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The Rapture of the Church

The study of the rapture is of great significance to church-age believers, since the rapture represents the completion of our salvation, the redemption of our physical bodies. Paul says in Romans,

[8:22-25] We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we have been saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

The redemption of the body is the great hope shared by every believer in Christ. It is the teaching of the New Testament that for the church-age saint that hope will be realized in an instant, when Christ suddenly appears in the sky to resurrect the dead, and to transform the bodies of living believers into their glorified form as they are caught up to be with Christ.

Biblical Background

The existence of the church (the Body of Christ, *cf.* Col.1:24) was not revealed in the Old Testament (Eph. 3:1-10), and since the rapture relates exclusively to the church, there is no reference to the rapture in the Old Testament. Christ was the first to mention the rapture (Jn. 14:2-3), but He gives few details other than disclosing that Heaven is the destination of the raptured saints. Jesus says,

[Jn. 14:2-3] In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

It is Paul who develops the rapture theme, mentioning it in eight passages (Rom. 8:20-23; 1 Cor. 15:35-38; Eph. 1:13-14; Phil. 1:6,10; 3:10-11,20-21; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 4:13-18; Tit. 2:11-14). From Paul's writings we learn the following facts about the rapture. 1) The spirits of those believers who have died will return with Christ for the resurrection of the body (1 Thess. 4:14). 2) The dead in Christ will rise first (1 Cor. 15:52-53; 1 Thess. 4:15-16). 3) Living believers will be "changed" (*i.e.*, their bodies will be transformed into "glorified" bodies) and caught up to meet Christ in the sky (1 Cor. 15:52-53; 1 Thess. 4:17). Paul also mentions that the church is not destined for the wrath of God to be poured out upon the earth during the day of the Lord, but to the obtaining of salvation by means of the rapture (1 Thess. 1:1-10; 5:9, *cf.* Rom. 5:9).

James mentions the rapture and associates it with personal accountability before Christ, possibly alluding to the judgment seat of Christ immediately following the rapture (Jam. 5:7-9). Peter equates the rapture with the completion of salvation (1 Pt.1:3-5). John mentions the rapture twice, and alludes to the transformation of the bodies of believers at the appearance of Christ (1 Jn. 2:28; 3:2). He further indicates that the bodies received by the saints will be like Christ's own glorified body (3:2, *cf.* Phil. 3:20-21).

Description of the Rapture

The only detailed descriptions of the rapture are given by Paul and occur in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. In 1 Corinthians, Paul states:

[15:51-53] Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead in Christ will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

Paul also describes the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, where he says:

[4:13-18] Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Several important points flow out of these statements. 1) The details of the rapture were a mystery until revealed through Paul. 2) At the rapture, Christ will appear in the sky; He will not descend all the way to the earth as He will at the second coming. 3) He will be accompanied by the souls of the church-age believers who have died, returning to receive their resurrection bodies. 4) He will call believers, both the dead and those living, to Himself in the sky. (Notice how the description of the rapture differs significantly from that of the second coming, when Christ actually returns to the earth and remains (*see* Table 8.1, p. 223.) 5) The event will be signaled by a shout from an archangel and a trumpet call. 6) The dead in Christ will be raised first, then those who are alive will be "changed" (*i.e.*, their bodies will be transformed into glorified bodies suited for eternity). 7) Believers who are alive at the time of the rapture will, in a fashion reminiscent of Enoch and Elijah in the Old Testament, escape physical death. 8) The entire event will happen almost instantaneously. 9) The raptured saints will always be with Christ.

The Old Testament saints are not included in the rapture of the church. God has a special purpose for the Old Testament believers, as well as for those who are saved after the rapture; they will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennium (Dan. 12:13; Rev. 20:4). Those who believe in Christ after the rapture and survive the tribulation unto the second coming will enter into the millennium in their natural (untransformed) bodies and repopulate the earth (Isa. 65:17-25). Thus, it appears that only the church participates in the

rapture. In order to understand this, we must grasp the unique nature of the church, and how God's program for the church and Israel differ.

The Unique Nature of the Church

It is God's plan to consummate the salvation of those belonging to the Body of Christ (the church) at the rapture, and it is the unique nature of the church that makes this possible. It is this fact that makes the differences between dispensationalism and covenantalism, which we discussed previously, so important.

Every saved person in history fits somewhere in the plan of God, but every saved person in history is not necessarily part of the church. (We are not speaking of the visible, organized church, which includes both saved and lost, but the invisible "Body of Christ," *cf.* Col. 1:18,24). The reason the church is a subset of believers (instead of all believers that have ever lived) is because the church did not exist until the Holy Spirit began baptizing believers into the Body of Christ on the day of Pentecost A.D. 33 (Acts 1:5 *cf.* 1 Cor. 12:13). Therefore, the Old Testament saints, though occupying a special place in the plan of God, are not part of the Body of Christ. This is also true of people saved after the rapture; they occupy a special place in God's program, but they are not part of the church.

The church and Israel are distinct entities

Contrary to the position of covenantalism, God did not abandon His plans for the true descendants of Abraham; that is, those who are His children by both birth and faith, (Rom. 9:6-9). He has every intention of fulfilling His promises to Israel (*cf.* Psa. 105:8-11; Jer. 33:20-26; Rom. 11:1-36), and this is the basis for belief in a literal, earthly kingdom beginning at the second coming of Christ and extending into eternity. The fact that Israel as a nation rejected their Messiah, and God from both Jew and Gentile forged a new entity – the church – did not nullify God's program for Israel. It merely postponed it until Israel responds to God's grace in the future. In fact, one of the primary purposes of the tribulation is to bring Israel to faith in Christ.

It is true that church-age saints share in the distinction of being designated “children of Abraham.” Abraham is, metaphorically speaking, the father of all who believe (Gal. 3:6-9,29, *cf.* Gen. 12:3). The blessings that the church enjoys have their roots in the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:8-9). However, it would be incorrect to interpret this to mean that Israel and the church are the same, or that the church is merely a new form (a “spiritual” form) of Israel, or that the nation’s promised blessings have somehow been transferred to the church (owing to Israel’s rejection of Christ). While church-age believers are called “children of Abraham,” the church is never called “Israel,” and Israel is never designated as “the Body of Christ.” Although Galatians 6:16 is sometimes cited as an example of the church being referred to as “Israel,” the church is not mentioned in this passage; Paul is merely drawing a distinction between those who were outwardly Israelites, by birth and tradition, and those who were “the Israel of God,” by birth and faith (*i.e.*, saved Jews). In saying this, he nullified the argument of the Judaizers that one must be circumcised to be right with God – since even the Jews could only be saved by faith! The presence of saved Jews in the church (referred to as, “the Israel of God”) does not equate the church with Israel; the duality of these two is strictly maintained in the New Testament. In Romans 11:1-36 where Paul gives the analogy of the root and the branches, it is worth noting that he never pictures both the church and Israel as the same, or even attached to the root (the source of blessing) at the same time. The root in this passage seems to represent the rich blessings that flow from Abraham’s faith and God’s response to that faith in His promises. Israel was attached to the root at one time, but because of their rejection they were broken off, and a new entity – the church – was grafted in. At some point in the future, when Israel responds in faith to their Messiah (Zech. 13:7-9), they will be grafted back in again (Rom. 11:23-24). In fact, this entire analogy can make sense only if Israel and the church are distinct entities (in this analogy, distinct “branches”). Otherwise if we took Israel and the church to mean the same thing, this passage would make no sense at all. [Paul would be saying, “Israel was broken off because of unbelief, and Israel is grafted in Israel’s place because of belief, but someday if they do not remain in unbelief, Israel will be grafted back in again.” Such an interpretation is simply nonsensical. The meaning and significance of this passage only comes into sharp focus when we see that Israel and the church are two distinct

entities.] While it is true that Israel and the church share a common heritage in the faith of Abraham and God's promises to him, they are nonetheless distinct; just as two children may have the same parent and be loved equally, but be born at different times, have different names, and have different expectations made of them by that same parent.

Israel and the church have been given distinct prophetic programs

Nowhere is the critical distinction between Israel and the church more significant than in the study of prophecy. The reason is that both the church and Israel occupy unique places in the overall prophetic program. God's promises to Israel, as embodied in the Old Testament promises and prophecies, is for a land, a nation, an earthly kingdom (with Messiah on the throne), and a special and perpetual relationship with God. The fountainhead of these promises, as we have seen, is the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3,6-7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 22:15-18); and they are further developed in the Palestinian covenant (Deut. 29:1-30:20), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:12-17), and the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), as well as numerous prophetic passages dealing with the kingdom (Ps. 98:1-9; Isa. 11:1-12:6; 25:1-12; 32:1-8; 35:1-10; 40:3-11; 66:1-24; Jer. 33:10-26). On the other hand, the church is nowhere promised a land, descendants, a nation (or kingdom on earth) though it does share in the promise of a special relationship with God, and a heavenly home (1 Jn. 1:3; 3:3; Jn. 14:1-3).

