesus spoke of Daniel’s “abomination of desolation” (Daniel 11:31; 12:11) as something fulfilled within a generation of His teaching (see Matthew 24:15, 34; Mark 13:14, 30).

Within forty years of Jesus' teaching, Jerusalem was indeed surrounded by armies, its people carried off captive (see Luke 21:20–24) and its Temple destroyed. Luke says that this period will continue until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (see verse 24), which might mean until the full number of Gentiles has come in and the Jewish people as a whole turn to faith in Jesus the Messiah (see Romans 11:25–26).

Christian interpreters divide over whether the abomination of the Temple will be repeated in the future. (It seems to have happened more than once in the past; Daniel 11:31 seems to have happened in the second century BC, and Daniel 9:24–27 may have happened in the first century.) But the destruction that Jesus said fulfilled Daniel had already happened by the time Revelation was written. Revelation thus seems to look to something beyond AD 70.

Some interpreters suggest that Revelation is applying the image of tribulation differently, to depict the *kind* of time more than the length of time. Revelation elsewhere shows that the Lion of Judah (see Genesis 49:9–10) is a slain lamb (see Revelation 5:6) and reapplies other Old Testament images in light of their greater fulfillment in Christ. Plagues from Exodus now appear in more global forms in Revelation 8:7–9, 12; 9:7; and 16:2–4, 10. We do not interpret them as simply describing the plagues that already happened in Moses' day. Thus "the great city" is called Egypt—recipient of the plagues—but it is also called Sodom and the city where our Lord was crucified (see Revelation 11:8). Geographically, Egypt, Sodom and Jerusalem are not in identical locations nor are they geographically "the great city" Babylon (see Revelation 16:19; 18:10, 21).

Clearly Revelation reapplies some images from past events to events still unfolding or future in its own day. It should not surprise us if Revelation reapplies imagery from Daniel. Thus, for example, Daniel and his three friends were tested for ten days (see Daniel 1:12, 14); the church in Smyrna will likewise be tested for ten days, although with a different outcome (see Revelation 2:10). For that matter, Daniel's own prophecy of 490 years, from which the final three and a half years of tribulation come, was a prophetic reapplication of a shorter period of time (70 years) prophesied by Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10; Daniel 9:2, 24–27).

1,260 Days in Revelation 12

Whatever one thinks about the future Tribulation, virtually all Bible readers agree that periods of tribulation are not limited to a future seven-year period. This allows us to recognize that different passages might refer to different times, even if such times are somehow related in God's plan.

The most critical question for Revelation 12 is what Revelation 12 itself says. Almost everyone agrees that in verse 5, the person caught up to God and His throne to rule the nations with an iron scepter is Jesus. Here are the events that immediately follow in verse 6: "Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, where they would supply her food for 1,260 days." The 1,260 days seem to begin with Jesus' exaltation. From the cosmic standpoint, this event also seems to coincide with Satan's expulsion from heaven (see verse 9). With Christ now at God's right hand, Satan can no longer accuse us before God (see verse 10). Although the fullness of salvation and God's Kingdom will come at Christ's return, verse 10 declares that it has already come in Christ's exaltation.

Revelation seems to view the entire present age through the lens of the future Tribulation. This need not mean that there is no intensification of tribulation at the end. At the very least, 2 Thessalonians 2:8–12 suggests such a future intensification, led by a revolt against Christ and against the moral demands of the God of heaven. Whether we envision this age through the prism of the final Tribulation or the final Tribulation as merely an intensification of this age, both reflect the same basic DNA.

Revelation 12 does suggest that tribulation is a normal experience for believers in this age. When that is not our experience: Praise God! There is no reason to complain about unexpected blessings! But when it is our experience, we should not be surprised (see 1 Peter 4:12). Revelation reminds us of what Jesus already told us: In this world we shall have tribulation, but Jesus has already overcome the world (see John 16:33).

Christians believe that the promised Messianic King who is yet to come has already come once. His resurrection is the firstfruits of our future resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23), and even though His Kingdom awaits full consummation, it is already at work among us (see Mark 4:31–32; Matthew 13:31–33; Luke 13:19–21). Jesus is already Lord, seated at the Father's right hand until His enemies become His footstool at His return (see Acts 2:33–35; Hebrews 1:13; 10:12–13).

Thus, we recognize something special about the present time, something that Jesus' contemporaries assigned to the future. The last days, the end time, have already invaded history. We live in a world that is still traveling and experiencing demonic abuse, but we are the people of the future age commissioned to reveal Christ's rule in this present age. The Kingdom is both "already" and "not yet."

In other words, tribulation is the normal experience of believers in this age. Not experiencing affliction is a blessed exception that we should enjoy when we have it, but we should not count on it as if it were our right in Christ. We should always be ready to suffer for Christ and always be ready for Christ's return.

Overcomers

Four or five of the seven churches directly addressed in Revelation had problems of compromise. Two of the churches, however, were persecuted, and these churches are commended without any reproof. They are like the believers depicted later in Revelation who are suffering; suffering seems to weed out compromising Christians so that those who remain Christians are typically fully devoted to Christ. The persecuted saints in Revelation thus reflect something like the ideal state of the Church.

These believers are Spirit-empowered witnesses for Christ (see Revelation 19:10), speaking for the Lord in the face of persecution, in the midst of life-and-death crises. Such believers are ready to lay down their lives, because of, first, the blood of the Lamb and second, the word of their testimony (12:11).

First, by shedding His blood, Jesus redeemed us from among all peoples (see Revelation 1:5–6; 5:9; 7:14; 13:8), and He also proved that we can overcome by death (see Revelation 5:5–6). Second, these are martyrs on behalf of God's message and their witness or testimony for Christ, as in Revelation 6:9; their blood, like the Lamb's, has been shed (see Revelation 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). As Jesus was a sacrificial lamb (see Revelation 5:6), so are the martyrs who are depicted as under the altar (see Revelation 6:9), the place where the blood of sacrifices was poured out (see Exodus 29:12; Leviticus 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34; 5:9; 8:15; 9:9).

That they *overcame* the devil by the blood of the Lamb and their witness, even in death, means that deliverance in this life is not the only way to overcome. From the world's perspective, the Beast overcomes God's servants by killing them (see Revelation 11:7; 13:7). But in light of eternity, staying faithful, no matter what we must face, is true victory. Here are some of Revelation's promises to the overcomer (which can also be translated, "the victors, the triumphant ones"):

- We will eat from the tree of life in God's paradise (see 2:7).
- We will not be harmed by the second death (see verse 11).
- We will receive the promised manna and a white stone with a special name (see verse 17).
- We will have authority over the nations (see verse 26).
- Jesus will clothe us in white garments, He will not blot our names from His Book of Life and He will confess us before His Father and His angels (see 3:5).
- Jesus will make us strong supports in His temple, where we will dwell forever; He will write on us the name of God and of the New Jerusalem and His own new name (see verse 12).
- Jesus will seat us with Him on His throne, just as He overcame and sat with His Father on His throne (see verse 21).
- We will worship before God's throne (see Revelation 15:2).
- We will inherit the perfect new creation, and God will be our God, and we will be His sons and daughters (see Revelation 21:7).

Remembering these promises about the future can strengthen us when we must endure temporary tests in the present.

Post-Tribulational Paranoia

This observation invites us to challenge a mistaken approach held by some others who believe that the Church will go through the Tribulation. Some people *are* afraid of the Antichrist. Confident that the final Tribulation is just around the corner, some believers stockpile food and ammunition and want to flee into the mountains.

But the "wilderness" in Revelation 12:6 probably symbolizes this entire age. It evokes Israel's experience of depending on God in the wilderness. Just as manna-dependent Israel could not stockpile food in the wilderness, neither do God's people in Revelation 12; instead, God provides for them (see verse 6). Moreover, we see God's servants in Revelation suffering to bring the Good News of Christ to others, never fighting back with physical

weapons (see Revelation 6:9–10; 12:17; 13:7, 10). (They do receive *divine* vindication, some of it sooner and some of it later; see Revelation 6:11; 11:5–6, 11–13; 16:5–6; 19:21.)

That does not mean that we should not be prepared for emergencies. In 2017 and 2018, for example, in the United States hurricanes devastated Puerto Rico and Florida and flooding devastated Houston. Earthquakes, impassible snowstorms, power failures or other emergencies will strike, so it is simply prudent to have some supplies on hand.

Yet some emergencies may require more than short-term emergency supplies, and these may be harder to prepare for. If the power grid or transportation infrastructure collapse, our Amish neighbors will be among the best prepared. If some area is bombed or invaded militarily, Jesus' advice to His followers in Judea normally would also stand us in good stead: Value life over possessions and flee the safest way (see Matthew 24:16–20).

But most readers of our book are not in this kind of crisis situation right now. Revelation shows us that whenever possible, we believers should be seeking to share our faith with nonbelievers rather than running away from them. In times of crisis, the comfort and healing that our faith can provide others are all the more needed. Our normal posture should be to continue to testify about Jesus, "even when faced with death" (Revelation 12:11 NASB). If we truly believe the Gospel, then we believe that, if a choice becomes necessary, ultimate victory comes more by leading others to life in Christ than by preserving our lives in this world.

Such courage to be bold for Christ requires confident faith, and such confidence to testify comes from the Holy Spirit. If we lack such confidence, the solution is not to cower in fear. It is to pray for a deeper empowerment of God's Spirit in our lives. In Luke 11:13, Jesus promises us this power if we request it from the Father. In Luke's sequel volume, the book of Acts, we see that outpourings of the Spirit often followed prayer (see Acts 1:14; 2:4; 4:31; 8:15). May God empower all of us ever more deeply with His Spirit!

Why are we not afraid of the Antichrist? Because greater is the Spirit who dwells in us than the spirit of antichrist that is in the world (see 1 John 4:1–6, especially verse 4).

End-Time Revival? Along with Suffering

New Testament pictures of the end time, perhaps what believers should almost expect as *normal*, speak of both apostasy and preaching the Gospel. In times of crisis, those who are not serious about their faith fall away, whereas those who are truly committed to Christ share the Gospel (see Matthew 24:10–14; cf. 1 Timothy 4:1; possibly 2 Thessalonians 2:3). If this is the case, having a big church with lots of members and programs, valuable as it might be, is not the end goal by itself. Churches need to help members grow as strong disciples of Christ who can stand firm and share their faith with others no matter what comes their way.

Suffering comes to everyone, believers or not, but persecution for Jesus' name is specific to His followers. Yet Jesus' promise of persecution is only for His real followers, not for those who hide their faith (see Mark 8:34–38). We face persecution for His name (e.g., Matthew 5:11; Mark 13:13; 2 Timothy 3:12), and this even becomes an opportunity to share our faith further (see Mark 13:9–11). New Testament pictures of end-time martyrs associate their suffering with end-time preaching of the Good News to all peoples (see Matthew 24:14; Revelation 6:9; 20:4).

If by end-time revival we mean disciples of Jesus radically devoted to Him and the Gospel going out to all peoples, we should indeed expect it. This is, in fact, what the Church should be experiencing at any time in history, although in most of history it has not been true of most of the Church. When the Gospel spreads, the Church usually becomes established and grows, too, whether immediately or after ground has been broken.

Some, however, have unrealistic ideas about end-time revival. They suggest that everyone will be converted before Jesus' return. With Jeremiah, we are tempted to say, "Yes indeed! May the Lord do this! May the Lord establish what you have said!" (Jeremiah 28:6). But, as in Jeremiah's day, the Lord has really been calling for something less pleasant, and the burden of proof is on the one with the pleasant words (see verses 7–9). Unrealistic optimism underestimates the evil that is present in the world; when crushed by brutal realities such as World War I, such misplaced hopes have sometimes given way to shattered faith. Revelation depicts some people from all nations worshiping Jesus (see Revelation 5:9; 7:9), but it also depicts others from all nations worshiping the Beast (see Revelation 13:7).

