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THE CASE FOR THE POSTTRIBULATION RAPTURE POSITION

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PURPOSE, ASSUMPTIONS, AND APPROACH

It is my purpose to present an exegetical and theological argument for the view that the church, or the saints of the present dispensation, will be raptured after the Great Tribulation. This argument makes several assumptions. First, the argument assumes, although it is not necessarily predicated upon, the view that the return of Christ in glory will occur before the Millennium (Rev. 20:4–6). A second assumption is that the Scriptures predict a period of unparalleled distress, called in Revelation 7:14 “the great tribulation,” which will immediately precede the Second Advent. Third, it is accepted that the seventieth week of Daniel (cf. Dan. 9:24–27) has not yet found complete fulfillment and that it is related to the time of unprecedented tribulation.¹

In approaching the topic under consideration, it is especially important that the bearing of ecclesiology on the investigation be made clear. If a radical disjunction between Israel and the church is assumed, a certain presumption against the posttribulational position exists, since it would be inconsistent for the church to be involved in a period of time that, according to the Old Testament, has to do with Israel. However, it is important at the outset to note that a posttribulational Rapture is not necessarily excluded by a view that keeps Israel and the church separate. Thus, if Scripture indicates that both Israel and the church are to experience the Great Tribulation, each could remain on earth during that time as separate entities. Even if it be concluded that the Great Tribulation is for Israel only, is it not a priori impossible to think that the church

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¹ Footnote reference included.
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will remain on earth during that period without undergoing this climactic affliction.²

In other words, a total and consistent separation of Israel and the church does not necessarily entail any specific view of the time of the Rapture. Since this is the case, an approach to the topic that assumes no particular view on this ecclesiological question cannot be deemed illegitimate. Furthermore, such an approach is to be preferred because it paves the way for more objective exegesis of the relevant texts. To begin with a particular view of the relationship of Israel and the church can too easily lead to circular reasoning. One argues that such and such a text cannot refer to the church because it describes the Great Tribulation, which is only for Israel—but one can know that it is exclusively for Israel only on the basis of an exegetical treatment of every relevant passage including the one under scrutiny! Certainly it is preferable to draw tentative conclusions on the larger theological issue (Israel and the church) only after the exegesis has been carried out.

Inasmuch as the Rapture is clearly revealed only in the New Testament, the decisive evidence for its timing with respect to the Tribulation must come from the New Testament also. Furthermore, it is sound hermeneutical procedure to establish a doctrine on the basis of the texts that speak most directly to the issue. Thus, the major part of the paper will be devoted to an exegesis of these texts. However, some foundational issues must be addressed before this important task is begun.

THE TRIBULATION AND THE SECOND ADVENT

The Nature of the Tribulation

While it is the message of both the Old and the New Testaments that the saints experience tribulation throughout history, both also clearly speak of a climactic time of tribulation that will immediately precede the Second Advent. To define the nature of this period, particularly with respect to
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God's wrath, is the purpose of this section. When we turn to the Old Testament, the situation is complicated by the fact that it is often difficult to discern whether a particular description of "tribulation" relates to the Exile, the final judgment, or the "Great Tribulation" as such. The distinction between the latter two is not always recognized, but it would seem to be an important one in discussing Old Testament prophetic texts. For passages that describe the horror of the end itself (e.g., what the New Testament describes as the Battle of Armageddon, etc.), which, according to all three views, follows the Tribulation, cannot be used as evidence for the nature of the Great Tribulation, which precedes the end. Since many of the relevant prophetic texts involve descriptions of the "Day of the Lord," and do not indicate clearly whether the Tribulation or the end itself is envisaged, the problem is a real one. Caution is called for, then, in applying these descriptions to the Tribulation.³

With this in mind, it must be concluded that only in Daniel do we find passages that must refer to the Great Tribulation (cf. especially 7:7–8, 23–25; 8:9–12, 23–25; 9:26–27; 11:36–12:1). Certainly others may describe the Tribulation—Deuteronomy 4:29–30; Isaiah 26:20–21; Jeremiah 30:4–9; Joel 2:30–31; and Zephaniah 1–2, to name a few. But none of the depictions of distress in these passages is clearly distinct from the final outpouring of God's judgmental wrath that occurs only after the Tribulation. In the interests of accuracy, then, it is important to use the texts in Daniel as primary evidence in constructing the Old Testament concept of the Tribulation and employ the other texts only as they corroborate the picture in Daniel.