The extent of the church age

As previously noted, the church did not exist prior to the commencement of Spirit baptism on the day of Pentecost A.D. 33. The biblical basis for this assertion is as follows. 1) The church is "the Body of Christ" (Col. 1:18,24), and Spirit baptism is the operation that makes a person a member of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Since the Spirit's ministry of baptism did not begin until the day of Pentecost, it is not possible that believers who died prior to that time could be included as a part of the church. 2) The disciples recognized that Pentecost marked the beginning of the church (Acts 11:15-16). 3) Jesus indicated the church to be a future reality from the standpoint of His earthly ministry (*cf.* Matt. 16:18, note the future tense,

“I will build my church”). 4) The nature of the church age as a parenthetical age, distinct from God’s program for Israel, is reinforced by its complete absence from Old Testament prophecy, which delineates God’s program for Israel in minute detail. 5) The church is never mentioned in any prophecy of the tribulation. Prophecies of the tribulation invariably center on Israel – in the New Testament as well as the Old. This is not proof that the church is absent, but rather that the focus is on Israel as a distinct entity. The fact that the tribulation was revealed in the Old Testament as part of God’s program for Israel and the existence of the church was not revealed, coupled with the fact that the New Testament never specifically mentions the church in any tribulational prophecies, indicates that the church age is parenthetical to God’s program for Israel. This concept is again reinforced by the observation that a number of Old Testament passages mention events of both advents of Christ with no indication of a break or dislocation of time (*e.g.*, Isa. 61:1-3). Thus, it should be apparent from the reasons given above that the church age extends from Pentecost, A.D. 33, to the time it is removed from the earth sometime prior to the outpouring of divine wrath at the day of the Lord.

Views on the Time of the Rapture in Relation to the Tribulation

The timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation has been the subject of much discussion, and several options have been proposed. Whether one approaches this subject from a dispensational or covenantal frame of reference will predispose one toward one set of views or another. Covenant theology leads naturally to a “post-tribulational” view of the rapture, equating it with the second coming, though there are significant differences among covenant premillennialists and covenant amillennialists. Among dispensationalists, who view the church and Israel as distinct, all of the views fall into what might be termed a “pre-wrath” categorization, with the rapture occurring prior to the outpouring of divine wrath. However, not all dispensationalists agree as to how much of the tribulation period is divine wrath. Historically, the “pretribulational” view—that the rapture occurs prior to the beginning of the tribulation—has been the most popular position among dispensationalists. However,

there are other views associated with dispensationalism. “Midtribulationism” places the rapture in the middle of the tribulation. “Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view” places the rapture sometime in the second half of the tribulation. “Partial rapturism” places the rapture prior to the tribulation, but holds that only those believers who are prepared will be raptured; the rest will be left to go through the tribulation. Finally, the “imminent pre-wrath view” (the view posited by the author) holds that the rapture is imminent and will occur before God’s wrath is poured out, but not necessarily before the tribulation begins (though it certainly could occur at any time, since it is imminent). The imminent pre-wrath view rejects the assertion that the entire tribulation is divine wrath, and as such recognizes a “window” for the timing of the rapture (extending from the present to the time at which God’s wrath is poured out, possibly late in the tribulation period). This view differs from all the others in that it does not “fix” the rapture at a specific point on the timeline.

Before looking at individual views, it is important to note that the proofs employed by all of these views are almost wholly deductive in nature. There is no single passage of Scripture that explicitly states when the rapture occurs. Therefore, the student of prophecy must be especially careful to employ both sound interpretative principles, and sound logic in determining what this information means.

Pretribulationism

Pretribulationists believe that the rapture must occur prior to the beginning of the tribulation. While it may seem to be splitting a hair, it is important to distinguish the “possibility” of a pretribulation rapture (as held under imminent pre-wrath rapturism), and “pretribulation-ism,” which holds that the rapture must occur before the tribulation begins. Maintaining that the rapture *must* occur pretribulationally carries a much heavier burden of proof than does acknowledging the mere possibility of a pretribulation rapture. In order to sustain its position, pretribulationism must provide convincing evidence (either biblical or theological) of the church’s absence from every part of the tribulation. While numerous arguments have been put forth in support of pretribulationism, the following are the stronger arguments.

The rapture is an imminent event

The concept of “imminency” means that the rapture could happen at any moment, *i.e.*, it is without any known precursory events (that is, known by man). Interestingly, it would not be necessary to prove imminency in order to establish pretribulationism. Pretribulationism could, potentially, be established from the wrath argument alone (see below), assuming the wrath argument were to hold true; then imminency could simply be inferred from pretribulationism. However, most pretribulationists prefer to use imminency as a primary proof (perhaps because of the lack of other primary arguments). This results in an incomplete proof, because while imminency does provide a powerful argument against the views that make the rapture subsequent to various tribulation events (*i.e.*, the “fixed-point” views like midtribulationism, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view, and posttribulationism), it does not prove pretribulationism exclusively, since one can hypothesize a non-pretribulational position that is also consistent with imminency (*e.g.*, the imminent pre-wrath view). The use of imminency to prove pretribulationism is actually a reductive fallacy; we will explore this further when we come to the imminent pre-wrath view. Nevertheless, imminency is a large part of the usual presentation of pretribulationism. [The term “fixed-point,” as used here, refers to views that place the rapture subsequent to certain tribulation events, thus making the rapture contingent, rather than imminent. Mid-tribulationism, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath rapture, and posttribulationism are all “fixed-point” or contingent views of the rapture.]

The pretribulational argument from imminency goes like this: The Bible indicates that the rapture is an imminent event and the pretribulational position is the only view compatible with imminency. In other words, if the Bible teaches that Christ might return for the church at any moment, that fact implies pretribulationism, since any other view would require at least some intervening events of the tribulation to take place prior to the rapture. For example, the midtribulational view, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view, and posttribulationism all require that certain tribulation events must transpire before the rapture could take place. [This argument is being presented from the pretribulational perspective, and as we will see, pretribulationism is not the only view that is consistent with immi-

nency. Additionally, it is interesting that while most pretribulationists present imminency as proof of pretribulationism, they are almost completely at a loss to prove the doctrine of imminency exegetically; we will discover the reason for this in a moment.]

The church is not to be the object of God's wrath

This is really the core argument of pretribulationism. Interestingly, it is also a core argument for midtribulationism and Rosenthal's pre-wrath view. The difference between those positions and pretribulationism is that pretribulationists bring an important assumption to this argument—that the entire seven-years of tribulation is divine wrath. We will address that assumption later, for now we will simply look at the argument as it is usually presented.

Paul is clear on this point: The church is not to be the object of God's wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess.1:9-10; 5:9). The clearest passage to this effect is in 1 Thessalonians, where Paul says,

[5:9-10] For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

Since this passage appears immediately after a major discussion of the rapture (4:13-18) and the coming tribulation (5:1-8), and it alludes to the two states of the saints at the time of the rapture ("awake" and "asleep" *i.e.*, "alive" and "dead," *cf.* 4:13-18), it is apparent that Paul is referring to the church's rapture prior to the outpouring of divine wrath at the day of the Lord.

The rapture must occur before the second coming

Pretribulationists insist that the rapture must occur before the second coming of Christ. In fact, it would seem that it must occur well before the second coming; the reason is this: If the rapture were to happen at the second coming, all people entering the millennium would enter in glorified (eternal) bodies. Such a condition is clearly incompatible with both Old and New Testament teaching regarding the character of the millennium. The Old Testament teaches that children will be born in the millennial kingdom, and some people

(presumably, the unsaved) will die (Isa. 65:17-25). Revelation reveals that toward the end of the millennium a great rebellion against Christ will occur (Rev. 20:7-9); this presumes the presence of unsaved people in the millennial kingdom; since only redeemed people are admitted into the kingdom (Matt. 25:31-46, *cf.* 7:21-23), it is again apparent some must have entered through birth. Given the fact that people in glorified bodies do not marry and propagate (Matt. 22:30; Lk. 20:34-36), it is obvious that a significant number of saved people must enter the millennium in their natural bodies in order for these events to take place. Yet if the rapture occurred at the second coming it would preclude anyone entering the millennium in a natural body. Posttribulationists have sought to avoid this obvious difficulty by proposing that huge numbers of people who see the rapture occur (at the second coming) will immediately receive Christ and thus be saved, too late to participate in the rapture, but not too late to enter into the kingdom. This is a highly optimistic solution, but it is neither realistic nor biblical. Note the assumptions of such a position. 1) It assumes that Christ will pause in His descent (after the rapture) long enough for the people of the earth to fully comprehend what has taken place and to consider the theological and personal implications. 2) It assumes a higher level of receptivity to the gospel at the extreme end of the tribulation period than previously. This is clearly at odds with the teaching of the New Testament. Both John and Paul indicate that as the tribulation progresses, men's hearts will be darkened, and they will fall under a deeper spiritual delusion than before; they will be hardened in their rejection of God as the period progresses (2 Thess. 2:6-12; Rev. 9:20-21; 16:21). Interestingly, this hardness will actually be a form of divine judgment. Paul says in 2 Thessalonians,

[2:8-12] And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

The tribulation is a resumption of God's prophetic program for Israel

Pretribulationists make the point that the tribulation is a resumption of God's program for Israel, not the church, so there is no reason for the church to be present. That the tribulation represents a return to the prophetic program for Israel can be seen in the prophecy of Daniel's seventy "weeks" (Dan. 9:24-27), in which the seventy "weeks" relate to the nation of Israel (v. 24), with the seventieth "week" representing the tribulation period. According to this argument, since the church age is parenthetical to God's program for Israel (*i.e.*, it occurs outside the prophesied program for Israel, falling between the 69th and 70th "weeks" of the seventy "weeks" prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27), and it is reasonable to assume that the church is to be raptured sometime in advance of the second coming (see the argument above), then it seems reasonable that the rapture should occur prior to the beginning of the tribulation period. This is not viewed by most pretribulationists as a conclusive argument, but rather as a supporting point.