One extreme sector of charismatic Christians even claims that true disciples will have such faith that they will achieve superpowers as "manifested sons." This extreme manifested sons teaching commits an error similar to pre-Tribulationism by sundering suffering from glory. It wrongly separates the glorification of our bodies from Christ's ultimate triumph and the new creation of which our glorified bodies are a part. Creation longs for glorification of God's children because restoration of our bodies is simultaneous with the restoration of, or at least the beginning of the restoration of, creation, when Jesus descends from heaven with a shout (see Romans 8:17–23; Philippians 3:20–21; 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10). Expectant faith is good, and God does

perform signs and wonders to honor His Word. But His Kingdom is already/not yet; some aspects of it, such as the permanent resurrection of our bodies, certainly await Jesus' return.

Jesus is the hero we honor. Jesus' power is perfected in our weakness, and we live for His glory alone. Jesus is honored by our perseverance in testing as well as by what the world considers victories. In Revelation, the world's perspective on victory includes the Beast overcoming God's servants (see Revelation 11:7; 13:7). From heaven's perspective, however, it is those who resist the Beast, even to the point of martyrdom, who are *truly* victorious (see Revelation 12:11; 15:2). Just as Jesus overcame by being faithful even to the point of death (see Revelation 5:5), so do we. Those who overcome, who are faithful to the end, will inherit the world to come, as children of God (see Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7).

None of this is meant to play down expectation of, or work toward, the end-time completion of the Gospel reaching all peoples (see Matthew 24:14; 28:19–20; Romans 11:25–26; Revelation 7:9). Likewise, God certainly is eager to demonstrate His glory with signs and prophetic boldness as we carry forth His Good News. That is not something just for the end of the age; ideally it is for any time believers are fully yielded to God's Spirit and God's calling, most often expressed in times of what we call revival. But insofar as the Church has often failed, surely God does want a generation that will show even the rulers in the heavenly places what His plan for His people looks like (see Ephesians 3:10; 4:11–13). Yet that plan is not simply about success. It also embraces faith that reveals God's power in the midst of suffering, as Christ's cross did.

The Two Kingdoms

The book of Revelation contrasts two cities, which it depicts as two women. (This depiction is not sexist, by the way. Ancient coins and literature also portrayed cities as women, and the Old Testament depicted Israel as a faithful or unfaithful wife. Thus, everyone would have understood the image.) The city of the world, Babylon, is depicted as a prostitute. By contrast, the New Jerusalem is depicted as Christ's Bride. Those who live for the temporary gratification of this age's desires cling to the prostitute; those with faith keep themselves pure for Christ in view of the coming age and will be Christ's Bride.

Not following Babylon does not mean that we oppose the world in every sense. God sent His Son to save the world (see John 3:16–17), and we should love the people in the world. Jesus ate and drank with those whom religious people considered sinners (see Mark 2:15–17). Paul used the language and customs of his day to reach people for Christ, and he even had supporters who were leading officials of a Roman province (see Acts 19:31). But we cannot compromise with the world in the sense of its values that distract from or oppose God and His values of justice, mercy and righteousness.

With good reason, many scholars identify Rome as the Babylon of John's day. Rome annually celebrated its founding on seven hills or "mountains," and regularly called itself the city on seven hills (see Revelation 17:9). Of the empires that ruled other kings (see verse 18), it was the one that John's audience knew best. It was a naval power (at that time the world's only significant one) that traded in the very imports listed in Revelation 18:12–13. Rome even had an emperor who persecuted Christians, Nero, who had died yet was widely expected to return (cf. Revelation 13:3; 17:10–11). (Coincidence or not, "Nero Caesar" spelled in Hebrew does come out to 666 when calculated as a number in the traditional way.) Most importantly, Rome destroyed the Temple and enslaved God's people as Babylon had done, so many Jewish people already envisioned Rome as a new Babylon. Indeed, they usually understood Daniel's fourth human kingdom, a successor of Babylon, as Rome (see Daniel 2:40–43; 7:6, 23).

But the spirit of Babylon outlived Rome. Just as Rome was an evil empire like the earlier Babylon, evil continues to flourish in the world. John himself probably recognized this, because he would have understood his vision in Revelation 13 in light of what he knew from the Old Testament. His contemporaries understood Rome to be the fourth beast of Daniel 7, the evil empire just before the coming of the Son of man. But Revelation 13:1–7 blends characteristics of all four beasts. It is thus more than Rome alone: It is the spirit of evil empire.

John prophesied from the island of Patmos, where he had been banished for preaching God's message (see Revelation 1:9). The Roman Empire was the most powerful empire that his part of the world had ever known, and it seemed poised to crush the Church, which may have then constituted less than one-tenth of one percent of the empire. Yet in Revelation 18:2–3, John, using the language of earlier biblical prophets, pronounces a funeral dirge over Babylon!

History proved John right. The Roman Empire fell over a millennium and a half ago. The evil empires of the past now lie in the dust, yet the Church of Jesus Christ has now spread more widely than ever before. So why should anyone put trust in any mortal kingdom of our day? Let us live instead for the one Kingdom that will last forever, the Kingdom of Christ and of God!

May we awaken to live for Christ alone—not slumber like the churches of Sardis or Laodicea, surrounded by worldly comforts. We should learn from suffering churches, such as those in Smyrna and Philadelphia, and our brothers and sisters who suffer for Christ today in northern Nigeria, North Korea, Eritrea and other locations.

Of course, churches that are not persecuted so much have opportunities and resources that suffering churches lack, and we can work to provide for them. But we have much to learn from them, lessons learned less from books than from enduring fiery trials. The promise of Christ's coming was an encouragement to the suffering churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, but a dire warning to the sleeping churches in bed with the values of the same world system that was killing their brothers and sisters elsewhere (see Revelation 3:2–3, 17; 16:15).

The Spirit of Antichrist Is Already Here

A Rapture before the Tribulation cannot by itself deliver us from the fear of tribulations or antichrists, which are not reserved solely for the future. Throughout Revelation, people are identified by markers recounted to or seen by John. Thus, the righteous have a name on them (see Revelation 3:12; 22:4); Babylon has a name on her, although she is figurative (see Revelation 17:5); Jesus comes back with a name on Him (see Revelation 19:16). The righteous are sealed to be protected from judgments (see Revelation 7:3–4), recalling how God invisibly marked the righteous to protect them before judgment in Ezekiel 9:4–6. (A pre-Christian Jewish source called the Psalms of Solomon also speaks of God invisibly marking both the righteous and wicked to distinguish them.)

The mark in Revelation that commands the most attention on the popular level today is the mark of the Beast (see Revelation 13:16–18). But whatever this mark might or might not mean for the future (speculations abound), it has a lesson for us today. Followers of the Beast conform to his ways, recognizing that they cannot prosper in this life without being part of his system (see Revelation 13:17). Their concern is not with promised hidden manna or fruit from the tree of life (see Revelation 2:7, 17; 22:2, 14, 19), but only with getting ahead in this life.

Because there are no chapter divisions in the original, Revelation offers a striking contrast between those who live for this world and those who live for the world to come. People are marked either with the name of the Beast (see Revelation 13:17) or the name of the Lamb (see Revelation 14:1; cf. 13:16–14:1). The promised world to come is worth any price in this world. We might not yet be in the final throes of the Tribulation under the final Antichrist, but the examples in Revelation warn us that ultimately there are only two sides. We either faithfully follow the Lamb or, by default, we follow what the world demands of us.

It is not hard to imagine many antichrists in this world, and not only in the future. First John applies the title to those who teach against the true Jesus who came in history, who is God's Son, the Messiah (see 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). The mystery of lawlessness is already at work (see 2 Thessalonians 2:7), and even now there are many antichrists (see 1 John 2:18).

In times of peace we sometimes find it hard to believe biblical warnings about the antichrists and demonic evil. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that the final Antichrist will be terrible and demonized. Because Satan does not know the final hour (see Mark 13:32), he must always have an antichrist in waiting. And because he does not know the final hour, Satan has already shown his hand. One need think only of a recent antichrist figure who succeeded on a local level and nearly succeeded on a global level: Adolf Hitler.

A generation ago, within the lifetime of the authors' parents, Nazi ideology included religious elements, featuring Hitler as the new savior. Many Aryan supremacists worshiped a false, non-Jewish Jesus, utterly different from the real Jesus of history. Both liberal and nationalist elements of the state church had paved the way for this false Jesus. Hitler believed that Jesus had started fighting against the Jews, and Hitler would complete that mission. Of course, Hitler's religion diverged starkly from Scripture; with his emphasis on Aryan purity, he honored Teutonic gods and semidivine Norse heroes.

An internal Nazi document from 1943 shows that the leaders of the Nazi party planned to abolish all denominations in 1945 and hail Hitler as the new Messiah. (Certain religions, such as Hinduism and Islam, would have been exempted from this requirement "for political reasons.") Hitler's promised "thousand-year Reich" allegorized and twisted the millennium of Revelation 20. This thousand-year reign, with Hitler as the new Messiah, could begin only after the binding of Satan (see Revelation 20:2)—which Hitler understood as the extermination of the Jews, whom he considered to be subhuman and mixed with demonic blood. That was why, even after the Allied invasion of Normandy, Hitler diverted military resources to expedite the liquidation of Jews in the death camps. (Hitler also was killing Gypsies, homosexuals and other groups he considered subhuman.)

Hitler and antichrist figures like him reflect the selfish character of Satan, grasping for power to exploit others. Jesus, by contrast, modeled serving others even to the point of laying down His life for us. In the end, Hitler and others like him have always failed, though often after bringing about the deaths of thousands or even (in Hitler's

case) millions of other people. In the end, God's truth was always vindicated against Satan's lies that brought so much suffering, even if people did not recognize it.

Each of these antichrist rebellions and their ultimate failures foreshadows the end. How will we know which antichrist and which tribulation are the final ones without knowing the time of Christ's return? The final time of testing will be final not only because it will be terrible, but precisely because it will be *final*. Christ's return will vindicate truth permanently and establish peace for humanity, and it will be a public and universal event rather than some individual gaining political or religious support to claim messiahship.

Satan's strategy is not difficult to envision in a demonic parody of the Kingdom such as Hitler's. The Nazis honored northern, Aryan gods; they were able to bend to their will much of the state church, where many already doubted claims of the Bible or interpreted it quite erroneously. Racism and genocide dehumanized and murdered people made in God's image. And if Satan could eliminate the Jewish people, biblical prophecies of the Jewish people's restoration could not be fulfilled; thus, Satan worked against the true God and the people He had chosen for His purposes.

But Satan's long-range plans did not depend only on one man, Adolf Hitler. Racism and ideas of racial supremacy allowed some to dehumanize others and produce slaughter on a massive scale never before witnessed in human history. Satan's work did not start only with Hitler, who was shaped by the race ideas of others. He also was able to draw on earlier models, such as the Turkish genocide against Armenians, U.S. internment camps for Native Americans and the 1904 German genocide that brutally murdered tens of thousands of members of two tribes in southwest Africa.

In the last-mentioned case, Germans forced survivors of their massacres, including women, children and the elderly, into slave labor in concentration camps, where the mortality rate was somewhere around fifty percent. (Such exploitation had earlier histories with King Leopold of Belgium in the previous generation in the Belgian Congo, and the earlier international slave trade proliferated by Arabs and developed by Europeans.) A German anthropologist performed medical experiments on African prisoners to study race, and Germans shipped roughly three hundred skulls to Germany for experiments to prove Aryan superiority.

Hitler knew that his predecessors had gotten away with these actions and had little reason to doubt that he could do the same. This was done by supposedly "progressive, civilized" nations that did not recognize how sin had warped their thinking.