Two points of relevance for our topic emerge from the texts in Daniel. First, the sufferings of the saints during this period are uniformly attributed to an ultimate oppressor and usurper of God (7:7–8, 20–25; 11:35–48). It is "the little horn" who "wages war against the saints and overpowers them" (7:21; cf. 8:25).

Second, Daniel 11:36 and (probably) 8:19 attest to the existence of divine wrath (δυνάμει) during this period of intense persecution. But nothing is said about the extent or duration
of this wrath nor is it stated that the wrath falls upon the saints. But while Daniel is silent about the extent and objects of this Tribulation wrath, it is significant that a related text, Isaiah 26:20–21, specifically depicts the selective nature of God’s wrath: “Come, my people, enter into your rooms, and close your doors behind you; hide for a little while, until indignation [θυεία] runs its course. For behold, the Lord is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity...”

If this passage refers to the Tribulation, we possess clear evidence that saints on earth are protected from the divine wrath. Even if one argues that this situation obtains only for Israel, it is still important to recognize that God’s people can remain on earth while escaping the wrath. On the other hand, this text may not relate to the Tribulation at all—in which case the principle of selectivity in the exercise of God’s wrath remains. At the least, then, Isaiah 26:20–21 establishes the possibility that God’s people can escape divine wrath though present during its outpouring.

We conclude that the depiction of the Tribulation in the Old Testament includes severe persecution of saints at the instigation of a powerful leader along with a revelation of divine wrath, undetermined in its extent and objects.

Of the forty-five occurrences of the noun θλυψία (“tribulation”) in the New Testament, only five are probably related to the final period of distress (Mark 13:19, 24; Matthew 24:21, 29 and Rev. 7:14), while two others may refer to it (Rom. 2:9 and 2 Thess. 1:6). Rather full descriptions of the Tribulation occur in Mark 13:14–23 and parallels, 2 Thessalonians 2:3–8, and in Revelation 6–16. Before examining these passages in order to delineate the New Testament concept of the Great Tribulation, it is worth observing that the normal usage of “tribulation” occurs in descriptions of the distresses and sufferings that the church experiences in the present age. If it is held that the church is to be exempted from the Great Tribulation, it must be shown that there is something distinctive in quality (not just in quantity) about that period in comparison with the present age.

In keeping with the Old Testament evidence, there is
emphasis in the New Testament portrayal of the Great Tribulation on the persecution of saints by a great antitypical leader, variously characterized as "the desolating sacrilege" (Mark 13:14), "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:3), and the "beast" (Rev. 13:1–8). The Revelation also pictures the Tribulation as a time during which God is judging unbelievers and pouring out His wrath upon them. Two aspects of this presentation in Revelation merit our attention. First, the wrath appears to be concentrated in the last part of the Tribulation period. It is mentioned in Revelation 6:16–17, where the context (cosmic disasters elsewhere said by Jesus to occur "after that tribulation"—(Mark 13:24) plainly indicates that the end has been reached; in 11:18, which again occurs in a context portraying the end; in 14:7, 10, 19, which describe the coming judgment; three times in conjunction with the bowls, which immediately precede the Advent (15:1, 7; 16:1) and twice in descriptions of the Parousia itself (16:19; 19:15). Then, second, the judgments and wrath of God are clearly selective. The demonic locusts of the fifth trumpet are ordered to harm "only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (Rev. 9:4), while the first bowl is poured out only on "the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image" (Rev. 16:2). And the recipients of a number of the plagues are said to refuse to repent (9:20–21; 16:9, 11)—an indication that only unbelievers are affected by them. In other words, there is no place in which the judgment or wrath of God is presented as afflicting saints, and there are indications on the contrary that God is purposefully exempting the saints from their force.