The removal of the "Restrainer" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9

Not all pretribulationists are agreed on the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9; however, some do advance a particular interpretation of this passage as supporting pretribulationism. In this passage Paul says,

[2 Thess. 2:3-9] Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now

holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

Notice that Paul says the day of the Lord will not come until the “man of lawlessness” (the Antichrist) is revealed, and the great “falling away” (or “apostasy”) occurs. According to some pretribulationists, since the “restrainer” almost certainly has to be the Holy Spirit who indwells the church, it is the removal of the church (along with the indwelling Holy Spirit) that allows the Antichrist to come on the scene resulting in the unfolding of the tribulation events. According to this interpretation, the removal of the restrainer occurs just prior to the beginning of the tribulation (and the revealing of the Antichrist follows shortly). Some pretribulationists suggest the apostasy (NIV “rebellion”) or “falling away” (v. 3) may be a veiled reference to the rapture itself.

An examination of the pretribulational arguments

Now that we have familiarized ourselves with these arguments, we need to take a closer look at them. It’s good to remember that not every pretribulationist holds to each of these arguments, and the minor arguments are not dealt with here. (If the major arguments are found to be faulty, the minor arguments are of no help to pretribulationists anyway.) Most pretribulationists do hold to the wrath argument, and most hold to the imminency argument (even though it is an incomplete proof).

The argument that the rapture is imminent

The point of this argument is that the other views (*i.e.*, the mid-tribulational view, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view, and the post-tribulational view) are inconsistent with the concept of imminency

because they “fix” the rapture at a point sometime within the tribulation, thus requiring that some tribulation events must transpire before the rapture can occur. For example, if you fix the rapture at the middle of the tribulation, then the events of the first half of the period must take place before the rapture can occur; likewise with Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view and posttribulationism.

If one were to limit the field of potentially correct views to pretribulationism, midtribulationism, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view, and posttribulationism, then the issue of imminency could be used to identify which one of these four views would be correct. Obviously, the correct view would have to be the pretribulationist view, because it is the only one of these four views that is consistent with imminency. The problem, of course, is the subtle condition necessary for this logic to work. In order for imminency to support pretribulationism, one has to be comparing pretribulationism only with views that “fix” the rapture at a specific point within the tribulation, making it subsequent to (and contingent upon) all of the tribulation events leading up to that point. In such a comparison only the pretribulationist view passes the test, but only because of a reductive error in the procedure (since any additional possibilities are arbitrarily excluded). However, we could postulate a view that says: “The rapture could occur at any time up to the point at which God’s wrath is poured out – whenever that may be.” With such a view we would not be “fixing” the rapture at any particular point either before or during the tribulation, and we have not made it subsequent to any tribulation events, thus we have not violated the principle of imminency; since we would not know when the rapture is going to happen, and it could happen any time, it would still be imminent. While pretribulationists have long equated proof of imminency as proof of pretribulationism, the fact is, the rapture doesn’t have to be pretribulationist to be imminent. As long as we don’t know when the rapture will occur, or what if any events will precede it, it’s still imminent. Therefore, since imminency does not preclude the rapture from occurring within the tribulation, logically it cannot be appealed to as proof of pretribulationism (except that it could be used to rule out any non-imminent views and thus narrow the field of possible views). This will seem a bit odd for many pretribulationists, since imminency and pretribulationism have long been assumed to go

hand-in-hand. Nevertheless, while imminency is compatible with pretribulationism, it is not a proof. We will discuss this further when we come to the imminent pre-wrath view.

The argument that the church is not to be the object of God's wrath

That the church is not to be the object of God's wrath is a fact forcefully declared by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, and is without any doubt "the" quintessential fact with which all students of prophecy must reckon when it comes to the timing of the rapture. For those who assign any degree of literality to the meaning of Scripture, Paul's statement can only be understood to mean that the rapture of the church must occur prior to the outpouring of divine wrath at the day of the Lord. In other words, the extreme terminal point at which the rapture could occur is the moment prior to the outpouring of God's wrath. It is interesting to note that on this point pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and Rosenthal's pre-wrath view all agree. It could rightly be said that each of these theories takes a "pre-wrath" view of the rapture, for each according to its own view of the nature of the events of the tribulation places the rapture prior to the outpouring of divine wrath (as indicated previously, the mid-tribulationist views only the second half of the tribulation as divine wrath, and those who hold to Rosenthal's pre-wrath position view only the last quarter or so as divine wrath). The distinctive feature of pretribulationism is its view that the entire tribulation is divine wrath, thus requiring the rapture to be placed prior to the beginning of the period.

If we look at the full statement of the pretribulationist wrath argument, it goes like this: The church is going to be removed before God's wrath (at the day of the Lord) is poured out upon the earth; the entire seven-year period of the tribulation is divine wrath; therefore, the rapture of the church must occur before the seven-year period begins. Notice that we have a complete syllogism; *the major premise*: the church will be raptured prior to the outpouring of divine wrath; *the minor premise*: the entire seven-year tribulation is divine wrath; *the conclusion*: the church must be raptured prior to the beginning of the tribulation. While it may seem too obvious to state, it is important to observe that this argument is deductive; many pretribulationists when asked to supply proof of pretribulationism

simply quote 1 Thessalonians 5:9 as if that constituted all the proof necessary; it doesn't. 1 Thessalonians 5:9 supports the major premise, but if the argument is to be sustained, the minor premise must also be supported. Herein is the problem with this argument – there is no firm exegetical or theological support for the minor premise (that the entire period is divine wrath). In fact, although the entire argument rests on the validity of the minor premise, one almost never hears this problem addressed in pretribulationist discussions or literature. Generally, pretribulationists reason the minor premise something like this: The tribulation is composed of seven seals; since the last seal is clearly divine wrath (*cf.* Rev. 6:16,17), it is reasonable to assume that they are all divine wrath (a sort of literary homogeneity). The short form of this would be, “a seal, is a seal, is a seal” – if one is divine wrath, they are all divine wrath.

Of course each seal is part of a larger structure, and thus there is some sort of homogeneity. However, that does not mean they all have to be divine wrath. We could just as well suggest that the homogeneity consists in the fact that they are all movements within the same period (*i.e.*, Daniel's seventieth “week,” according to Daniel 9:24-27). Pretribulationists remark that the book of Revelation pictures Christ in Heaven breaking the seals; however, the fact that Christ is sovereign in the unfolding of these events does not mean that they are all characterized by divine wrath. This illustrates one of the central problems in the presentation of pretribulationism – the tendency to make logical leaps where the Bible (or proper theological deduction) fails to connect the dots. Given the scarcity of biblical facts on this subject, proponents of the various positions sometimes fall prey to the tendency of covering gaps in biblical or logical support by stretching terminology to cover those gaps (*e.g.*, “tribulation” = “wrath”). In relation to the seals of Revelation, the Bible does not mention “wrath” until 6:15-17, which is after the breaking of the sixth seal. So far, attempts to characterize the earlier seals as divine judgment are based on assumptions rather than exegetical or theological proof. As we will see later in this discussion, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9 may well indicate that the day of the Lord doesn't begin until sometime after the middle of the period. We should also point out that whether a feature (such as a seal) constitutes divine wrath cannot be made based solely on the fact that it occurs during the seven-year period, or even its level of severity. Whether or not an

event constitutes divine wrath depends on the divine intent concerning the event (*i.e.*, whether or not it is intended as retribution). Since this speaks to intent, unless Scripture tells us that an event is divine retribution, or unless the nature of the event is such that only God could be the direct and active cause, it would be impossible for us to know that it is divine wrath. This is particularly important in understanding tribulation events, which seem to represent a mixture of distressing events, some caused by man's actions, some by the powers of darkness, and some intended by God as retribution. If we confuse these, we will never get a clear picture of what is actually happening in the tribulation, and we could fall into the trap of attributing evil to God.

There is an additional problem for the pretribulational position in viewing all of the seals as divine wrath. The time of the fifth seal (Rev. 6:9-11 *cf.* Matt. 25:9-10) involves the martyrdom of many Christians. Pretribulationists are at a loss to explain how the severe suffering and deaths of so many of God's faithful could be the direct result of divine wrath. Of course, believers have died for their faith in every generation. The issue is not that believers are going to die; it is whether God makes saved people the objects of His wrath. Unquestionably, divine wrath is by nature "active" rather than passive. If the fifth seal is divine wrath, then it depicts God making saved people the objects of His wrath. If on the other hand the fifth seal encompasses events that God has sovereignly decided to allow, it is the direct causes (Satan, his agents, and evil men) who will be responsible for this evil, not God. That the events occurring during the time of the fifth seal represent unspeakable moral evil allowed by God, rather than divine wrath directed by God, can be seen from the fact that the martyred saints appear in Heaven beseeching God for justice in avenging their deaths (Rev. 6:9-11). To maintain that the fifth seal is divine wrath is to imply that God is the cause of this injustice. If God will judge the evil committed against believers who are to be unjustly killed during the time of the fifth seal (which He is pictured as doing in Revelation 8:1-6, *esp.* v. 3, *cf.* 6:9-10), how can it be held that the fifth seal is God's righteous judgment (wrath) upon the world? Granted, God at times uses evil people to accomplish His purposes, but does He direct evil people to target and destroy the faithful as an act of divine justice? Unless God directs wrath at His faithful, the martyrdom during the time of the fifth seal must repre-

sent God passively (yet sovereignly) allowing evil to express itself, in which case it can hardly qualify as divine wrath. Suffice it to say, the fifth seal is an enormous obstacle to the argument that all of the seals are divine judgment.

Whatever one's view of the fifth seal, the fact is that pretribulationism has failed to provide proof (either exegetical or theological) supporting its premise that the entire seven-year period is divine wrath; and because of that, the wrath argument fails as a proof for pretribulationism.

The argument that the rapture must precede the second coming

This argument is sound; however, it is only useful in refuting posttribulationism, since the other views all allow for a period of time between the rapture and the second coming; though Rosenthal's pre-wrath view occurs so late that it might run into difficulty with the spiritual delusion sent upon unbelievers during the second half of the tribulation (2 Thess. 2:10).