The spirit of lawlessness has been among us for a long time, and so has tribulation. The good news is that if we are sufficiently committed to Christ to overcome and to serve Him in present trials, we need not fret about future ones. They may amplify what we have faced before, but God's power already with us will enable us to overcome and to serve Him then, too. Why are we not ultimately afraid of the Antichrist? Because Jesus Christ is Lord.

How to Live in Light of Post-Tribulationism

In 1918, Baptist pastor Clarence Larkin published his classic work *Dispensational Truth, or God's Plan and Purpose in the Ages*, replete with original charts and woodcuts, all designed by Larkin himself. In my (Michael's) early years in the Lord, I read the book with great interest, believing that Larkin had been given special insight into the end times. Many other readers also appreciated Larkin's work, and to this day, the book is still in print.

Now I will confess that in those early years in the Lord, my friends and I occasionally questioned if he got every detail right (we once joked that if the Lord ever lost track of the schedule of the events during the Tribulation period, as long as He had Larkin's charts, He would figure it out). But overall, we thought Larkin had things amazingly right, although one of his charts caused me to wonder. The chart was called "The Failure of Christianity," in which Larkin explained that "Christianity has not kept pace with heathenism." He wrote,

It is evident that there are more than . . . 100 times as many persons born into the world each year, as there are persons 'new born,' and that thus far Christianity, as a world converting power, is a failure, all of which proves that, if after 1900 years of gospel preaching the world is not converted, it is not God's purpose to convert the world by the preaching of the gospel in this age, but simply to gather out an 'elect body'—the church.¹

I asked myself, "Is this really God's plan? The failure of Christianity? What kind of divine strategy is this?"

More Than Conquerors

Unfortunately, I have often seen a similar defeatist mentality among other traditional dispensationalists, and I have observed it from two different-but-related angles. First, many have a pessimistic eschatology, by which I mean they believe that things will only get worse until Jesus returns. Because of this, they see little reason to engage the culture, since, they reason, "It's all coming down, and the return of Jesus is very near. Why bother to resist?"

In their eyes, the collapse of the society is not only inevitable, it is imminent. The end is both very bad and very near, so the best thing we can do is get our own houses in order and win as many lost souls as possible. But, while the emphasis on winning the lost is admirable, it is hardly a full-fledged, Great Commission emphasis, since Jesus did not simply call us to win the lost but to make disciples. This, in turn, leads to the question, "How should disciples live? Should they not be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?"

So the first common problem in the traditional pre-Trib mentality is a hopeless attitude which sees the world as going downhill only. And even if this theology was right—which I question—who says we are living in the last generation? What if there are several (or more) generations after us? What if we have not entered the time of the last great falling away? In that case, why should we be so pessimistic? The slave trade never would have been abolished in Great Britain and America had Christians been convinced that things were only getting worse and the world was on the verge of total collapse. Why even try?

This pessimistic end-time theology also begs the question, "If you see someone in need, should you not try to meet that need, whether Jesus is coming back in one year or one hundred years? And if you see something that is wrong and needs to be addressed, should you not address it, whether Jesus is coming back in one year or one hundred years?"

The second common problem among many dispensationalists is the defeatist attitude when it comes to the Church. Jesus will come back to rescue us before it is too late! He will save us from the Antichrist! Our greatest hope is to escape before things get really hot!

What kind of mentality is this? How does this comport with the biblical teaching that Jesus is Lord, that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Him, that He is with us always, even to the end of the age, that His name is higher than any other name, that He is sitting at the Father's right hand until His enemies are put under His feet, that all things hold together by His powerful Word, that He is King of kings and Lord of lords and that, consequently, we are more than conquerors through Him, overcomers by our new, redeemed nature? As expressed

by John, “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4 ESV).

And note carefully that John did not say, “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world—with the exception of the Antichrist, whom we can’t overcome”; or, “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world—with the exception of during the Great Tribulation, when we can’t overcome.” To the contrary, in the first century, John could already write, “Children, it is the last hour. And as you have heard, ‘Antichrist is coming,’ even now many antichrists have come. We know from this that it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18 HCSB).

What, then, makes us think that the climax of this age will be any different? That the same promises will not prevail? That the name of Jesus will not carry the same authority? In Luke 10:19, Jesus said to His disciples, “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you” (NIV). He did *not* say, “I’ve given you authority to overcome all the power of the enemy—with the exception of the Antichrist. And nothing will harm you—other than the Great Tribulation.” That is not what Scripture teaches.

There were antichrists in John’s day, there are antichrists today and there will be a future Antichrist, the evil godfather of them all. And he will wreak destruction on many. But even if he mows us down because of the testimony of our faith, he loses and we win. As Revelation 12 describes, there was war in heaven, because of which Satan and his minions were cast down to earth. At that time John

heard a loud voice in heaven saying, “The salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the ruling authority of his Christ, have now come, because the accuser of our brothers and sisters, the one who accuses them day and night before our God, has been thrown down. But they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die.”

Revelation 12:10–11 NET2

If you kill us, you promote us to glory, where we will one day receive the martyr’s crown. Our death is our honor, and our sacrifice is our privilege. And just as our Savior defeated the enemy by dying and rising, so too we die with Him, knowing that we will also rise. What weapon can the enemy bring against us? And if, in Jesus, we have power to resist Satan himself, why should we fear one his servants (namely, the Antichrist)?

Some dispensationalists would point to Daniel 7, where the prophet recounts what he saw in a vision of the end of the age, referring to the end-time ruler as the “little horn” and speaking of this final war against God’s people:

As I was watching, this horn waged war against the holy ones and was prevailing over them until the Ancient of Days arrived and a judgment was given in favor of the holy ones of the Most High, for the time had come, and the holy ones took possession of the kingdom.

Daniel 7:21–22 HCSB

But note here that the ones who will take possession of the Kingdom and rule as God’s servants are the same ones who have been persecuted and killed. We have not been raptured out, and our defeat at the hands of the Antichrist is only temporary, and, in reality, it is only an apparent defeat. Even this satanic persecution is being used for our good:

Those who are wise among the people will give understanding to many, yet they will die by sword and flame, and be captured and plundered for a time. When defeated, they will be helped by some, but many others will join them insincerely. Some of the wise will fall *so that they may be refined, purified, and cleansed* until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.

Daniel 11:33–35 HCSB, emphasis added

Now, I am quite aware that some dispensationalists will say, “The issue is the wrath of God, and we are not appointed to wrath. We’re really not concerned about the Antichrist.”

But since we have already demonstrated that God can protect His people here on the earth while His wrath is being poured out, why are we still afraid? Why do we fear the Great Tribulation—or any tribulation? And for believers being killed or tortured to death today, what can the Antichrist do that will be worse than this?

One of my closest friends is an Indian brother, and he told me that in 2017, four of his pastors working in tribal regions in India were martyred. A few years earlier, as persecution rose in the Indian state of Orissa, Hindu radicals rounded up pastors and their families, pouring gasoline on their wives and children and threatening to burn them to death if they did not deny Jesus. What will the Antichrist do that is worse than this?

Another friend of mine serves as a missionary in Nigeria, educating the poorest of the poor. In early 2018, she told me that the slaughter of Christians there is “happening every day. The worst this year was the New Year’s Day massacre, followed by a mass burial of 73 victims. There have been many attacks since then. Villages razed, girls and women raped, men butchered. Cutlasses have been replaced by AK-47s. The military has, at times, seemed complicit.”

A 2016 report claimed that

while much media attention has been focussed on Islamic State and the plight of persecuted minorities in the Middle East, 11,500 Christians in northern Nigeria were killed in five years between 2006–2014, and 13,000 churches were destroyed, forcing 1.3 million Christians to flee to safer areas of the country.³

Have these Christians not experienced very real tribulation? Will the Antichrist do anything worse than slaughtering, raping, torturing, starving and abusing children, women and men?

The truth be told, since the first days of the New Testament Church, adversity and persecution have been the norm. And to this day, in countries like North Korea, an antichrist-type system exists, meaning, if you do not bow down to the government, you could die. Yet the martyrs of the past are not calling out from their graves and urging us to be cautious and fearful. Instead, they are urging us to stand strong, to be of good courage and to speak the truth boldly and without compromise.

The Voice of the Overcomer

At the time of this writing, I (Michael) have had the privilege of ministering in India 26 times since 1993, at one time washing the feet of a martyr's widow whose husband I had prayed for and commissioned to plant churches. To say it was deeply moving would be a massive understatement.

On that same trip, we also washed the feet of pastors and church planters who had been persecuted for preaching the Gospel, one of them nearly beaten to death. He had won so many Hindus to the Lord that he was savagely attacked and lay in a coma for five days. To make things even worse, in the hospital where he lay unconscious, a doctor had been bribed to kill him. But his family found out and rescued him, taking him out of the hospital while he was still in a coma, after which he gradually recovered at home.

Subsequently, he went back to the same area and began preaching again, winning to the Lord and baptizing the first man who had assaulted him, along with many others. He was then attacked once more and had to go into temporary hiding, but he was resolute in his desire to return and preach. When I interviewed him through a translator he showed no fear and considered it an honor to suffer for his Master, even bursting into song. We could learn something from this pastor!

I still remember vividly what happened on that day when we washed everyone's feet. (There were two martyrs' widows there, along with one of their teenage daughters, plus all the pastors.) The music had been somber, and there were many tears being shed. But then, once we were done, the music suddenly changed, and in a moment, the men were jumping and dancing and leaping and celebrating. It is because they realized, "We have the privilege of being persecuted for righteousness! We have the honor of being treated like Jesus! What a high calling! What a joy!" It was really a sight to see.

About ten years before that, I was in India during another wave of heavy persecution, at which time an Australian missionary and his two sons, a family working with leprosy patients, were burned to death while they slept in their car overnight. This sent shock waves through India, but it was just one horrific act among many others.

Persecuted leaders had traveled up to 48 hours to get to our meetings, and every day, we poured encouragement and faith into their hearts, feeling privileged to serve men and women in this way. One day, one of the pastors stood up to share his own story. He recounted how the persecution began in his state a few months earlier when a local pastor was murdered and hung up on a tree as a public warning to others. Since then, every single day, he received a phone call saying, "Look at your wife. Look at your children. You will never see them again. We are going to kill you."

And how did he respond? He stood tall and strong with a big smile on his face and said, "Why die a natural death when I can die a martyr's death? For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (quoting Philippians 1:21). This reminds me of the words of an Iranian pastor who was killed for his faith. Years earlier he had said, "What a waste of a death to die a natural death." Do you think believers like this are afraid of the Antichrist?

Do Not Discount the Plain Sense of the Scriptures

Please allow me to approach this subject from an entirely different perspective, beginning with some general observations. One of the signs of a cult is that the group has a special way of reading the Bible, and they believe that without the guidance of their leaders, we cannot understand the Scriptures. What about the plain sense of the text? "Sorry," we are told, "but that's not what it really means. Our leaders have opened our eyes to the true meaning of the Scriptures."

So, for example, when you show Jehovah’s Witnesses some of the New Testament verses that say we can know that we have the hope of heaven and ruling with Christ, they respond, “But that’s only for the 144,000 sealed. Those verses aren’t directed to us.”

Really? Says who? There is not a stitch of scriptural or historical evidence to support this notion, yet they are convinced of it because they have brought another system of interpretation to the text. And that system overrules the plain and obvious sense of the Word.

Now, when it comes to dispensationalists, I am *not* comparing them to a cult, nor am I questioning their relationship with the Lord. As both Craig and I have emphasized elsewhere, some of the finest believers on the planet hold to a pre-Trib Rapture, and it was people like this who helped pray us into the Kingdom. So, again, I am not comparing pre-Tribbers to a cult.