Thus, the New Testament picture is similar to that of the Old Testament. The Great Tribulation is presented as a period of severe persecution of saints then on earth and a time of God's wrathful judgment. But the New Testament is clearer in suggesting that the wrath is confined to the last part of the Tribulation and in specifically indicating the protection from God's wrath afforded to the people of God who live through that time. But, it must be asked, how can they be protected from such universal judgments as, for instance, the death of every sea creature (16:3)? In response, two points can be made.
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First, this constitutes a problem for all interpreters because everyone agrees that saints of some sort will be divinely protected and preserved alive until the Parousia—whether they be part of the church or the Jewish remnant represented by the 144,000 (Rev. 7). Second, the history of Old Testament Israel would suggest that, although God's judgments are never directed toward those who truly belong to Him, the judgments can indirectly affect them. Thus Noah and his family were, to say the least, inconvenienced by the flood. And did not Jeremiah and other true servants of God experience suffering, even death, as a result of God's wrathful judgment upon Judah through the Babylonians?

An important conclusion emerges from this discussion of the nature of the Great Tribulation: there is nothing inherent in it that makes it impossible for the church to be present during it. All agree that no true believer will experience the wrath of God (1 Thess. 5:9), but no description of the Tribulation presents it as a time of wrath upon God's people. All agree that the church experiences tribulation—at times severe tribulation—throughout its existence; but no description of the Tribulation indicates that it will involve greater suffering than many believers have already experienced.

The Vocabulary of the Second Advent

Three words are frequently used in the New Testament to describe the return of Christ: ἀποκάλυψις ("revelation"), ἐπίφανεια ("manifestation"), and παρούσια ("coming" or "presence"). Παρούσια, which occurs most frequently (15 times), should probably be translated "coming," but its associations with the concept of "presence" are probably not lost sight of. Its appropriateness as a characterization of the Lord's return is evident from the fact that it is used in the papyri to designate the special visits of kings. Ἐπίφανεια (5 times with reference to the Second Coming) connotes a decisive divine appearance for the benefit of God's people, while an allusion to the completion of God's purposes is suggested by the term ἀποκάλυψις (5 times).5

What is important to note about these terms is, first, that
each is clearly used to describe the posttribulation return of Christ and, second, that all three also designate an object of the believer’s hope and expectation. The Parousia is indisputably posttributional in Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39 and in 2 Thessalonians 2:8; ἀποκάλυψις has the same time frame in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, as does ἑπιφανεία in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. On the other hand, the Parousia of Christ is explicitly stated to be an object of the believer’s expectation in 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; James 5:7–8; and 1 John 2:28. The word ἀποκάλυψις is presented as an expectation in 1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7, 13; 4:13, while all four references to the ἑπιφανεία in the Pastorals (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1; 4:8; Titus 2:13) bear this significance. If, then, believers are exhorted to look forward to this coming of Christ, and this coming is presented as posttributional, it is natural to conclude that believers will be present through the Tribulation.⁶

However, this would be to proceed far too quickly. It may be that the Second Coming must be divided into two stages: a “coming” of Christ for His church before or sometime during the Tribulation and a “coming” with His church after it. Such a two-stage coming cannot be ruled out a priori, but on the other hand it cannot be accepted unless there is clear evidence for such a division. We have seen that such evidence is not available in the terms used to depict the Second Advent—each of them includes both the Rapture and the posttributional descent of Christ from heaven. The analogy of the Old Testament hope of the coming of Messiah, which in the light of fulfillment can be seen to have two stages, is hardly appropriate. For these two separate stages were only obvious after the fact. Likewise, it is difficult to find evidence for a “two-stage Parousia” in descriptions of Christ’s coming “with His saints.” For in only three texts is mention made of Jesus coming with His saints—Revelation 19:14; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:14–15. In the former two, it is not clear whether those who accompany Christ are angels or believers,⁷ in either case, it is important to note that 1 Thessalonians 4:14–15 presents saints as coming “with Jesus” at the time of the Rapture.

Therefore, a study of the vocabulary employed in describing the return of Christ paints a uniform picture: believers
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are exhorted to look for and to live in the light of this glorious event. And, while some texts obviously place this coming after the Tribulation, there are none which equally obviously place it before the Tribulation. However, it may be that a closer look at the contexts in which these terms occur will reveal that there is, in fact, a pretributional aspect to the Second Coming. It is to these texts that we now turn.

THE RAPTURE—THREE BASIC PASSAGES

It will be appropriate to begin our study of these texts with what are claimed to be “... the three principal Scriptures revealing the rapture—John 14:3; 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52; and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.”8 Since our study of the nature of the Tribulation has revealed nothing that would necessitate the removal of the church during that period and the important terms used to describe the Second Advent give no indication that anything other than a posttributional event is envisaged, we would expect to find in these texts clear indications of a pretribulation aspect of the Advent, if such an aspect exists.