The argument that the tribulation is a resumption of God's program for Israel

While it is a true statement that the tribulation is about Israel, not the church, that in itself does not necessitate a pretribulation rapture. It is possible that just as there was overlap between the existence of national Israel and the church between A.D. 33 and 70, there could be overlap between the church and Israel in the tribulation. Our theological categories are not always as neat in reality as they appear on paper, and we must acknowledge the possibility of transitions. This is one of those arguments that if one is already committed to the pretribulation view makes perfect sense, but really has no probative value.

The argument from the removal of the "restrainer" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9

This argument, based on a rather precarious interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9, says that the church must be absent from the tribulation because the Holy Spirit who indwells the church will be removed prior to the manifestation of the Antichrist (which is assumed to refer to the Antichrist's coming to power at the beginning

of the tribulation). This argument is based on several assumptions. 1) The passage never actually mentions the Holy Spirit, nor is the identity of the “restrainer” given, so it is assumed (by pretribulationists) that it is the Holy Spirit – an assumption that might or might not be true. 2) The passage says nothing about the church or the indwelling of the church by the Holy Spirit. 3) The passage does not indicate that the restrainer is taken from the earth. Of course, the Holy Spirit must be present on earth in order for anyone to be saved after the rapture. [Proponents of this argument say that only the “indwelling” presence is removed, but this both begs the question and assumes that the tribulation saints are not indwelt, which is entirely without biblical or theological justification. It isn’t the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit that uniquely defines the church, but His work of baptizing believers into the Body of Christ.] 4) The passage says nothing about the rapture. This argument is really a series of “dots” with no connecting lines. If one is already a pretribulationist, pretribulation content can be poured into this passage, but it would be impossible to argue pretribulationism simply on the basis of what this passage actually says.

A better interpretation of this passage is that it refers to the unveiling of the Antichrist at the middle of the tribulation, and the martyrdom and subsequent apostasy among professing Christians that will occur beginning shortly after the middle of the tribulation. In Matthew 24:4-28, Christ describes this very sequence. If the connection between 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9 and Matthew 24:4-28 proves to be correct (and it certainly seems so), then not only does this passage say nothing about a pretribulation rapture, it clearly indicates that the day of the Lord (the container for the wrath of God, among other things) cannot begin until sometime after the abomination in the temple, which occurs in the middle of the period, thus further weakening the pretribulation position by moving the onset of divine wrath to a point late in the tribulation period. (This passage will be discussed in more depth under the imminent pre-wrath view.)

Midtribulationism

The midtribulational view has been almost entirely eclipsed by Rosenthal's pre-wrath view. (In many ways Rosenthal's view is an extension of midtribulational thinking.) Midtribulationists hold that the rapture will occur approximately in the middle of the tribulation. The basis for this view is a chronology of the tribulation that places the rapture in Revelation 11:11-15, equating the seventh trumpet of Revelation (11:15) with the trumpet call of the rapture (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). Revelation 11:11-12 reads:

[11:11-12] But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

According to this view, since the church is not raptured until the seventh trumpet of Revelation, which midtribulationists view as occurring at the midpoint of the period, the seals and trumpets of Revelation cannot be equated with divine wrath, since that would result in the church suffering the wrath of God. Midtribulationists generally view the seals and trumpets as human or satanic wrath, similar to persecution in any age but far more intense (*see* Figure 8.2, p. 215).

There are numerous problems associated with midtribulationism. 1) The passage cited as the "rapture" in Revelation 11:11-12 is not a description of the church being raptured, but the two witnesses of God being resurrected and caught up into heaven. 2) The sounding of the seventh trumpet of Revelation does not occur until 11:15, which is actually not associated with the supposed "rapture" event of 11:11-12. In the biblical descriptions of the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16 the trumpet of the rapture precedes the event, in contrast to the midtribulational scenario which would require the trumpet to sound well after the event is completed. Therefore, the seventh trumpet of Revelation cannot be equated with the trumpet of the rapture. 3) The passage cited (Rev. 11:11-12) occurs in one of the two recursive sections of Revelation, disconnected from the main timeline of the book (*see* Figure 7.5,

p. 171) Actually, the event to which Revelation 11:11-12 refers occurs very near the end of the tribulation – not in the middle as suggested by midtribulationists (see Figure 7.7, p. 179).

Rosenthal's pre-wrath rapture view

The view discussed here is that put forth by Marvin Rosenthal and popularized in his book, The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church. Other proponents have popularized the same, or similar views, but we will focus on Rosenthal's ideas as representative since his writings seem to have done more to advance the "pre-wrath" viewpoint. It is unfortunate that this particular pre-wrath view has been labeled as "pre-wrath rapturism," since pretribulationism and midtribulationism are also pre-wrath views; proponents of these three positions simply disagree as to how much of the tribulation is divine wrath. Because of the almost certain confusion which might otherwise result from the use of the term "pre-wrath," we will refer to this view as "Rosenthal's pre-wrath view" to distinguish it from pre-wrath positions in general (*i.e.*, any view which places the rapture prior to the outpouring of divine wrath).

Rosenthal's pre-wrath view of the rapture divides the tribulation period into three distinct time periods: "the beginning of sorrows" which occupies the first three and one-half years; "the great tribulation" beginning at the midpoint of the period and extending to approximately the breaking of the seventh seal (possibly eighteen to twenty-four month prior to the second coming), and "the day of the Lord" beginning approximately at the breaking of the seventh seal and culminating at the second coming (see Figure 8.2, p. 215). According to this view only the day of the Lord represents divine wrath. Since the church need only escape the period of divine wrath, the rapture need not occur until just prior to the outpouring of that wrath, or approximately eighteen to twenty-four months prior to the second coming of Christ. It is important to understand that this view doesn't simply establish a "last point" at which the rapture could occur. It "fixes" the rapture at this late point in the tribulation period, making a connection between the trumpet of the rapture and the trumpet judgments of Revelation. This view, along with midtribu-

lationism and posttribulationism are referred to here as “fixed-point” views, since they fix the rapture at some point within the tribulation period, resulting in a contingent (non-imminent) view.

Arguments used in support of Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view

As mentioned previously, Rosenthal’s view has many similarities with the midtribulation view, but is more complex, and employs a more accurate chronology of the tribulation than does midtribulationism. It is apparent that midtribulationism must have been the prototype for this view. Rosenthal gives the following arguments in favor of his pre-wrath view.

The “beginning of sorrows” and “the great tribulation” are not divine wrath

The difficulties of the “great tribulation” (as defined by Rosenthal) do not represent divine wrath, but rather the wrath of man and Satan (consequently the same is true of the beginning of sorrows); therefore, there is no theological necessity for the church to be absent from “the great tribulation.” Recall that according to this view, “the great tribulation” precedes the outpouring of divine wrath. (See, Figure 8.2, p. 215.)

The day of the Lord does not begin until late in the second half of the tribulation

The day of the Lord, which is the time of divine wrath, does not commence until the breaking of the seventh seal. This is based on the observation that the seventh seal embodies the celestial judgments, which elsewhere in Scripture seem to be characteristic of the day of the Lord (*cf.* Joel 2:30-31; Isa. 13:9-10). In fact, according to Rosenthal, Joel 2:30-31 implies that the day of the Lord cannot begin until these signs are manifested. Joel says:

[Joel 2:30-31] I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood [before] the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. [Brackets added]

Elijah must come before the day of the Lord

Malachi 4:5-6 indicates that Elijah will be sent before the coming of the day of the Lord. If Elijah is to be identified as one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3, then the day of the Lord probably could not commence until sometime after the midpoint of the period.

The rapture trumpet is likely associated with the trumpets of Revelation

Rosenthal suggests that the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 is most likely a reference to the trumpet judgments embodied in the seventh seal. (Note the last trumpet of Revelation is blown in 11:15.) Believers will be raptured in connection with the trumpets of Revelation, but before the outpouring of divine wrath embodied within the bowl judgments. (Again, note the close similarity with midtribulationism.)

Problems with the arguments for Rosenthal's pre-wrath view

Each of these arguments is deficient in some way; let's now take a closer look at them.

The argument that the beginning of sorrows and the great tribulation are not divine wrath

Even if Rosenthal is correct in saying that divine wrath is limited to the last seal, or a portion of it, that fact in itself does not mean the church will be raptured so late in the period. Since Scripture does not indicate how far in advance of divine wrath the rapture might occur, it is possible that the rapture could occur much earlier than the terminal point suggested by this argument. Indeed, one could suggest that there might be other considerations in the timing of the rapture than simply the necessity of escaping divine wrath. For instance, it might be necessary for the rapture to happen earlier than Rosenthal proposes simply to avoid the problem of the spiritual delusion that will take hold during the second half of the tribulation. (Since there will need to be a considerable number of people saved after the rapture, it is difficult envisioning that happening if the unsaved world is under a strong spiritual delusion.) At best this

argument is only useful in establishing a terminal point at which the rapture could occur; it cannot establish when the rapture must (or even, “might”) occur.

The argument that the day of the Lord does not begin until late in the second half of the tribulation

The notion that the day of the Lord does not begin until sometime in the second half of the period is consistent with Paul’s statements in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9. However, Rosenthal’s argument that the day of the Lord cannot begin until the celestial events are manifested is based on a faulty understanding of the word “before” in Joel 2:31. This argument depends upon the word “before” [Heb. *lipnâ*] meaning “to precede in time.” However, *lipnâ* commonly means “at.” In other words, Joel was simply saying that these celestial events will be observed “at” – or “in connection with” – the day of the Lord, not necessarily “before” the day of the Lord begins. In any case, the point hardly matters, since as stated in connection with the first argument (above), the rapture could occur at any time prior to divine wrath; it does not have to occur immediately prior to the day of the Lord.