But what I *am* saying is this: It is cult-*like* to discount the clear testimony of hundreds of Scriptures because of a questionable system of interpretation. Specifically, there is zero support for the notion that all the verses I’ve cited or referenced in this chapter about our victory in Jesus hold true at all times and ages *except for the Tribulation period when the Antichrist rules and reigns*. Not a chance. They will apply until Jesus sets up His Kingdom here on this earth. Until then, we will be in a ferocious battle with the forces of darkness, but through Jesus our Lord, we will overcome.

Here is how it was expressed by the German Christian leader Eberhard Arnold (1883–1935):

The early Christians were revolutionaries of the Spirit, heralds of the last judgment and the coming transformation; they had to be ready for martyrdom at any moment. Their witness meant they had to reckon with being sentenced to death by state and society. Therefore, “martyrs” were those witnesses ready to die for their faith, those who bore this testimony before kings and judges with the steadfastness of soldiers of God. They were martyrs, that is “confessors,” even if they did not have to die. To give witness is the essence of martyrdom. Martyrs uphold the truth of their testimony as eye-witnesses of the Lord and his resurrection. They see Christ and become his prophetic spirit-bearers. Through the Spirit, the blood-witness of the martyrs becomes part of the decisive battle waged by Jesus, the battle in which he himself died as champion and leader of the future. By dying, he finally judged and routed the hostile powers of the present age. Put to death by the most devout Jewish people and the Roman state, Christ fettered and disarmed the demons and their darkness through his cross. Since then, each new martyrdom—each new dying with Christ—becomes a celebration of victory over the forces of Satan.⁴

Victory is in our blood, spiritually speaking, which is why over and again in Revelation, Jesus gives promises to those who overcome, to the victors, using the Greek word *nikōn*, which is translated as: “him who overcomes” (NKJV); “the victor” (HCSB); “the one who conquers” (ESV); “the one who is victorious” (NIV); “him winning the victory.” In Jesus, we are *expected* to overcome. Just look again at these glorious promises from the Lord:

To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Revelation 2:7 ESV

To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Revelation 2:17 ESV

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star.

Revelation 2:26–28 ESV

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

Revelation 3:5 ESV

The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

Revelation 3:12 ESV

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Revelation 3:21 ESV

We overcome because He overcame. His victory is our victory. And you can be quite sure that Jesus is not threatened by the Antichrist—or for that matter, by a trillion billion antichrists. (And do not forget Revelation 12:11, which we quoted earlier: We overcome by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of our testimony and by not loving our lives even to the point of death.)

Then note how this all comes to climax in Revelation 21, which first speaks of the glories of the New Jerusalem and then states:

The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

I encourage you to embrace the mentality of the overcomer, the conqueror, the victor—through Jesus, who is victorious over all.

Be Strong in the Lord!

In Ephesians 6, Paul urged us to “put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand” (Ephesians 6:13 NIV). If there is, in fact, a specific period of time called the Great Tribulation, isn’t that the ultimate day of evil? Will not the armor of God work then just as it has always worked in the past? Will the shield of faith be any less effective? Will the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God!—be any less powerful?

Jesus told His disciples that He would build His Church and that the very gates of hell would not overcome it (see Matthew 16:18). And while there is considerable discussion about the precise meaning of some of His words (what, exactly, are the “gates of hell,”⁵ and are they primarily offensive or defensive?), there is no debate about the Lord’s overall message: His Church—His unique, Messianic, Spirit-empowered community of Jewish and Gentile believers—would be victorious. But of course! Light always overcomes darkness in the end (see John 1:5).

Paul certainly knew what it felt like to experience tribulation, as did many of the believers to whom he wrote. They hardly imagined the message of the cross to be the key to financial success and earthly fame! Yet in the midst of intense and unremitting persecution, Paul could pen these words:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:35–39 ESV

And note carefully where he starts: *tribulation*, that Greek word *thlipsis* that we studied before (see chapter 5). Tribulation shall *not* separate us from the love of Christ—even “Great Tribulation.” Not a chance.

We might be killed all day long. We might be rejected or hated or excluded. We might be imprisoned or tortured or beheaded. We might be deprived or starved or abused. So be it. In all these things “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Or, as translated by others, “we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (NASB); “we have complete victory through him who loved us!” (NET); “overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us” (NLT). Amen!

And note carefully where the emphasis is placed: It is *through Christ who loved us*—not through our own courage or faith or power or perseverance. No, it is out of our weakness that His strength is perfected (see 2 Corinthians 12:9–10), which is why we are called to “be strong *in the Lord* and in the strength *of his might*” (Ephesians 6:10 ESV, emphasis added).

In ourselves, we would likely cower and cringe at the Antichrist. But Jesus in us stands strong, and we find our strength in Him. Or, to put this in the form of a series of questions: Is the power of the Antichrist greater than the love of Christ? Is the intensity of the very worst tribulation superior to the strength of the Lord? Is the Word of God true or not? Shall tribulation separate us from the love of the Messiah or not? Are we more than conquerors through Jesus or not? Has God made us overcomers or not?

I urge you to put away a theology that dismisses a multitude of God’s promises because of a highly suspect, biblically flawed view of the end times. Whatever lies ahead, however hellish it might be, in Jesus, we will overcome, whether by life or by death. His love is greater than all!

The Night Is Almost Past

But what about Clarence Larkin’s chart on the failure of Christianity? Is it not true that the world as a whole is getting worse and that more people are being born every day than are being won to the Lord? And does the Bible not say that in the last days, perilous times will come (see 2 Timothy 3:1), marked by demonic doctrines (see 1 Timothy 4:1) and great deception (see Matthew 24:4, 24)? Yes, those Scriptures give very clear warnings, but that is not all the Bible has to say about the last days. It also says this:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my

Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. *And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

Acts 2:17–21 ESV, emphasis added

Do you see it? The last days will be marked by the great working of Satan and the great working of the Spirit, and we know who prevails when Satan and the Spirit collide. What is more, a straightforward reading of the New Testament indicates that the last days began with the death and resurrection of Jesus and will end when He returns. In other words, we have been in the last days for the last two thousand years (see 1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 1 Peter 1:20; 1 John 2:18—which shows that Paul, the author of Hebrews, James, Peter and John all agree). And the last days are times of parallel extremes, where in the midst of gross darkness glorious light rises (see the promise to Israel in Isaiah 60:1–3). They are also times of great harvest, both of the good and the bad:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 13:47–50 ESV

Paul also describes this end-time harvest, but here, he focuses on the salvation of a multitude of Gentiles along with the nation of Israel:

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

Romans 11:25–27 ESV

The greatest harvest of souls into the Kingdom of God is still ahead. That is why, from a New Testament perspective, things are getting brighter, not darker. In the words of John,

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, *because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.*

1 John 2:7–8 ESV, emphasis added

Or, as expressed by Paul,

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. *The night is far gone; the day is at hand.* So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Romans 13:11–12 ESV, emphasis added⁶

The Name of Jesus Is Being Exalted Worldwide as Never Before

According to New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado, “there may have been about seven to ten thousand Christians by AD 100, about two hundred thousand Christians by about AD 200, and perhaps as many as five to six million by AD 300, though unevenly distributed across the empire.”⁷ These remarkable statistics are worth thinking about for a moment: By AD 100, after seven decades of preaching the Gospel, led by the apostles themselves, there were perhaps seven to ten thousand Christians. That is it!

Estimates for the world population in AD 100 range from 150 million to 300 million, but if we use a figure of 250 million,⁸ that means that if there were 10,000 Christians at that time, there was only one believer on the planet for every 2,500 people. Yet the New Testament mentality is one of great faith and victory, not despair and defeat.

Now, I have seen other estimates that put the number of believers in AD 100 much higher, claiming that there was one believer for every 360 people on the planet. And based on the book of Acts alone, I would say those higher figures are more accurate.⁹ Even so, one out of 360 people is a very tiny percentage. But look at what has happened since! It speaks of anything but the failure of Christianity.

As I (Michael) noted in *The Revival Answer Book*, which was published in its first edition in 1997:

Writing in the November 1990 issue of *Missions Frontiers*, Ralph D. Winter stated that in the year 100, after the glorious period of the Acts and the early Church, there was approximately one true, gospel believing Christian for every 360 people on the earth; by 1900, there was one believer for every 27 people; by 1989, one for every seven; and at the present rate of growth, by the year 2000 there will be *one in three!* Even if you differ with these statistics, claiming, e.g., that by 1989 more realistic numbers would indicate that there was one believer for every fifteen people on the planet (and I’m not aware of many missiologists who would share such a pessimistic outlook), or that, by the year 2000, there will be one believer for every ten people on earth, that still would represent an absolutely supernatural and exponential increase in the spread of the gospel and the growth of the Church. Yes, it’s harvest time!

Or, to look at this from another angle and with a small variation in statistics, here is a chart supplying “Milestone Dates in the Growth of True Christianity.” According to the compilers, it offers “at the dates indicated, a comparison of 1) the number of Bible-believing Christians and 2) the total number of people in the world.” Examine this carefully and begin to rejoice!

One per hundred (1%) by AD 1430 (One to 99 after 1430 years)
Two per hundred (2%) by AD 1790 (One to 49 after 360 years)
Three per hundred (3%) by AD 1940 (One to 32 after 150 years)
Four per hundred (4%) by AD 1960 (One to 24 after 20 years)
Five per hundred (5%) by AD 1970 (One to 19 after 10 years)
Six per hundred (6%) by AD 1980 (One to 16 after 10 years)
Seven per hundred (7%) by AD 1983 (One to 13 after 3 years)
Eight per hundred (8%) by AD 1986 (One to 11 after 3 years)
Nine per hundred (9%) by AD 1989 (One to 10 after 3 years)
Ten per hundred (10%) by AD 1993 (One to 9 after 4 years)
Eleven per hundred (11%) by AD 1995 (One to 8 after 2 years)

What this means in practical, down to earth terms—and it is staggering—is that “there are 78,000 conversions each day and 16,000 new churches planted each week.” Stand up and shout for joy, my friend. It’s harvest time!¹⁰

And here is the best thing of all. These stats are quite outdated. The Gospel is spreading at a much more rapid rate today. The Prayer Foundation shared these exciting statistics, along with sobering needs: (Note that some of these amazing statistics are actually *understated*, not overstated.)

- The number of Christians in Indonesia has grown from 1.3 million 40 years ago to over 11 million today. That said, of the 76,000 villages in the country, 50,000 are without a church. (*Operation World*)
- If Bible translation had continued at its historic pace, providing a Bible in every people group’s heart language would have been accomplished in 2150. Thanks to God’s working through *Wycliffe’s Vision 2025*, the work has been accelerated by over 100 years and is now on pace to be completed in 2042. (*Wycliffe*)
- *The Jesus Film* has been translated into nearly 1,000 languages and over 200,000,000 people have indicated decisions for Christ as a result of the film. (*Campus Crusade*)
- No Christian was officially allowed to live in Nepal until 1960. Now there is a church in every one of the 75 districts of Nepal with estimates of over half a million believers. (*Operation World*)
- About 500 Muslims come to faith in Christ every month in Iran—a country ranked among the top ten persecutors of Christians in the world. Many of the new believers are young, since 70 percent of Iran is under the age of 30. (*Vision 2020*)
- Every day, 20,000 Africans come to Christ. Africa was 3 percent Christian in 1900 and is now over 50 percent Christian. (*Vision 2020*)
- In 1900 Korea had no Protestant church and the country was deemed impossible to penetrate. Today Korea is 30 percent Christian with 7,000 churches in Seoul alone, and several of these churches have over 1,000,000 members. (*Vision 2020*)
- There are currently 60–80 million Christians in China with between 10,000 and 25,000 converts a day. (*Open Doors*)
- More people worldwide are committed to praying for worldwide revival than ever before.¹¹

The Traveling Team shares this exciting news:

The number of people who are being presented the plan of salvation every day is now at least 260,274. . . . Every day now the average number added to the body of Christ worldwide averages 174,000. 3,500 new churches are opening every week worldwide.