In the farewell discourse of John’s gospel (14–17), Jesus seeks to prepare His disciples for the time of His physical absence from them. In 14:1–4, Jesus encourages them by asserting that His “going” to the Father is for the purpose of preparing a “place” for them in the Father’s many “dwelling places” (v. 2), and that He will come again and “receive” them to Himself, “in order that where I am there you also may be” (v. 3). It is almost certain that the latter verse describes the Second Advent and Rapture. But there is no indication in the text that any “coming” other than the posttributional one described elsewhere in the New Testament, is in Jesus’ mind. The fact that believers at a posttributional Rapture would rise to meet the Lord in the air only to return immediately to earth with Him creates no difficulty, for the text does not state that believers will go directly to Heaven,9 but only that they will always be with the Lord. If it be argued that this is the inference of the text, it is hard to see how any other view can offer a more reasonable scenario. As Gundry says, “The pretribulation interpretation would require us to believe that the
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Church will occupy heavenly mansions for a short period of seven years, only to vacate them for a thousand years . . . .

Neither is it true that a promise of deliverance only after the severe distress of the Tribulation could not be a “comfort” to the disciples. The “blessed hope” of being reunited with the risen Lord is surely a comfort, no matter what believers have previously experienced. Thus, John 14:1–4 offers no indication at all of the time of the Rapture.

In 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, it is Paul’s purpose to indicate how living saints can enter the kingdom at the last day even though “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 50). To do so, he affirms that, while “we” (believers in general) will not all die, we will all be “changed”—whether living or dead. That Paul calls this transformation a “mystery” indicates nothing about who will participate in it; only that it was not clearly revealed previously. And in quoting an Old Testament verse (Isa. 25:8) with reference to the resurrection of church saints in this context (vv. 54–55), Paul may be indicating his belief that Old Testament saints participate in this “change.” Further indication that this transformation involves Old Testament saints (and cannot thereby be limited to a separate event for church saints) is found in the reference to “the last trumpet.” As the commentators note, this does not refer to the last in a series, necessarily, but to the trumpet that ushers in the “last day.” And this trumpet is a feature of the Old Testament Day of the Lord at which time the Jewish nation experiences final salvation and judgment (cf. Isa. 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:16; Zech. 9:14). The Isaiahic reference is particularly suggestive inasmuch as the sounding of the “great trumpet” is associated with “the gathering up of the Israelites one by one.” This is probably a description of the gathering of Israel in preparation for entrance into the millennial kingdom—an event that is always posttribulational. Furthermore, it is probable that the trumpet here in 1 Corinthians 15:52 is the same as the one mentioned in Matthew 24:31. For when one finds only one reference throughout Jesus’ teaching to a trumpet, and it is associated with the gathering of the elect into the kingdom, and further finds Paul making reference to the transformation of saints in preparation
for the kingdom when he mentions a trumpet, the parallel can hardly be ignored. But the trumpet sound in Matthew 24:31 is manifestly posttributional. Thus, while dogmatism is unwarranted, the reference to “the last trumpet” in 1 Corinthians 15:52 would suggest that the “transformation” Paul describes takes place at the time when the Jewish nation experiences its eschatological salvation (Isa. 27:12–13) after the Tribulation (Matt. 24:31).

The third principal text relating to the Rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Clearly, Paul is here seeking to comfort the Thessalonian believers over the death of believers. Why were they concerned? Certainly it could not be because they did not know of the resurrection of the dead—this doctrine was central to Paul’s preaching (1 Cor. 15:3–7), and he assumes it in his discussion here. Since Paul’s emphasis in the passage is on the fact that the dead in Christ will fully participate in the blessing of the Parousia, it is probable that the Thessalonians “. . . feared that their dead would not have the same advantages as the survivors when the Lord came.” It is important to note that the comfort Paul offers does not have to do primarily with the position of living believers, nor does he suggest that exemption from the Tribulation is a source of this comfort. His encouragement lies solely in the fact that all believers, living or dead, will participate in the glorious events of the Parousia and that they will as a result “always be with the Lord.” That such a hope, if it included a previous experience in the Great Tribulation, would not be a comfort to believers is manifestly untrue. For, in fact, these Thessalonians had already experienced very difficult times—they had been converted “in great tribulation” (1:6) and were still undergoing such tribulation (3:3,7). Nowhere does Paul seek to comfort Christians by promising them exemption from tribulation.