The argument that Elijah must come before the day of the Lord

The argument that the day of the Lord cannot begin until Elijah comes, as one of the two witnesses in the tribulation, is faulty on two counts. First, there is no biblical evidence to prove that Elijah is to be one of the two witnesses in the tribulation. Revelation, which is the only book to mention the two witnesses, does not state their identity (Rev. 11:3-13). Second, Christ on two occasions declared the Malachi 4:5-6 prophecy to be fulfilled; He said that Elijah did come in the person of John the Baptist (Matt. 11:14; 17:11-12). Matthew 17:11 is not a prediction of a future coming of Elijah, but a recognition that he had already come (typically) in the person of John the Baptist; verse 12 makes this clear. However, even if the point were conceded that Elijah himself must come before the day of the Lord begins, that still would not necessitate that the rapture occur in the second half of the period; at most it would only counter pretribulationism’s contention that the entire tribulation is divine wrath. It is possible that in the divine plan, John was a substitute for Elijah (in “typical” form) because God foreknew His Son would be rejected; but that in

the future He will send Elijah to that generation of elect Jews He has determined will receive His Son. In any case, this has no bearing on when the rapture will take place, other than to help identify the terminal point at which the event could occur (*i.e.*, the onset of the day of the Lord).

The argument that the rapture trumpet is likely associated with the trumpets of Revelation

The identification of the rapture trumpet in 1 Corinthians 15:52 with the trumpets of Revelation is completely erroneous. The trumpet call in 1 Corinthians 15:52 (as well as 1 Thessalonians 4:16) precedes the rapture and announces deliverance, whereas the trumpets of Revelation would have to follow the rapture and announce judgment. Since the trumpets of Revelation are blown over a period of time, the last of these trumpets (11:15) would be considerably removed in time from the supposed rapture event in Revelation 11:11-12, and therefore cannot be equated with the trumpet signaling the rapture. There is simply no exegetical basis for connecting the trumpet of the rapture with the trumpets of Revelation, though some might try to make a connection based on the observation that both are either stated, or implied, to be “last” trumpets. However, this identification is erroneous since “last” is a relative, not an absolute idea. To illustrate this, we can simply point to the fact that the seventh trumpet in Revelation isn’t even the last trumpet blown in the tribulation. The last trumpet of the tribulation is blown at the second coming (Matt. 24:31); however, in relation to the distinct events to which they pertain they are all, relatively speaking, “last.” The rapture trumpet is the last trumpet of the church age, the seventh trumpet of Revelation is the last of the trumpet judgments, and the trumpet at the second coming signals the final great event of the period.

An additional problem

Rosenthal’s view is inconsistent with the notion of an imminent rapture, since it “fixes” the time of the rapture after the sixth seal is broken and connects it with the trumpet judgments; thus implying that the rapture cannot occur until after certain tribulation events are past. (Support for imminency will be discussed further under the

imminent pre-wrath view.) The greatest difficulty with this view, other than the lack of positive support for the individual arguments, is its incompatibility with imminency.

The partial rapture view

The partial rapture view is not widely held, nor was it ever; it claims there will be a partial rapture prior to the beginning of the tribulation (similar to pretribulationism), but not all believers will be taken — only those who are prepared will be raptured — the remainder who are not raptured will be left to go through the tribulation. Support is derived primarily from the following passages: Matthew 24:40-51; 25:1-13; Luke 20:34-36; 21:36; Philippians 3:8-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; 2 Timothy 4:8; Hebrews 9:24-28, and Revelation 3:3 and 3:10. Partial rapturists believe that each of these passages in some way indicates that only believers who are waiting expectantly at the time of the rapture will be taken.

Arguments used in support of the partial rapture view

Matthew 24:40-51 and Luke 21:36 are the same discourse. The passage does not teach that participation in the rapture is conditioned on works, but rather on salvation. Note that the “evil servant” is not simply left behind, but “He [the Master] will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” which cannot describe the future of a believer. Rather, these servants evidence the validity of their belief by their actions (*cf.* Jam. 2:18-20). Those who are evil (in the sense of this passage) only manifest that they do not belong to Christ. The parallel passage, Luke 21:36 says, “*Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.*” Pretribulationists counter the use of this passage by asserting that it, and the parallel passage in Matthew 24:36-44, are spoken in relation to the second coming, not the rapture. While this is a convenient solution (for pretribulationists), it poses even greater problems, and as we will see later is certainly incorrect. Even if this passage is spoken in relation to the rapture, it still does not support partial rapturism since the passage says nothing about only part of the church being removed. It is a

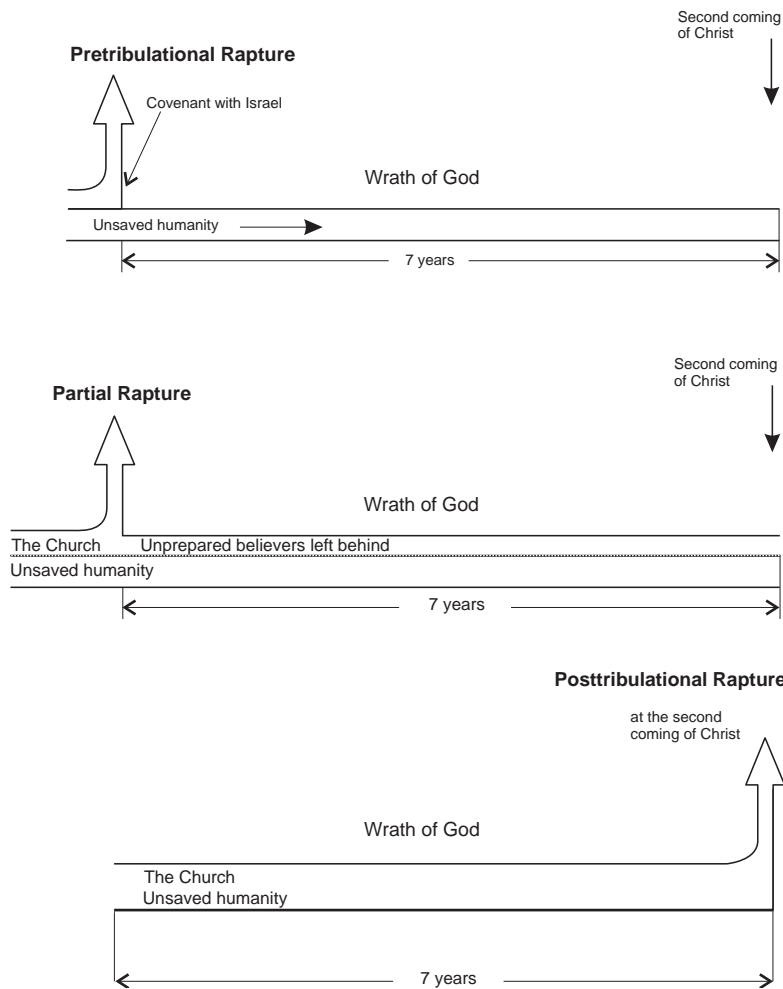


Figure 8.1 Comparison of Pretribulationism, Partial Rapturism and Posttribulationism

These three views are similar in that they all view the entire seven-year period as divine wrath—though they view both the nature of the church and the wrath somewhat differently.

general admonition to believers, as a group (Gr. *deomenoi*, “you [plural] implore”), concerning the future of believers, as a group (Gr. *katischusete*, “you [plural] may be able to escape”).

Matthew 25:1-13 records the parable of the ten virgins. While pretribulationists characteristically deny that this is spoken in reference to the rapture, it does seem to continue the theme from the previous chapter, which ends with a discussion of the imminency of the rapture (*cf.* 24:36-51). [Some pretribulationists deny that Matthew 25:1-13 relates to the rapture because they deny 24:36-51 relates to the rapture. Although we will discuss this in more detail later, we simply note here that they do this for two reasons: 1) because they see problems for pretribulationism from the parallel passage to 24:36-44, which is Lk. 21:36; and 2) they are reluctant to see a discussion of the rapture in such close proximity to a description of the second coming (24:29-31).] For now, acknowledging that the parable of the ten virgins does indeed refer to the rapture of the church, this passage still does not support partial rapturism. The reason is that this is a parable of “the kingdom of Heaven” (25:1), and we know from other parables (*cf.* Matt. 13) that the kingdom of Heaven includes the invisible kingdom (those truly saved), as well as those that merely “profess” belief, but are not redeemed (*see* Figure 5.1, p. 65). In the parables of the kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13 the duality of saved and lost within the kingdom of Heaven is illustrated by: plants that yield fruit *versus* spouts with no root that dry up, a tree *versus* birds lodging within the tree, wheat *versus* tares in the same field, dough *versus* leavening in the same lump, and good fish to be kept *versus* bad fish to be discarded (but gathered in the same net). Based on a proper understanding of the nature of the kingdom of Heaven (see the discussion of the kingdom of Heaven in chapter five: *The Kingdom of God and the Millennium*, p. 62, and Appendix F: *The Kingdom of Heaven and the Course of the Present Age*, p. 361), we must conclude regarding the virgins who had no oil, and of whom Christ said, “*I do not know you,*” that they represent those who, while professing faith in Christ, have never been born again. (They are sprouts without root, birds in the tree, tares in the field, leavening in the dough, uneatable fish in the net. They are “reformed” but not “transformed,” *cf.* 2 Pet. 2:22.) Therefore, since the unprepared virgins do not represent redeemed people, they cannot represent Christians left behind at the rapture.