Our annual growth rate of church planting is presently at more than 8% per year. We only need 11% per annum to allow us to place a living Christian fellowship—a local church—as a witness in every community in the entire world. We have seen countries like Singapore have a 10% increase of those who have seen Christ come into their lives.

In the 1980s 10% of Korea and 10% of Chile turned to Christ, and over 10% in Indonesia—the largest Muslim country in the world. Indonesia is now over 25% Christian.¹²

Even if some of these statistics are too optimistic, they present a very different picture than one of a defeated and demoralized Church. This is not the failure of Christianity, this is the triumph of the Gospel, to the point that *in one day*, around the world, far more people come to faith in Jesus than may have come to faith in Him in the first seventy years of Church history. And this is exactly what we should expect, since Revelation 7 speaks of “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” described as “the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9, 14 *ESV*). Elsewhere, Revelation describes an army of two hundred million (see Revelation 9:16), but here, it speaks of “a great multitude that no one could number,” which would mean it had to be much, much bigger than two hundred million. The greatest harvest is still to come!

Ironically, there are dispensationalists who believe that there *will* be a great harvest of souls during the Great Tribulation, even though the Holy Spirit has been taken from the earth¹³ and even though people who come to faith in Jesus will be killed (beheaded!) for their faith. Not only is this belief illogical, it is unscriptural: The Gospel is spreading throughout the world at an ever-increasing pace, *with* the Spirit's help, not *without* the Spirit's help, and in the midst of great darkness and evil and apostasy, God's light is shining brighter by the day.

Can we look at our Lord and Savior Jesus—the ultimate Overcomer and Victor—and expect anything less?

A Practical Message

Sometimes when people discover what they think is a biblical truth, they promote it in a divisive way, as if it makes them better than others who have not discovered this insight. Some readers of Scofield’s reference notes may have done this when promoting pre-Tribulationism in early twentieth-century prophecy conferences. We do not want readers of this book to do so with post-Tribulationism. All other biblical principles—such as humility and love—still apply!

Nevertheless, the matter remains practical and important. It shows us that God does not have a complicated chart with a coming here and a coming there and verses that must be split down the middle as to which aspect of the Second Coming they refer to. Rather, Scripture announces one glorious future coming that is our hope, when the kingdom of this world becomes the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

In their context, nearly all of these second-coming Scriptures bring out the same idea. Most of them do not emphasize, “You will be persecuted. Be ready to lay down your life for Christ.” They do not need to emphasize that point, since it has already been emphasized in many of the passages that invite us to be disciples of Jesus. Moreover, all early Christians outside Jerusalem, whether persecuted or not, recognized that they belonged to a minority group that was often misunderstood and maligned by outsiders. They already understood that following Jesus involves a cost.

Jesus’ Coming Invites Us to Live for Him

These passages about Jesus’ return are less about relief from tribulation in this world than about being ready to stand before the Lord. They emphasize living holy and godly lives, comforting and loving one another in the hardship of this age with the hope of His coming. God has provided for us many blessings in this age, including brothers and sisters in Christ, provision for our needs, often healing and so forth; but we may also need to die for Christ (see Mark 10:29–30). Yet the hope that makes us live godly lives is the hope of His appearing. And that—not a specifically pre-, mid- or post-Trib message—is what the Church most needs to hear.

This message is so central to a biblical understanding of Christ’s coming that it seems to be the main point of most passages about His return. Thus:

- Titus 2:12–13 invites us to live in a way that is self-controlled, just and God-fearing, as we await the return of Jesus Christ, our great God and Savior.
- 2 Peter 3:11–14 urges us to live as blameless, God-fearing people consecrated to Him, in light of the present order’s promised passing and the new world coming.
- Matthew 24:45–51 warns us to humbly serve our fellow servants rather than to lord it over them, since we will all answer to the one Lord.
- Bearing in mind the coming day, we should stay awake spiritually and walk in the light (see Romans 13:12).
- Paul expects the Lord to confirm believers blameless to the end (see 1 Corinthians 1:8).
- We should live in righteous ways with our bodies because God will raise our bodies and judge us for deeds done in our bodies (see 1 Corinthians 6:13–14; 2 Corinthians 5:10–11).
- The day of Christ’s judgment will evaluate and expose whether we have built our deeds on Christ and so determine our reward (see 1 Corinthians 3:11–15; 4:5).
- We should live for heavenly rather than earthly values because we await our Lord’s coming from heaven to transform our bodies (see Philippians 3:17–21).
- In light of Christ’s public revelation and the promise that we will be revealed with Him in glory, we should put to death wrong earthly desires (see Colossians 3:4–5).

- We will be rewarded at Jesus' coming (see 1 Thessalonians 2:19).
- We pray to have hearts that are blameless in holiness in God's sight at Jesus' coming with His consecrated ones (see 1 Thessalonians 3:13; the context in 4:3 includes sexual purity as part of blamelessness).
- The purpose of the traditional Rapture passage (see 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17) is that we should comfort or encourage one another when believers die (see verse 13); we grieve, but not like those without hope (see verse 18).
- On account of the coming Day of the Lord, we must endeavor to remain vigilant, self-controlled and ready in faith, love and salvific hope (see 1 Thessalonians 5:6–8).
- Like Timothy, we should observe the Lord's teaching blamelessly until Jesus' public appearing (see 1 Timothy 6:14–15).
- Paul charges Timothy to preach and teach faithfully in light of Christ's public appearing, His Kingdom and His judgment of all (see 2 Timothy 4:1–2).
- We should endure faithfully to the end, in view of Christ's promised coming to save believers and destroy those who turn away (see Hebrews 10:35–39).
- Many heroes of the faith have suffered for the sake of the promised reward (which includes the New Jerusalem; see Hebrews 11:16, 26); the ultimate example is Jesus, who likewise received reward after He endured suffering (see Hebrews 12:1–4).
- We can emulate the commitment of those who have endured torture for their faith, persevering in view of their reward at the coming resurrection (see Hebrews 11:35).
- Without holiness (i.e., being set apart for God), no one will see the Lord (see Hebrews 12:14; this implies the need for perseverance in the faith).
- We should endure present sufferings because we know the Lord is coming soon (*parousia*; see James 5:8).
- We must not judge one another, since the true Judge is coming soon and will evaluate us all (see James 5:9 in light of verse 8).
- We persevere through testing, bearing in mind our promised end-time salvation and the inheritance now reserved for us in heaven (see 1 Peter 1:4–9) for when Jesus is publicly revealed (see 1 Peter 1:13).
- This world is passing, but whoever does God's will remains forever (see 1 John 2:17).
- We must remain in Him so that when He appears publicly at His coming (*parousia*) we will not be ashamed before Him (see 1 John 2:28).
- We must purify ourselves, because when Jesus publicly appears, we will see Him fully and so be transformed into His likeness; and whoever has this hope purifies himself or herself, just as He is pure (see 1 John 3:2–3).
- We should remain alert as we anticipate Jesus' coming (see Revelation 16:15).
- Jesus' coming brings His reward for our deeds (see Revelation 22:12).

As we can see, Scripture emphasizes over and over that our expectation of the Lord's return should affect the way we live. We should not live like those who do not have the same hope (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13). The Lord knows that we need food and clothing (see Matthew 6:25, 32) and that we live in this world (see John 17:16–18; 1 Corinthians 5:10). But our interest cannot be in simply collecting things, being entertained, competing with our neighbors or making our work days survivable. We want to invest in what counts eternally so that in whatever spheres we live, we can spend our lives serving the Lord and others, celebrating our hope. This is not a doctrine to debate about so much as an expectation to live by.

Suffering Is a Wake-Up Call

Likewise, believing that Jesus' followers will experience severe suffering raises an issue for *all* believers, whatever their end-time views. Following Jesus is more than offering a simple salvation prayer as a fire escape and going on our way. It is more than just going to church. It is more than believing God for the fulfillment of particular desires and even needs in our lives—though God cares about our needs and delights to bless us.

Jesus warned that if we want to be His disciples, we must be ready to give our lives for Him. Many people recognize that there is something higher in life than our own short, individual lives. Soldiers prepare to give their

lives for their nation, if necessary. Many researchers devote their entire lives to finding cures for diseases. Many such acts of devotion are noble and praiseworthy pursuits.

But what could deserve our loyalty more than our Lord who sacrificed His own life to give us eternal life? And if we truly recognize that we have eternal life in Him, we will not hesitate to devote our lives for His honor—for something that will count *forever*. Whether we discover cures in His name, or care for the needy in His name, or work for justice or clean toilets or whatever we do, let us do it with eternity in mind (see Colossians 3:17).

Being disciples of Jesus means living for Him, not for ourselves. Such a devotion affects our career and other life-setting choices, our daily decisions and what we do with our money and our time. Those who live for Christ can die for Christ; those who are prepared to die for Christ can also live their lives with Christ in focus.

Too often we North American Christians live for ourselves. Too often we pray only for what God can do for us and our immediate families, even though Jesus taught us to pray first for the coming of God's Kingdom (see Matthew 6:9–10, 31–33). Ours is not a completely new problem. The apostle Paul lamented that he had no one like Timothy, because others sought after their own interests rather than those of Christ (see Philippians 2:20–21; cf. Mark 8:33).

God *does* lavish His love on us, but we need to remember His love in hard times as well as happy ones. Like a caring parent, He prepares us for reality and matures us by letting us face some hardships, with His help. The best way for us to prepare for future tribulation is by being faithful in the smaller tests we face now.

We should live not for ourselves but instead for the One who died and rose on our behalf (see 2 Corinthians 5:15). Thus, like Paul, we can spend and be spent for others (see 2 Corinthians 12:15) rather than for ourselves alone. In some generations Christians understood that ideal, and they sacrificed for the Kingdom, sowing the Gospel in many parts of the world where it is now bearing abundant fruit. In more recent times, however, we Christians in North America have often been lulled into complacency, trusting the world's value of seeking just personal interests. We have bought into a consumer Christianity that is far from the call of the cross.

How should we live in light of the Tribulation? The reality of any tribulation reminds us that the world is not just an amusement park. Reminders about being ready to suffer for Christ are valuable for complacent Western Christians who have plenty; Paul offered his converts such reminders (see Acts 14:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:3; 2 Timothy 3:12).

But biblically, living in light of tribulation is less central than living in light of eternity (see, e.g., Romans 12:2; 13:11; 1 Corinthians 2:9–10; 2 Corinthians 5:15–17; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 1:18–19). The only thing that will count when Jesus comes back is what we have done for Him and His purposes in the world (1 Corinthians 3:11–15). We should make our life decisions and, insofar as possible, our daily decisions with a view to what they will look like a hundred, a thousand or a million trillion years from now—not considering so much what feels good now as what will count forever.

Are we like Christ's followers in Revelation 12:11, living wholeheartedly for God, ready to lay down our lives for Him? If we are not, let's pray to be like them.

Perseverance Is Necessary

Scripture makes it clear repeatedly that Jesus' true followers must persevere to the end. Christians with various theological perspectives recognize this. Calvinists contend that those who do not persevere were never truly saved to begin with. Arminians contend that people can be truly converted yet fall away and be lost. Yet both agree that those who do not persevere to the end will not be saved.