Luke 20:34-36 mentions those who “are considered worthy of taking part in that age (*i.e.*, the millennium) and in the resurrection from the dead.” There is no mention of the rapture, nor is there any link between particular works and entrance into the kingdom. Scripture teaches that one becomes “worthy” to enter God’s kingdom by faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8-9).

In Philippians 3:11, Paul mentions that his goal is to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Partial rapturists have interpreted this statement to indicate that apart from works, Paul could not count on being included in the rapture. The construction of this passage in the original is somewhat complicated grammatically, since the very long sentence that ends with verse 11, actually begins in verse 8. What Paul is saying in this extended sentence is that faith in Christ results in four things: knowing Him, knowing the power of His resurrection, knowing the fellowship of His sufferings, and being conformed to His death. This last item, “becoming like Him in His death,” results in one’s ultimate participation in the resurrection [Gr. *éi*, “so that” (A.V. “if by any means”)—shows the conditional relation of resurrection to “becoming like Him in His death”]. Paul makes a similar statement to this effect in Romans 6:5, where he says, “*For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.*” How does a person become “united with Christ” in the “likeness of His death,” or be “conformed to His death?” The answer is, “by faith” (Philp. 3:9). This identification is not something Christians strive for, it is something that becomes a reality the moment a person exercises faith in Christ. Paul is arguing in both of these passages that a Christian’s life ought to reflect the inner spiritual reality of union with Christ, not that Christians ought to strive to obtain that union, for they already possess it. Thus, Paul was not implying any uncertainty regarding his future participation in the rapture.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:6, believers are contrasted with the unsaved, who will be caught off guard at the end of the age. Although believers are enjoined to be watchful, there is no hint in this passage that failure to do so could result in being left behind at the rapture.

In 2 Timothy 4:8, Paul makes reference to the crown of righteousness that he and all who have longed for Christ's appearing will receive. Partial rapturists suggest that those who do not "long" for Christ's appearing will not receive the crown because they will miss the rapture and be left on earth to go through the tribulation while the rest of the church is in Heaven receiving their rewards. First, we should note that the rapture is not mentioned in this passage. Second, "all who have longed for His appearing" seems to be a figurative expression for "believers" (*i.e.*, a descriptive label). Paul has been talking about the fact that he is ready to die (v. 6). He knows that God has a reward for him, and for all the saints (they are, after all, the ones who have "longed for His appearing").

The argument from Hebrews 9:28 is identical to the argument employed from 2 Timothy 4:8; therefore, the answer is the same, "those who are waiting for Him (Christ)" is a descriptive label for "believers," not an additional qualification for participation in the rapture.

Revelation 3:3, which occurs within the context of the letter to the church at Sardis, urges the church to remember and obey what they had received, else Christ might come suddenly to deal with them. The "coming" mentioned here is not the rapture. Rather, it is a threat that if this church does not get back on course, Christ will deal with it in discipline. This same thought is expressed to the churches at Ephesus (Rev. 2:5) and Pergamum (Rev. 2:16), and is clearly not associated with the rapture in either case.

The argument from Revelation 3:10 is that God promised the Philadelphian church he would keep them from the hour of testing because they obeyed His command to endure patiently. The difficulty with attempting to use this passage in support of the partial rapture position is that the promise is to the entire church, not merely to watchful individuals within the church.

The principal flaws in the partial rapture position are its failure to recognize the unity of the Body of Christ and the fact that participation in the rapture, which is the completion of one's salvation (Rom. 8:23), is conditioned only upon faith in Christ, not faith plus works. Partial rapture as one might guess from its line of argu-

mentation, appeals principally to those of Arminian persuasion – though it should be pointed out that partial rapturism has had limited appeal even among Arminians.

The imminent pre-wrath view

Like pretribulationism, the imminent pre-wrath view maintains that the rapture is imminent, but it also recognizes that pretribulationism's premise that the entire tribulation is divine wrath is not provable. Therefore, this view maintains that while the rapture could occur at any time, it is not essential that it occur before the tribulation begins.

Arguments supporting the imminent pre-wrath rapture view

The rapture is imminent

The rapture is an imminent event – on this the New Testament is clear. Unfortunately, the current debate on imminency has largely been framed by argumentation between pretribulationists and those holding to non-imminent views (*i.e.*, the fixed-point views). Pretribulationists argue for imminency (since it is inconsistent with the fixed-point views), and proponents of the fixed-point views have attempted to show that imminency is not taught in the New Testament. To make matters far more complicated, pretribulationists have almost universally abandoned the strongest (and only direct) biblical support for imminency due to secondary theological complications – which will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The fact that the Lord's return for His church is imminent is clearly taught in Matthew 24:36-44, which is the definitive statement of this doctrine. In this passage the Lord says,

[Matt. 24:36-44] No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will

be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

This passage contains the most explicit statement of the imminency of the rapture found in the New Testament; any view on the timing of the rapture must be consistent with this doctrine. Were it not for the “fog” created by the pretribulation/fix-point debate, we could simply end our discussion of imminency here. Unfortunately pretribulationists, who have been the principal defenders of the doctrine in the past, have done a very poor job in defending imminency and have left the doctrine open to attack from fix-point proponents. Therefore, we need to take a look at how pretribulationists dropped the ball and what we can do to demonstrate that imminency is the clear teaching of the New Testament.

Matthew 24:36-44 (as well as Matthew 25:1-10) was spoken in regard to the rapture, and it unequivocally teaches the imminency of Christ’s return for His own at the rapture. However, pretribulationists fear that acknowledging this passage as a reference to the rapture might ultimately lend support to posttribulationism (since the immediate context of vv. 36-44 is the tribulation and the second coming, *cf.* vv. 4-31), or that it might lend support to partial raptureism (since the parallel passage in Luke 21:36 has been used as support by partial rapturists). They also see dire implications for pretribulationism flowing out of Luke 21:36. If this passage refers to the rapture, it implies a degree of uncertainty with respect to its timing in relation to the tribulation. As a result, some contemporary pretribulationists have taken the position that this passage refers not to the rapture, but to the second coming. This interpretation effectively deals with the secondary theological issues mentioned above; however, in the process it makes the defense of imminency very difficult, since Matthew 24:36-44 is the first mention and principal explication of this doctrine. In fact, Christ’s teaching is so clear that the New Testament writers saw no need to reiterate this truth; what

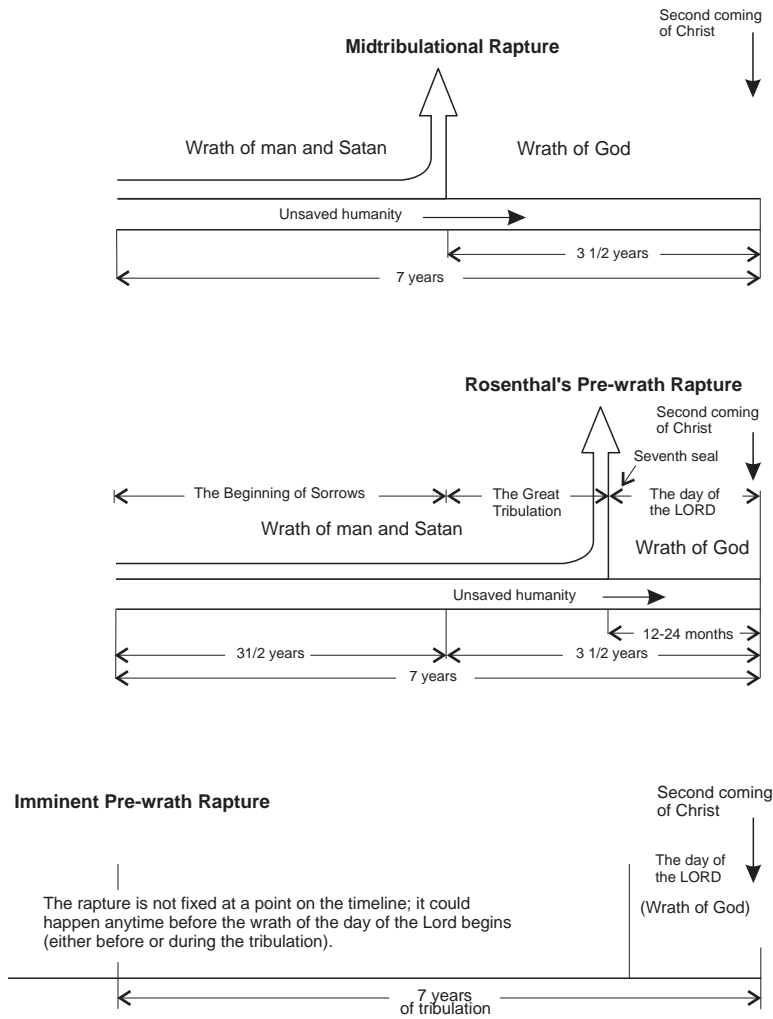


Figure 8.2 Comparison of Midtribulationism, Rosenthal's Pre-wrath View, and the Imminent Pre-wrath View

These three views are similar in that they do not view the entire seven-year period as divine wrath. The imminent pre-wrath view is the only one of these three views that is compatible with imminency. Both midtribulationism and Rosenthal's pre-wrath view are "fixed-point" views, in that they "fix" the rapture at a particular point within the tribulation, thus making the rapture subsequent to certain tribulation events and therefore non-imminent.

we have from them is simply the non-contradiction of the doctrine. Proponents of the fixed-point views have been very quick to pick up on this dilemma. In a strange twist of circumstance, pretribulationists have actually done far more damage to the case for imminency than their opponents. Without the principal text to positively expound the doctrine, all they have left is simply the non-contradiction of imminency from the remainder of the New Testament (and early church history), which is at best, evidence in the negative (*i.e.*, the non-statement of anything to the contrary).