What does it mean to persevere? In the context of salvation, it means that we continue to be followers of Jesus. It does not mean that we become sinless or perfect. It does mean that we continue to recognize Jesus as the true Lord and Savior. If we convert to an incompatible religion or renounce our faith to evade persecution, we turn away from Jesus. Jesus said that He will confess as His own before the Father whoever confesses Him before others, and deny those who deny Him (see Matthew 10:32–33; Luke 12:8–9; Revelation 3:5). There is forgiveness even for deniers who truly repent, such as Peter (see Mark 14:68–72; 16:7; Luke 24:34)—ultimately they persevere. But in any case, we cannot truly renounce Jesus and continue to follow Him while doing so. He is the only means of salvation.

Pointers for Overcoming and Enduring

Whether we call it the Great Tribulation or not and whether we will go through the Great Tribulation or not, we as believers need to be ready to face tribulation. Hardships will come on individuals and on societies, as they always

have. The Bible does not envision any period, past or future, in which great faith can exempt God's children from all hardship.

Because times of hardship will come your way, here are some pointers to bear in mind:

1. Be sure you are saved—that is, that you will get to spend forever with God. This gift of eternal life is for the asking because Jesus provided it for us by His death and resurrection. We cannot make ourselves good enough for Him on our own. The good news is that Jesus made the way for us to come to Him, at great cost to Himself. We can therefore confidently entrust our eternal destiny to God on the basis of what Jesus did for us. He promises to welcome all of us who entrust our eternal future to Him.

2. Be consistent. Act like you really *believe* that Christ has saved you from sin. Being saved means that you have changed sides: You have joined God's side and belong to Him. Therefore you want to obey this true King and live for His purposes in the world—why in the end would anyone want to live for anything else? God's plan is what really lasts forever—unlike the things that most of the world lives for.

3. Remember that you are God's child. All of those who belong to Christ are God's own children. When you sense God's assurance that you are His child and that He loves you, you can know that He Himself is speaking to you (see Romans 5:5; 8:16). Stand by faith whatever the moment's feelings.

4. Determine to stay loyal to God when you are tested. Following Jesus means being a disciple who will stay loyal to Him under pressure. True, Jesus' first disciples did not reach that level of loyalty overnight. But that means that we should grow in loyalty by practicing it even now, even in the small things. Remember how Daniel and his friends showed loyalty to God by refusing the king's food long before they were tested with the fiery furnace or lion's den.

5. Pray for yourself and for others. This can include praying biblical psalms that pray for protection or deliverance from enemies. We do not need to wait till trouble comes to begin praying those psalms or other scriptural prayers for perseverance—not least of which is, "Lead us not into testing but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13).

6. Consider what it genuinely means to live in victory. We need to redefine *victory* and *overcoming*, taking into account the fact that no one can take from you what no longer belongs to you, including your life. Having embraced Jesus as Savior, you have given up ownership of your life in this age to receive life forever in the age to come (see Mark 8:35–38). The book of Revelation illustrates the nature of true victory. Here the saints overcome not through physical conquest but rather through martyrdom. From the world's standpoint, we are being overcome (see Revelation 11:7; 13:7). We need to instead adopt God's standpoint, which is that those who are faithful will overcome (see Revelation 2:11; 3:12; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7).

As faithful witnesses for Christ, we can trust Him to make our lives count for eternity. We should witness in life whenever we can, and by death when we need to. Our lives count as sacrifices before the Lord, as prayers that God hears and on account of which He will move history toward its future climax (see Revelation 6:9–11; 8:4–6; 15:1–8).

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Hope Beyond Tribulation

There is no need to be afraid of one or even many antichrists. In light of eternity, their time to cause trouble is infinitesimally brief (see Revelation 17:12).

In times of suffering, the Church realizes who she is and what she really has to live for. Jesus never promised us nontribulation; He promised that we would have tribulation in this world and said that we should be courageous because He has already defeated the world (see John 16:33).

Persecution is the Church's default setting, the setting in which she was born. Once we become followers of Jesus, our lives in this world become forfeit, while we also gain the promise of true life worth living, life that lasts forever. In truth:

Those who want to come after Me as My disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Me to the cross. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, but those who surrender their lives for My sake and the Gospel's sake will save them.

paraphrase of Mark 8:34–35; Luke 9:23–24

People cannot be My disciples unless they hate their own families and even their lives in comparison with their love for Me. They cannot be My disciples unless they carry their own cross and come after Me. . . . They cannot be My disciples unless they surrender to Me everything they have.

paraphrase of Luke 14:26–27, 33

Jesus Is Worth Anything

Jesus tells of someone who found a valuable pearl or treasure hidden in a field. The finder sells everything to obtain what is priceless (see Matthew 13:44–46). Treasure in heaven far outweighs any treasure on earth. Yet when Jesus offers a young man treasure in heaven if he sells his possessions to give them to the poor, the young man prefers to keep his possessions for this life (see Matthew 19:21–22). How foolish! Jesus and the Kingdom are worth *anything*. They are worth more than any price we could ever pay for them.

Some early hyperdispensationalists may have thought that most of the contents of the gospels were applicable *only* for Jewish Christians in the first century and in the final Tribulation. Of course, if you limit sufficiently the pool of verses that you are willing to apply to believers, you can always argue from the ensuing silence that some teaching is not for us. Yet our Bibles are full of such teachings, and Jesus' followers under persecution over the centuries have had to live and die by them. By now, the dead in Christ might possibly outnumber living Christians, and none of the fifty to a hundred generations so far have faced the *final* Tribulation. Does it make any sense for so much of Scripture (e.g., Revelation 6–18) to be relevant for believers in Christ only during the final Tribulation but not for the present Church age?

Even if we limited the part of the Bible that is relevant for us to Paul's letters—a limitation that Paul himself would have denounced (see Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:16–4:3)—we must be ready to suffer for Christ. For example, note Philippians 1:27–29:

Just act as citizens in a way that suits the good news of Christ. This way, whether I come see you or hear about you while away, I'll know that you're standing in one spirit, contending together with one heart for trust in the good news, and not intimidated at all by those who oppose you. This is evidence to them that they'll be destroyed, but that you'll be saved; and this is from God. Because you've been given this gift for Christ's sake: not just to trust in Him but also to suffer for His sake.

Those who withdraw from the world, stockpiling weapons for impending persecution, make exactly the same mistake as those who ignore the prospect of suffering. If we act either way, we act as though our lives in this world are all we have to live for. Jesus calls us to live for something higher and better so that we invest our lives in serving people in love and reaching them with the transforming truth of Christ's Gospel.

Being ready to lay down our lives does not mean that every one of us will have opportunity to do so in a single act of martyrdom; it does mean that we should offer ourselves to Christ as living sacrifices (see Romans 12:1). It means that we should have the frame of mind that devotes everything to Christ, whether in life or in death. Billions of

people have yet to hear the message of eternal life from a true Christian. Hundreds of millions of people lack safe drinking water or any form of health care. Love demands attention to the world's needs.

Christ sacrificed His own home in heaven to serve us, to heal us and to die for our sins. As His followers, we each have only one life to invest in what will count for all time. May we count the cost and grasp a vision for what we can each do for the Kingdom. When I (Craig) was a doctoral student, I once talked with a university student who obviously cared deeply about his friends and wanted to benefit their lives. Although he knew about Christ, he had never committed his life to Him. I asked him what gift he could ever give his friends that was greater than life forever with Christ, but also pointed out that he could not give what he did not have. Over time he committed his life to Christ, and within a few weeks of his commitment he had shared Christ one-on-one with fifty of his friends. He endured considerable mockery at first, but in time his peers began to respect his consistent and loving stand for Christ. He has since gone on to reach probably more people one-on-one for Christ than I have.

That day I presented him with this simple math: An hour is greater than a minute, a lifetime is greater than an hour and eternity is far greater than a lifetime in this present age. What we do that counts for eternity outweighs anything we do for our momentary distraction or entertainment.

The average American reportedly watches five hours of television a day. Imagine what would happen if forty million of the Christians in the United States turned off their televisions and devoted that time to praying, sharing their faith with their neighbors, mentoring needy children, loving and witnessing to isolated international students and so forth. Imagine if forty million Christians gave an extra three hours a day to the work of the Kingdom: That would allow for 120 million more hours of ministry per day and over 43 billion more hours of ministry per year by Christians within the United States alone.

The Value of Some Trials

We can be very grateful for times and places protected from persecution; sometimes the early Church had that experience (see Acts 9:31), and we are supposed to pray for that (see 1 Timothy 2:1–2; cf. Matthew 6:13). Crowds gathered around Jesus to hear His message, which was welcomed by the ordinary people in Galilee (see Mark 1:32–33, 37; 2:2). Leading, non-Christian officials of one of the Roman Empire's most prosperous provinces helped sponsor Paul's ministry there while it was popular (see Acts 19:31). When we have such times, we should thank God as we make use of them for the Gospel.

Unfortunately though, when the Church does not face opposition, it often grows complacent. The book of Revelation addresses seven churches in the prosperous Roman province of Asia (today, western Turkey). Of these churches, the only two that are commended unconditionally, the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, are suffering churches. The two that receive the harshest reproofs, the churches in Sardis and Laodicea, appear to be the ones facing the fewest challenges. Archaeology shows that Sardis welcomed its Jewish community; it probably tolerated its Christians, too. Yet the church there was a dead church (see Revelation 3:1–6). The church in Laodicea thought that it had everything it needed—but it neglected to depend on Christ. In so doing, the church in Laodicea proved so distasteful to the Lord that He was ready to spit it out (see Revelation 3:14–22).

This is not to say that we should *try* to be persecuted. Ultimately, in one way or another, all those who desire to live in a godly way in Christ will face some opposition (see 2 Timothy 3:12). We are just saying that we should live for Jesus one way or the other. If we cannot do it in prosperity, we will have to learn how to do it in hardship. Because judgment begins with the house of God (see 1 Peter 4:17), the Church gets sorted out when hard times come; we find out who really puts God first and who is instead ready to sacrifice Him when testing becomes unbearable or even merely inconvenient.

Today, if someone beats or ridicules another person for his or her minority faith or ethnicity, it often makes the news and people are rightly outraged. Yet when I (Craig) was a new believer in Christ, I was on more than one occasion beaten for my witness, but I did not bother to report it to any authorities because I assumed, probably wrongly, that no one would care. I rightly understood that persecution for my witness was par for the course. But I was probably wrong to assume that the authorities would simply admonish me for talking to potentially dangerous people to begin with. At least in one of the cases, they would have at least taken a description and a report, for what little it might have been worth by that point. I did not consider that Paul *did* appeal to the non-Christian Roman government at times for protection. In many societies, honorable people will recognize that such abuse is wrong, and it is still appropriate to appeal for justice and protection.

Nevertheless, Jesus makes clear that we cannot simply take for granted that justice will always be done in this world. Most of His followers were economically poor Galileans, geographically, politically and socially marginalized from all centers of power. They could not take justice for granted. They could not expect everyone

who claimed to be honest to care about truth. Remember that not everyone who witnessed the raising of Lazarus became a follower of Jesus (see John 11:45–46). Many do not value the truth, and without such integrity they will distort our claims and believe whatever they want (see 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12).

Our conversion gave us eternal life in return for counting our present life forfeit for the Kingdom. If we recognize that, nothing we must face can deter us. Trials include persecution, bereavement, famine, poverty and war, but none of these can separate us from Christ (see Romans 8:35). When we learn to desire most what is best, Christ Himself, this is a gift no one can take away.

Earlier in this book we posed some questions to consider. Here are a few more.

Is the church in the West ready for serious tribulation?
If not, does that mean we will not face it?
Biblically, should not all Christians be ready to suffer for Christ?
How will we help get ourselves and others ready spiritually?

Suffering Can Draw Us Closer to God

Suffering can draw us closer to God, and what is more precious than that? It affords us an opportunity to honor God in a special way.

Here is what the Lord says:

Those who've been harassed for righteousness' sake are privileged, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. You are privileged when others put you down and harass you and falsely say all kinds of bad things about you for My sake.

Matthew 5:10–11

Here is what Paul says:

We boast in our confident expectation that we will share God's glory. Not just that, but we boast also in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation instills in us endurance, and endurance instills in us character that has been proved, and character instills in us hope. And this hope doesn't let us down, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:2–5

Here is what James says:

Treat it as complete joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you encounter trials of whatever sort, since you know that the proving of your trust [in God] instills endurance. But let endurance perform its ultimate work, so you may be mature and whole, not lacking anything.

James 1:2–4

Here is what Peter says:

In this promise you celebrate, even though now you must briefly experience grief in the face of trials of whatever sort. This is so that the proving/testing of your trust [in God]—which is far more valuable than gold (gold is also tested through fire but is [unlike pure trust] destructible)—may be revealed for praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

1 Peter 1:6–7

After being whipped with 39 lashes by the leaders of their people, Peter and the other first apostles celebrated that they had been counted worthy to suffer public disgrace for Jesus' honor (see Acts 5:41). Their backs torn and bleeding from a humiliating public beating, Paul and Silas prayed and celebrated God's goodness in jail (see Acts 16:25). In this, our brothers were following the teaching of their Master and ours:

How wonderful it is for you when others hate you, exclude you, and mock and treat you as evildoers because of the Son of man. Celebrate when that happens and even leap for joy! For look, your reward in heaven is great! That is how their predecessors treated the prophets!

Luke 6:22–23

It is not always easy to rejoice when we are misrepresented, marginalized, mocked or (especially) murdered. I (Craig) think that Michael is more mature, but I confess that I was not rejoicing during my beatings, and do not always find it easy during ridicule, either. In some parts of the United States, we have gotten used to being respected, welcomed or at least tolerated. But whether welcomed or rejected, we need to remember who we are and to whom we belong. *We really need to believe the Gospel and that life and eternity with Christ matters more than what this world offers.*

Hope and Vindication

Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor, noted that the one personality trait that made a difference in survival in the death camps was hope. Jesus' followers have a secure hope that transcends death itself. Jesus will return and raise the dead, and we will reign with our Lord forever and ever.

Indeed, even judgments offer encouragement by reminding us that God is not simply looking the other way in this world of injustice. Judgments in Revelation especially *vindicate* God's suffering people. In Revelation 8:6–9:21, the judgments begin apparently in response to the prayers of the saints, which are like incense before God (see Revelation 8:2–5; cf. golden bowls in Revelation 5:8 and 15:7). More explicit is Revelation 16:5–6: God is just, because His people's persecutors "spilled the blood of consecrated ones and prophets, and so you gave them blood to drink. This is just what they deserve!"

But such judgments in history merely foreshadow the ultimate vindication. Babylon will be overthrown, because God will avenge the blood of His consecrated ones, apostles and prophets murdered by Babylon (see Revelation 18:20, 24; 19:2; cf. Revelation 6:10; 17:6). Already in Revelation 6:9–10, believers martyred for their testimony and faithfulness to God's Word ask how long until God vindicates them by avenging their sacrificial deaths. The answer is that this time will come when the full number of martyrs is completed (see verse 11). The judgment scene that follows depicts the catastrophic end of the age (see verses 12–17).

Although any texts that tell us about the timing of Jesus' Second Coming make clear that it is at the end of this age, chronology is not their focus. Their focus is that we will finally see our wonderful Lord Jesus. In light of this focus, they summon us to lives of holiness—to live our present lives in light of that future hope, instead of what the world around us values.

Awaiting Christ's coming does not mean pie in the sky. No one could make a bigger difference in this world than those who serve those around them in light of eternity. When we live in light of eternity, everything we do in this life takes on eternal significance. We want to make our lives count for what matters to God: What matters to Him most is other people's lives and welfare.

How do we prepare in light of promised tribulation in this world? Not by stockpiling as if we know the times or the seasons (though as noted, having a few supplies for emergencies is always prudent, no matter what the emergency might be). We prepare the same way Daniel and his three friends did: by being faithful in whatever situations we find ourselves now. We prepare for suffering in the same way that we prepare for our Lord's imminent return: We watch and pray and walk with Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are not called to be afraid of tribulation. Suffering is par for the course in this world—indeed, death comes to us all whether we are followers of Jesus or not. For every generation so far since the time of Jesus, death (rather than Jesus' physical return) has provided us with our only foretaste of the final judgment. Instead of living in fear of tribulation, we can live in expectation of God's promise for a renewed world where suffering and death will be no more. And we who believe that truth will share that hope with as many others as possible, hoping that they will want to share that promised future world with us.

Revelation's picture of the New Jerusalem reminds us of the great hope that lies beyond any tribulation in this age. "In this world you have tribulation, but . . . I overcame the world" (John 16:33).

No More Sorrow

Jesus' first coming changed everything; the new creation has already invaded our lives. The expected King has come; the promised resurrection of the dead began with Jesus. Just as the Normandy invasion decided the outcome of World War II well before the Nazi-run regime controlling Germany surrendered, so has Jesus' victory on the cross and His resurrection decided the ultimate outcome of spiritual warfare in this world (cf. Revelation 12:5, 10).

Jesus' miracles were signs, foretastes of the promised Kingdom. God often continues to provide such signs in this world, reminding us of His promise of full wholeness in the world to come. Although such signs proliferate especially in conjunction with preaching the Good News and breaking new ground for the Kingdom, God continues to provide reminders elsewhere as well. In the meantime, however, suffering and death remain. Deeper than the signs is the message of the cross: Even when suffering and injustice seem to have the final word, God is at work to bring about His purposes.

The foundations of the New Jerusalem are the twelve apostles of the Lamb (see Revelation 21:14), and the rest of us can be among its pillars (see Revelation 3:12). But John was the only one of those twelve apostles who remained alive when Revelation was given, and even John has now been dead for almost two millennia. We still await the resurrection of our bodies.

Yet the present sufferings cannot be compared with the future glory (see Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17). Present blessings are just a foretaste of what is to come, a reminder in this world of suffering that suffering is not our permanent state or destiny. The Lord will wipe away every tear from our eyes (see Revelation 7:17; 21:4), and death and mourning, crying and pain will all pass away (see Revelation 21:4). Jesus' first coming changed everything; so will His Second Coming. God declares, "Look, I am making *everything* new" (Revelation 21:5, emphasis added).

Who can withstand the temptation and pressure of Babylon the prostitute, the great city decorated with gold and pearls (see Revelation 17:1–5)? Those who have paid attention to enough of God's faithfulness that they trust His promise of New Jerusalem the Bride, an incomparably greater city *built* of gold and with *gates* of pearls (see Revelation 21:9–21).

Better than a Temple

Our present experiences of worship are but a shadow of the truest worship in heaven and especially in the New Jerusalem. Heaven is a place of worship, and so it is furnished like a temple. It has the tabernacle (see Revelation 7:15; 13:6; 15:5) or temple (see Revelation 7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5–8; 16:1, 17) and the Ark of the Covenant (see Revelation 11:19). It has a sea (see Revelation 4:6; 15:2), like Solomon's Temple (see 1 Kings 7:23–25, 39); it has altars of sacrifice and incense (see Revelation 6:9; 8:3–5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7) and golden bowls of incense (see Revelation 5:8; cf. Revelation 15:7). God's servants there have harps (see Revelation 5:8; 14:2; 15:2), like priestly musicians in the Old Testament Temple.

By contrast, the New Jerusalem on the new earth is said to have no temple (see Revelation 21:22). This picture of the New Jerusalem is greater than the pictures of heaven earlier in Revelation. Of course, it contrasts with more than Revelation's earlier pictures of heaven. Nearly all cities of John's day had temples, and Jewish people expected a new Temple. The Temple's explicit absence in the New Jerusalem does not suggest that God has forgotten the future Temple promised in Ezekiel, which was many times more massive than any temple Israel had previously known (see Ezekiel 40–48). God provided Ezekiel that design so that God's people could see His favor toward them and be ashamed of their unfaithfulness to Him (see Ezekiel 43:10–11). Interpreters debate whether Ezekiel's design will occur before the New Jerusalem or merely foreshadows it; but in any case, biblical images of the future are only vague pictures compared to the reality to come. As Paul reminds us, we have neither seen nor heard the wonders that God has prepared for us; we experience merely a foretaste of them by the Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 2:9–10).

So Why Does the Great New Jerusalem Have No Temple?

The New Jerusalem needs no Temple because the entire city *is* a temple. Revelation declares, "I did not see a temple in it, because the Lord God almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (21:22). When John sees the New Jerusalem descend from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband (see Revelation 21:2), he hears an accompanying declaration: "Look! God's tabernacle will be with people, and He will dwell [using the Greek verb related to "tabernacle"] with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them" (Revelation 21:3). *Nothing is better than the presence of Jesus, and we will experience His presence fully forever and ever!*

Better than the New Jerusalem being a temple city, however, is that it is like the Temple's *most* holy place, the locus of God's fullest presence. The New Jerusalem is shaped like a cube; its length and breadth and height are the same. (Some might contrast that shape with the number of evil, 666, which in geometry is a doubly triangular number.) A cube was the shape of the holiest place in Solomon's Temple (see 1 Kings 6:20), the place that only the high priest could enter once a year (see Hebrews 9:7). The difference is that the New Jerusalem will be incomparably larger! At more than 2 billion cubic miles (or more than 10 billion cubic kilometers), the new holiest place is over 10 quadrillion times larger than the earlier one, which was 27,000 cubic feet or 765 cubic meters (thanks to Chris Keener, whose Ph.D. is in physics, for helping with the math here).

This image seems to be a very graphic, apocalyptic way of saying that the city is far larger than we can possibly imagine. It makes the supposedly "great city" of this world, Babylon (see Revelation 11:8; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18–21), look smaller than a flea in a herd of elephants or a pea on a mountainside. Its floor plan alone is over seven times larger than France; it could cover about half the present United States, the Middle East or Europe. That is just its floor plan, however; in cubic measurements, the New Jerusalem may be about half the size of the moon! (Not that John's contemporaries had much idea of the moon's size.)

Perhaps more important are the specific figures used in the Greek text of Revelation 21:16: 12,000 stadia times 12,000 stadia times 12,000 stadia, mismatched with a wall of only 144 cubits (about 200 feet or 60 meters). The

mismatched size of the wall may invite us to look for something more than the literal significance of these numbers. These figures recall numbers with which the careful reader of Revelation will already be familiar: the 144,000 followers of the Lamb, standing with Him on Mount Zion (see Revelation 14:1).

This is God's city for God's people, where all of us who follow the Lamb, whether Jewish by birth or Gentiles grafted in by faith, will dwell. Notice that Revelation elsewhere includes Old Testament end-time promises for God's people, not only ethnically Jewish believers such as Michael, but also people from all nations (Gentiles—Craig, for example) who follow Jesus. One may compare, for example, Revelation 5:9–10 with Exodus 19:6; or Revelation 7:9, 16–17 with Isaiah 25:8 and 49:10. The Old Testament already foreshadows this welcome of loyal Gentiles among God's people (e.g., in Isaiah 19:23–25; 56:3–8; Zechariah 2:11.)

Paradise Restored

Revelation's New Jerusalem resembles Ezekiel's glorious future, yet far transcends it. Ezekiel promised a life-giving river flowing from God's Temple in Jerusalem (see Ezekiel 47:1–5, 8–10), with many trees on both sides that bear perennial fruit and healing leaves (see verses 6–7, 12). Since Scripture can speak of God enthroned above the cherubim in the holiest place (e.g., 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalms 80:1; 99:1), one can envision Ezekiel's river flowing from God's throne.