So, how do we know that Matthew 24:36-44 refers to the rapture and not the second coming? Actually the identification is rather simple. We know this passage must refer to either the rapture or the second coming, and on the basis of comparison it seems impossible that it could be referring to the second coming. The appearing of Christ as described in this passage is secret (vv. 36,42,44), unannounced and unexpected (vv. 36-39, 43,44), and instantaneous (vv. 40-41). Yet Christ, in the immediate prior context, stated the opposite in regard to His second coming (*i.e.*, it will be public (vv. 27-28), and attended by signs (v. 30), not to mention that it will be possible to calculate the exact day of Christ's return once the abomination in the temple occurs (based on information contained both in Daniel and in Revelation). So, on the basis of comparison it is apparent that this passage can only have been spoken in reference to the rapture. (For a discussion of Matthew 25:1-10, which also deals with the rapture, see that passage under the previous discussion of partial rapturism.)

Now let's take a look at how (some) pretribulationists justify the interpretation of this passage as referring to the second coming instead of the rapture, and why that interpretation is incorrect. It is asserted that Matthew 24:36-44 cannot describe the rapture because the flood analogy from verse 39 indicates those "taken" are taken in judgment – as was the case at the flood. (Obviously, if the ones taken in Matthew 24:40-41 are taken in judgment, this passage could not be a description of the rapture.) Matthew 13:49 along with other verses in Matthew 13 that speak of the removal of the unrighteous at the end of the age (associated with the second coming) are offered in support of this interpretation. However, the contention that those "taken" in Matthew 24:40-41 are taken in judgment at the second coming is not correct for the following reasons. 1) The reference to

those “taken away” in the flood in 24:39 is not analogous to the ones “taken” in vv. 40-41. Those who mistakenly identify the ones taken in verses 40-41 with those taken away by the flood (in judgment) do so because they press the analogical details of the flood illustration beyond what it was intended to illustrate. In this case the flood is simply an illustration of the sudden and unexpected nature of the event under discussion in verses 40-41. While it might be easy to make this misidentification from the English text, since the words “took them all away” (v. 39) and “one will be taken” (vv. 40-41) employ the same English root word (“taken” or “took”), implying a parallel; the Greek text employs an entirely different vocabulary for those the flood “took” (v. 39, Gr. *ere*, from *airô*, meaning, “to be taken away, or forsaken,” cf. Matt. 26:56; Mk. 1:18; 14:50), and those “taken” in verses 40-41 (Gr. *paralambonetai*, meaning, “to receive to one’s self,” cf. Jn. 14:3). In view of this, it hardly seems likely that the Lord intended for those “forsaken” (in judgment) at the flood to be a parallel to the ones “taken” (i.e., “received to Himself”) in verses 40-41. That being the case, there is no reason to believe that those “taken” in vv. 40-41 are taken in judgment—the major reason for assigning this passage to the second coming. Given the description of this event, as we noted above, it fits only the rapture. 2) The passages cited as support from Matthew 13 refer to a completely different time and event when Christ, at his second coming, will remove the unsaved (c.f., Matthew 25:31-46). There is simply no connection between the Matthew 13 material and the event described in Matthew 24:36-44. 3) Regarding the parallel passage in Luke 21:36 Christ says, “Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” The pretribulationist interpretation of this passage as referring to the second coming—simply to avoid obvious theological difficulties for pretribulationism arising out of connecting it with the rapture—is presumptive in that it assumes pretribulationism, and it assumes there is no other reasonable interpretation of this passage; both of these assumptions are false. It could just as well be that this passage is simply an injunction similar to the one in Matthew 24:20, and as we have already seen pretribulationism is far from proven.

Christ taught imminency, and as we have seen (see the discussion of imminency beginning on page 195), imminency does not require the rapture to be pretribulational – it simply requires that the timing of the rapture not be viewed as contingent upon any prophesied future events. The correct view of the rapture must be compatible with imminency; nevertheless, since both the pretribulational view and the imminent pre-wrath view are compatible with imminency, imminency cannot definitively answer the question of which view is correct. Ultimately, the correct view will be the one that is compatible with imminency and that meets the burden of proof imposed by its own assertions. While pretribulationism and the imminent pre-wrath view are both consistent with imminency, as we have seen, pretribulationism has failed to meet its burden of proof by demonstrating that the church *must* be absent from the entire seven-year tribulation period.

The rapture must precede the period of divine wrath

As stated earlier in the discussion of pretribulationism, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 states what is, without a doubt, “the” quintessential fact with which all students of prophecy must reckon when it comes to the relative timing of the rapture. Paul says in 5:9-10, “*For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.*” This statement is clearly intended to convey that the rapture of the church (explained in 4:13-18) will occur prior to the outpouring of the divine wrath associated with the day of the Lord (described in 5:1-3). Paul’s reference in 5:10 to those who are “awake” (alive) and those who are “asleep” (dead) clearly reflects back to 4:15-18 (though employing different terminology in the original), which describes the two states of believers at the time of the rapture. If those in 5:10 who are “awake” and “asleep” are not the same as those who are “awake” and “asleep” in 4:15-18, who are they? The contextual identification is clear. Paul explicitly states that the saints, both the living and the dead, will be received to Christ (by means of the rapture described in 4:13-18) before God’s wrath comes at the day of the Lord. In other words, the extreme terminal point at which the rapture could occur is the moment prior to the outpouring of God’s wrath at the day of the Lord. Of course, since the rapture is an imminent event it could occur at any moment prior to the terminal

point (including pretribulationally). While it is certain that the church will not suffer the wrath of God, that does not directly argue for pretribulationism since, as we have already observed, it cannot be proven that the entire tribulation period is divine wrath. In fact, Scripture appears to indicate to the contrary that not all of the tribulation period is divine wrath. In the following paragraphs the case will be presented that the day of the Lord, which encompasses the period of divine wrath, is almost certainly confined to the latter part of the seven-year period – likely the seventh seal itself.

Of the three major portions of Scripture from which it is possible to discern any tribulation chronology (Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:3-31; and Revelation 6-19) the only passages that specifically delineate elements of the tribulation as “divine wrath” are Revelation 6:16-17; 15:1 and 16:1. Revelation 6:16-17 says,

[6:16-17] ...and they said to the mountains and to the rocks,
“Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits
on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great
day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand.”

This statement is made immediately after the occurrence of the sixth seal. Whether it is spoken in an actual or “anticipatory” sense is not known. It is certainly possible that the sixth seal (physical disturbances in the sky and on the earth) is the final warning that God’s wrath is imminent, since it portends events which elsewhere in Scripture are specifically linked to the day of the Lord (*e.g.*, Isa. 34:4). In any case, there can be absolutely no doubt that the seventh seal to follow includes divine wrath. Both Revelation 15:1 and 16:1 specifically associate the bowl judgments, which occur during the time of the seventh seal, with divine wrath.

[Rev. 15:1] I saw in heaven another great and marvelous
sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues – last be-
cause with them God’s wrath is completed.

[Rev. 16:1] Then I heard a loud voice from the temple
saying to the seven angels, “Go pour out the seven bowls
of God’s wrath on the earth.”

While the passages cited above do not prove the events that precede the seventh seal are not divine wrath, they underscore the lack of biblical support for the notion that the first six seals are the wrath of God. If all of the seals are divine wrath it would certainly be odd that wrath is not mentioned until after the first six seals are past.

Another passage that seems to indicate that divine wrath is limited to a portion of the second half of the tribulation is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9. Paul states emphatically that the day of the Lord is not going to begin until after the Man of lawlessness (the Antichrist) is “revealed” and the great “falling away” (NASB “the apostasy”), or “rebellion” takes place. Some pretribulationists have interpreted the “falling away” as a veiled reference to the rapture, and the revealing of the Man of lawlessness as a reference to the revealing of the Antichrist at the beginning of the tribulation. However, Paul clearly intends for us to understand the “revealing” of the Lawless One as his revealing in the temple (v. 4), and that event, as we know from Daniel 9:27, occurs at the midpoint. Since verses 3-5 comprise one sentence in the original and must be read together, and the grammatical structure necessitates that the “falling away” and “revealing” are temporally related events, the associated “falling away” or “apostasy” to which Paul refers must be the apostasy that will take place in conjunction with the Antichrist’s revealing in the temple. If we look for a Scripture parallel to these events we don’t have to look far. In Matthew 24:3-25 the Lord outlines the events of the tribulation. In verses 4-8 he outlines the events of the first half of the period, and in verses 9-14 the events of the second half, with what appears to be a recursion (jumping back) to the midpoint beginning in verse 15 (see Figure 7.4, p. 169). The thing we need to notice is that the particulars of the events given by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 is precisely the same set of particulars given by Christ in Matthew 24:9-25. The Lord said the abomination in the temple will be accompanied by false miracles and spiritual deception (v. 24), and will be followed by a great persecution and martyrdom of the saints (v. 9), along with a great “falling away” from the faith (vv. 10-13). Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 describes the same set of events (the revealing of the Antichrist in the temple, with false miracles and spiritual deception, and the associated “falling away” or “apostasy”). If we allow Scripture to interpret itself, we see that both the Lord and Paul

were describing the same set of events. This being the case, Paul could not have been referring to events that will occur at the beginning of the tribulation, he must have been describing events that will occur beginning at the midpoint and continuing forward into the second half of the period. The additional piece of information that Paul's account yields is that the day of the Lord (and consequently the wrath associated with it) will not begin until sometime *after* the events he has described (*i.e.*, in the second half of the period); that pushes the terminal point at which the rapture could occur perhaps well into the second half of the tribulation period. As has been pointed out, this would not violate the concept of imminency, as long as the time of the event itself is left indefinite (not "fixed" to a specific point on the timeline, as is the case with the fix-point views). As we saw in our discussion of the problems with pretribulationism's wrath argument, the fifth seal (martyrdom of the saints), which begins almost immediately after the midpoint, cannot be classified as divine wrath (see the previous discussion on pp. 197-200). That being the case, it seems apparent that divine wrath begins either with the sixth or seventh seal. Since the natural transition in the book of Revelation is between the sixth and seventh seals, rather than between the fifth and sixth seals (again, see the previous discussion of the problems with pretribulationism's wrath argument), it seems likely that the day of the Lord begins during the time of the seventh seal. In any case, the biblical evidence indicates that it does not begin until sometime in the second half of the period. As was said previously, any correct view of the rapture must be compatible with imminency. When we match that with the evidence that the terminal point at which the rapture could occur is actually late in the seven-year period, the imminent pre-wrath view is the only view that meets these criteria.