But as with Ezekiel's Temple, Revelation's picture of the river again goes beyond Ezekiel's. Here the river of the pure water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb (see Revelation 22:1). Yet what grows around it is not merely a series of perennial trees, as in Ezekiel, but the perennial tree of life. Now its leaves bear healing explicitly for *all* nations (see verse 2). The tree of life harks back to the Garden of Eden, from which also a river flowed that became the source of four great rivers (see Genesis 2:9–10). That is why Revelation has already located that promised tree of life in the paradise of God (see Revelation 2:7); the Greek word here for "paradise" (*paradeisos*) is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2:8–16; 3:1–10, 23–24). Moreover, there will be no more curse (see Revelation 22:3)—a reversal of the curse against the earth that followed the fall (see Genesis 3:17).

With Noah, God initiated His plan to reverse the curse (see Genesis 5:29; 8:21) through a seed eventually narrowed to Abraham and David and finally to our Lord Jesus Christ, who bore all the curse for us (see Galatians 3:13). In the renewal of the creation that Jesus purchased, the curse will be no more. Paradise will be restored.

Toward the end of Revelation we find these words:

And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" Let whoever hears likewise say, "Come!" And let whoever is thirsty come. . . . He who testifies to these matters says, "Indeed, I am coming quickly!" Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Revelation 22:17, 20

This is our prayer. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Notes

Chapter 1 Some Questions to Consider

1. Distinctions such as those in John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1955), 87–88; and Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 101–103, are never incompatibilities; they simply depend on arguments from silence where some passages omit details that some other passages include.

2. Note that in cases like this, the usual pre-Tribulational insistence on literalism (Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 41, 56–58) falls silent!

3. Arthur D. Katterjohn, *The Rapture—When?* (Wheaton, Ill.: A. D. Katterjohn, 1975), 58–59.

4. Pre-Tribulationalists sometimes recognize that their case rests on inferences but object that the post-Tribulational case also rests on inference. See, e.g., Allen Beechick, *The Pre-Tribulation Rapture* (Denver: Accent Books, 1980), 76. The primary post-Tribulational inference, however, is simply that if the Bible does not affirm something, we cannot claim that it does.

Chapter 2 How We Left Behind Our “Left Behind” Theology

1. Likewise, Walvoord, a leading traditional defender of pre-Tribulationalism, supported “an attitude of Christian tolerance . . . toward those who differ on this doctrine” (*Return of the Lord*, 89).

Chapter 3 Pre-Pre-Trib

1. For more detailed surveys, see, e.g., George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 20–34; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation: A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 172–188.

2. E.g., The Epistle of Barnabas 4.5, 13; Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses (Against Heresies)* 5.28.4; 5.29.1.

3. Didache 16.4–8; Shepherd of Hermas 6.7–8; 23.5. Escaping tribulation there means being protected from it (Hermas 23.3–4).

4. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.35.1.

5. For amillennialism and other views, see also Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1992).

6. See Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 19–23, 65–69, 143–44; and Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation: A Biblical and Historical Study of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 41, 56, 64–65; cf. also J. F. Strombeck, *First the Rapture* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1982), 30, 59, 140.

7. Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 62. I adapt this survey of views from there.

Chapter 4 Shall We Dispense with Dispensationalism?

1. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, vol. 18 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 257.

Chapter 5 Does the Old Testament Support a Pre-Trib Rapture?

1. I understand the flood to be universal rather than local. For a classic defense of the worldwide flood, see John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications*, 50th anniversary ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2011); for a more recent study, focusing on Noah’s Ark, see John Woodmorappe, *Noah’s Ark: A Feasibility Study* (Dallas: Institute for Creation Research, 1998). See further Philip Ernest Williams, *The Archeological Evidence of Noah’s Flood* (Charlotte, N.C.: Christian Leaders & Scholars Press, 2011). Craig prefers the more local approach of Reasons to Believe (www.reasons.org): the Flood covered only the limited part of the earth that humans inhabited (the Hebrew phrase can mean “all the land”).

2. See, e.g., *Bible Prophecy: 16 Proofs of a Pre-Tribulation Rapture* (Prattville, Ala.: Making Life Count Ministries), <http://storage.cloversites.com/makinglifecountministriesinc/documents/16%20Proofs%20of%20a%20Pre-Trib%20Rapture.pdf>.

3. Already a generation after Matthew, Christians understood this passage with reference to Jesus gathering the Church into His Kingdom at the end of the age (see Didache 10.5).

4. Nathan E. Jones, “Why I Believe in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture: 11 Reasons Why Jesus Will Come Back before the Tribulation,” Lamb & Lion Ministries, <http://christinprophecy.org/articles/why-i-believe-in-a-pre-tribulation-rapture/>.

5. *Ibid.*

Chapter 6 There Is Only One Second Coming

1. John F. Walvoord, *Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age*, reprinted by the Theological Journal Library, <http://walvoord.com/book/export/html/324>.

2. Revelation was written after 1 Corinthians but coheres with it. See Craig’s treatment in chapter 8.

3. “What Is the Difference between the Rapture and the Second Coming?,” Got Questions Ministries, <https://www.gotquestions.org/difference-Rapture-Second-Coming.html>.

4. Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. James Ernest (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 3:54–55.

5. Here are other verses with *apokaluptō* (to reveal): Matthew 10:26 (secret words being revealed; see also Luke 12:2); Matthew 11:25, 27 (see also Luke 10:21–22); 16:17; John 12:38; 1 Corinthians 2:10 (God revealing things); Luke 2:35 (secret thoughts); Romans 1:17–18 (righteousness and wrath revealed); 8:18; 1 Peter 5:1 (future glory); 1 Corinthians 3:13 (works revealed by judgment fire); 14:30 (prophetic word); Galatians 1:16 (Son revealed to Paul); Galatians 3:13 (faith revealed); Ephesians 3:5 (mystery of the Gospel); Philippians 3:15 (further insights); 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 6, 8 (man of lawlessness to be revealed first!); 1 Peter 1:5 (future salvation); 1:12 (our salvation revealed to the prophets).

6. The quotation marks within this passage indicate that Jesus is citing several verses from the Old Testament.

7. See Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1997), 343–344, 347–351; see also Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 563–564, 575–583.

8. Note that in the Septuagint, *sunteleia* occurs twice in both Daniel 12:7 and 13, meaning that the word is found six times in this chapter.

Chapter 7 Evaluating Some Pre-Trib Arguments

1. See, e.g., Strombeck, *First the Rapture*, 95, 133.

2. Strombeck sees experience of that future Tribulation as incompatible with God's love for us, in contrast with present experiences of tribulation (*First the Rapture*, 45, 177).

3. See Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 41.

4. Walvoord, *Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, 10; Beechick, *Pre-Tribulation Rapture*, 10, 18–19; Strombeck, *First the Rapture*, 11–13, 135.

5. E.g., Strombeck, *First the Rapture*, 151.

6. Those who want to include the Tribulation in the Day of the Lord so they can apply it to both the beginning and end of the Tribulation (e.g., Strombeck, *First the Rapture*, 46–54) want to have their cake and eat it, too. Not only does this approach handle the text inconsistently, but it falls into the same fallacy of applying words differently that is evident in Michael's Uncle Fred illustration.

Chapter 8 Post-Tribulational Passages

1. And perhaps the "end" already mentioned in Daniel 12:6 (cf. verse 9).

2. Heaven is "out," not just "up." We have a foretaste of its spiritual dimension now, united with Christ in the heavenlies (see Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1–2). Jesus' ascension to heaven was His exaltation (see Acts 2:33; 5:31; Ephesians 1:20; Philippians 2:9; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). He is already reigning until all His enemies are put under His feet (see Acts 2:35; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 10:13); His current reign is the "already" aspect of the Kingdom's "already/not yet."

3. I adapt the following table from Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014), 590.

Chapter 9 What Is the Tribulation?

1. Michael Gryboski, "Billy Graham's Warning to American Churches: 'Prepare for Persecution,'" *The Christian Post*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/billy-graham-warning-american-churches-prepare-persecution-148764>.

Chapter 10 How to Live in Light of Post-Tribulationalism

1. Clarence Larkin, "The Failure of Christianity," in "Anchored to Pure Christianity" (Fig. 1), BCFi Mega Manila District Resources, May 1, 2017, <https://mmdchurchworkers.blogspot.com/2017/05/anchored-to-pure-christianity.html>.

2. For the varied interpretations of Revelation 12, see Keener, *Revelation*, 312–325. See also Craig S. Keener, "One Thousand Two Hundred Sixty Days: A Charismatic-Prophetic Empowerment Reading of Time and God's People in the Book of Revelation," in *But These Are Written . . . : Essays on Johannine Literature in Honor of Professor Benny C. Aker*, eds. Craig S. Keener, Jeremy S. Crenshaw, and Jordan Daniel May (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 235–246.

3. Florence Taylor, "Muslims Converting to Christianity in Nigeria, despite Brutal Persecution," *Christian Today*, February 24, 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/muslims-converting-to-christianity-in-nigeria-despite-brutal-persecution/80567.htm>.

4. Eberhard Arnold, ed., *The Early Christians in Their Own Words* (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough, 1997), 20.

5. Literally, it is "gates of hades," a familiar expression in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (and in Greek literature more generally) for the realm of death. Some suggest that in context its point here is that even martyrdom (see Matthew 16:21, 24–27) cannot stop the Church. The protest against a theology that accepts martyrdom (verse 22) is deemed satanic (verse 23). See discussion in Keener, *Matthew*, 270–277; Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 427–435.

6. Some claim that John 9:4, where Jesus tells His disciples, "Night is coming when no one can work," speaks of the need for us to work for God now before the Tribulation comes. But the idea that no one can work for God during the Tribulation belies the texts about testifying for Christ during the Tribulation (see Revelation 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 20:4). Worse yet, this is a conspicuous example of the need of pre-Tribulationists to take Scripture out of context to support their views. With inferior lighting, people in antiquity normally could work only during daylight. The night in this context is when Jesus is no longer in the world (see John 9:5). Jesus' public ministry will soon be over, and His works will not continue again until Jesus imparts the Spirit after His resurrection; for such a transition time see, e.g., John 16:19–22; cf. perhaps Mark 2:19–20; Luke 22:53. Nowhere in John's gospel does *night* or *darkness* refer specifically to the Tribulation period.

7. Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2016), loc. 645–647, Kindle. For these statistics, Hurtado relies on scholars such as Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4–13.

8. See, e.g., Scott Manning, "World Population Estimates, Interpolated and Averaged," *Historian on the Warpath* website archives, <http://www.scottmanning.com/archives/World%20Population%20Estimates%20Interpolated%20and%20Averaged.pdf>.

9. Craig also argues this in Craig S. Keener, "The Plausibility of Luke's Growth Figures in Acts 2.41; 4.4; 21.20," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity & Judaism* 7 (2010): 140–163.

10. Michael L. Brown, *The Revival Answer Book: Rightly Discerning the Contemporary Revival Movements* (Ventura, Calif.: Renew, 2001), 255–257.

11. "World Christian Growth Statistics!," Prayer Foundation, http://www.prayerfoundation.org/world_christian_growth_statistics.htm.

12. "State of the World: Growth of the Church," The Traveling Team, <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/growth-of-the-church>.

13. For a more complete discussion, see chapter 7, section "Removing the Restrainer," and chapter 8, section "An Escape from (Post-) Tribulation?"

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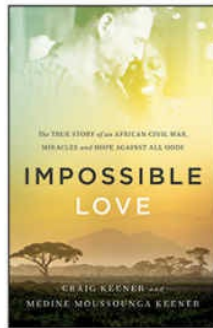
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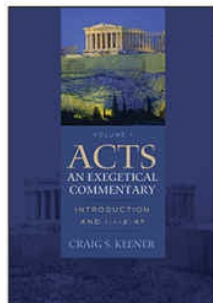
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