Classic posttribulationism (or, "covenant premillennialism")

As was said previously, covenant theology manifests itself in three distinct forms: amillennialism, postmillennialism, and covenant premillennialism. Amillennialism and postmillennialism both subscribe to a view of the tribulation (and millennium) that is highly allegorized; in these views the rapture is not really a distinguishable event from the second coming, which according to both of these views occurs after the millennium. (These two millennial views do

not regard the rapture passages as anything other than descriptions of the second coming; therefore, the term “rapture” is not employed in amillennial or postmillennial theology.) The only form of covenantalism that does have a distinct rapture theology is covenant premillennialism. We will look at both forms of covenant premillennialism, commonly referred to simply as “posttribulationism.”

“Classic posttribulationism” is the belief that the church (though defined covenantally) will pass through the tribulation and be raptured in conjunction with the second coming of Christ (*see* Figure 8.2, p. 215). It takes a somewhat more literal view of the tribulation than does “imminent posttribulationism.” Nevertheless, classic posttribulationists do believe in a future tribulation (though less severe than a literal interpretation suggests, thus allowing for the presence of the church).

Arguments used in support of posttribulationism

The arguments commonly offered in support of classic posttribulationism are as follows. 1) There is no evidence that the early church taught pretribulationism. 2) Although the church will suffer the wrath of man and Satan during the tribulation, the wrath of God is specifically directed against the unsaved, not the church. 3) The fact that Christians will be present in the tribulation proves that the church is not absent. (Covenantalists view all saved people as part of the church.) 4) The Bible does not teach that the return of Christ is imminent. 5) The resurrection occurs in connection with the rapture; since a resurrection occurs at the end of the tribulation this proves that the rapture also occurs at the end of the tribulation. 6) The New Testament uses the same words [Gr. *parousia* = “coming,” *apokalupsis* = “revelation,” and *epiphaneia* = “appearing”] to describe both the rapture and the second coming, therefore, they must be the same event.

Problems with the arguments used in support of posttribulationism

1) While early, post New Testament church literature does not appear to teach pretribulationism; neither does it teach posttribulationism or any other view on the rapture. Perhaps owing to the prevailing expectation that the Lord might return at any time (due

The Rapture	The Second Coming
1. Believers are caught up to meet Christ in the sky (1 Thess. 4:13-18).	1. Christ descends to the earth (Zech. 14: 1-8).
2. The dead are raised <i>prior</i> to Christ setting foot on the earth; in fact, He does not actually set foot on the earth at the rapture—He only comes to the sky (1 Thess. 4:17).	2. The dead are not raised until <i>after</i> Christ returns to the earth (Rev. 20:4).
3. Christ takes believers to Heaven (Jn. 14:1-4).	3. Christ ushers believers into the earthly millennium (Rev. 20:1-10).
4. The rapture is virtually instantaneous (1 Cor. 15:52).	4. The second coming occurs over a period of time (Matt. 24:30).
5. The bodies of living saints are “changed” into glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15: 51-57).	5. Living saints go into the millennium unchanged —as evidenced by the fact that they will bear children (Isa. 65:17-25).
6. The rapture was a mystery not revealed in past ages (1 Cor 15:51).	6. The second coming was clearly revealed in the Old Testament (Zech. 14:1-8).

Table 8.1 Contrast of the Rapture With the Second Coming

to Christ's explicit teaching in Matthew 24:36-44), and the complete absence of competing views, they saw no issue to address. 2) The idea that divine wrath poured out during the tribulation period is directed only against the unsaved, is highly inconsistent with a normal/literal interpretation of the events of the period. Many of the judgments of the day of the Lord are global and catastrophic. By their very nature they will indiscriminately affect both saved and unsaved. Only a highly allegorized interpretation of tribulation prophecy could sustain the view that the church, if present, could be unaffected directly by God's wrath. 3) The fact that saved people will be present on earth during the tribulation period does not imply the presence of the church. As has been demonstrated (pp. 186-187), not all believers are part of the church. Just as the church age had a definite beginning at Pentecost in A.D. 33, so it will have a definite ending, which will occur at the rapture. 4) Imminency is explicitly taught in Matthew 24:36-25:13, even though in a strange twist of logic, pretribulationists generally assign this passage to the second coming. 5) Arguing that the rapture occurs at the close of the tribulation, because both the rapture and the second coming occur in connection with a resurrection of the dead, is highly problematic for posttribulationism. The reason is the resurrection that happens at the end of the tribulation actually does not occur until sometime after the second coming. Daniel 12:11-12 indicates that it could occur as much as forty-five days after the end of the tribulation. Revelation 20:4-6 also pictures this resurrection as occurring after the second coming, actually after the binding and confinement of Satan to the Abyss, which is well after the second coming. The problem for posttribulationists, in equating the resurrection at the rapture with the resurrection at the second coming, is that this would require that the rapture happen sometime well after the second coming. There is also a collateral problem in that posttribulationism has to explain where the people come from who enter the millennium in their natural (untransformed) bodies. Generally, the explanation given is that at the moment of the rapture, many of the unsaved realize what has happened, change their minds, and accept Christ before He fully descends to the earth in judgment. However, if the rapture does not occur until after the second coming, there would be absolutely no explanation for the presence of people in their natural bodies in the millennium — since all believers would be transformed prior to entry into the kingdom. Of course, posttribulationists don't really believe

that the rapture follows the second coming; they simply don't take these prophecies literally enough for the inconsistency of their position to come into sharp focus. (If you're going to allegorize future prophecy anyway, why worry about a few small [inspired] details?) In any case, this is a serious defect in posttribulationism, since it illustrates that the resurrection associated with the second coming cannot be the same as the resurrection associated with the rapture. 6) The argument that the rapture and the second coming must be the same event, since the same terms are employed, is not sound because none of the three terms cited is a technical reference for either the rapture or the second coming. The terms *parousia* (coming), *apokalupsis* (revelation), and *epiphaneia* (appearing) are common terms, not technical labels for certain apocalyptic events. Therefore, we should not think it unusual for two discrete events (actually two discrete phases of the same broader event) both to be described using the same common terminology. On the other hand, a thorough comparison of the particulars of the rapture and the second coming demonstrates that they are not the same event (see Table 8.1, p. 223).

Imminent posttribulationism

As mentioned earlier, there are two forms of posttribulationism as held by covenant premillennialists. In addition to classic posttribulationism, which views the tribulation as a clearly recognizable set of events, there is another form that spiritualizes the tribulation to the point of complete non-recognition. This view, referred to as "imminent posttribulationism" takes the position that the church (defined covenantally) could now be in the tribulation, and the rapture and second coming could occur at any moment; consequently this view combines posttribulationism with a belief in imminency. Imminent posttribulationism offers the covenantalist the option of belief in imminency, while still holding to covenantal assumptions about the nature of Israel and the church. The difficulty with this view is that the tribulation must be allegorized to the point of complete non-recognition in order for the view to be workable. Such a position is incompatible with scriptural statements; for instance, Jesus' teaching on the tribulation plainly stated that it will be possible to discern certain events from within the tribulation period and that certain actions will become necessary when those events are recognized (Matt. 24:15-25). How could Jesus make such a statement

if the features of the period are unrecognizable? The level of allegorization of tribulation prophecy required to make this view work is clearly problematic, to say the least.

Summary of Rapture Views

All of the “fixed-point” views (midtribulationism, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view, and posttribulationism) are inconsistent with Christ’s teaching on the imminency of His return for His own (Matthew 24:36-44). Posttribulationism is inconsistent with Paul’s teaching that the church will not experience the wrath of God (1 Thess. 5:9-10). Partial rapturism implies works-based salvation, which is clearly at odds with the general teaching of Scripture. In addition to these problems we have also seen how the arguments advanced in support of midtribulationism, Rosenthal’s pre-wrath view, posttribulationism, the partial rapture view, and pretribulationism are faulty. Finally, while pretribulationism is consistent with imminency, as has been shown, imminency does not require a pretribulational rapture, and therefore cannot be used as a proof for pretribulationism. Also, while correctly holding that the church will not be present on earth for God’s wrath at the day of the Lord, pretribulationism has failed to support its contention that the entire tribulation is divine wrath (a necessary point if the wrath argument is to be used as proof for pretribulationism). When all the facts are considered, what we know about the timing of the rapture is this: 1) it is an imminent event; 2) it must occur before the divine wrath commences at the day of the Lord; and 3) it cannot be proven that the entire tribulation is divine wrath. In fact, Paul’s statement in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9 (*cf.* Matt. 24:9-31) plainly says the day of the Lord (which includes God’s wrath) cannot begin until after the Man of lawlessness commits his abomination in the temple (which according to Daniel 9:27 occurs at the midpoint). The imminent pre-wrath view is the only view posited so far that is consistent with these criteria.