Are there any indications in this description of the Rapture and accompanying resurrection as to when it takes place with reference to the Tribulation? The failure of Paul to mention preliminary signs is hardly relevant for there is no reason for him to include them here—in the light of the extreme sufferings that the Thessalonians were already experiencing, he
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hardly needed to warn them of this. He focuses exclusively on the great hope lying at the end of all earthly distresses. On the other hand, there are four indications that favor a posttribulational setting. First, while little can be definitely concluded from Paul’s reference to “a word of the Lord” in verse 15, there are suggestive parallels between the Parousia of 1 Thessalonians 4 and the Parousia described by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse. Both refer to a heavenly event with angels (archangel in 1 Thess. 4), clouds, a trumpet, and the gathering of believers. And while each of these texts mentions details not found in the other, none of the details are contradictory. However, the Parousia of the Olivet Discourse is, as we have already noted, posttributional.

A second indication that the Rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4 may be posttributational is found in the reference to the trumpet, which, as we saw in discussing 1 Corinthians 15, is an established symbol for the ushering in of the time of Israel’s salvation and judgment. (And, in keeping with Paul’s allusion to the trumpet of God, it should be noted that Zechariah 9:14 specifically says that the Lord will sound the trumpet.)

Third, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–16 features a number of elements closely parallel to Daniel 12:1–2: the description of the dead as “sleepers”; the presence of Michael, the archangel (cf. Jude 9); and, of course, a resurrection and deliverance of God’s people. But the Daniel passage definitely places the resurrection after the Tribulation.

Fourth, the word used by Paul to describe the “meeting” between the living saints and their Lord in the air (ἀπάντησις) occurs in references to the visit of dignitaries, and generally implies that the “delegation” accompanies the dignitary back to the delegation’s point of origin. The two other occurrences of this term in the New Testament seem to bear this meaning (Matt. 15:6; Acts 28:15). This would suggest that the saints, after meeting the Lord in the air, accompany Him back to earth, instead of going with Him to Heaven. However, this argument can be given little weight—the word does not have to bear this technical meaning, nor is it certain that the return to the point of origin must be immediate.

It may be concluded that the details of the description of
the Parousia and Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 do not allow a certain conclusion as to when these take place with reference to the Tribulation. Such indications as there are, however, favor a posttribulational setting. This we have found to be the case also in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, while John 14:1–4 sheds no light on the question either way. The implications of this must not be overlooked. We have discovered that the terms used to describe the Second Advent are all applied to a posttribulational coming and that believers are exhorted to look forward to that coming. Any indication that this coming is to be a two-stage event, in which the Rapture is separated from the final manifestation, would have to come from passages describing that event. We can now conclude that no evidence for such a separation is found in any of the three principal texts on the Rapture. On the contrary, such evidence as exists is in favor of locating the Rapture after the Tribulation, at the same time as the final Parousia. But there are other important passages related to the Parousia yet to be examined before final conclusions can be drawn.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1–11

After the depiction of the Rapture and Parousia in chapter 4, Paul turns to the subject of the “day of the Lord” in chapter 5. He introduces this topic with the phrase: “Now [δὲ], brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you” (v. 1). Since this “day” includes the destruction of unbelievers (v. 3), it is clear that a posttribulational event is described. The question to be asked, then, is this: does Paul intimate that the Thessalonian Christians to whom he writes may be still on earth when the Day comes? Three considerations are relevant: the relationship between chapter 4 and chapter 5, the meaning of “day of the Lord,” and the nature and basis of Paul’s exhortations in 5:1–11.

It is sometimes claimed that the δὲ introducing chapter 5 demonstrates a transition to a wholly new topic and that it is therefore inappropriate to include the Rapture (4:13–18) as part of the “day” in 5:1–11. Three considerations cast doubt on this conclusion. First, while δὲ generally denotes a mild
contrast, it also occurs frequently “as a transitional particle pure and simple, without any contrast intended . . .”24 (note the NIV translation quoted above). Second, even if a contrast is intended by Paul, one must determine the nature of that contrast. Rather than distinguishing two separate events, Paul may be contrasting the effect of the same events on two different groups—believers and unbelievers. Third, observe how Paul speaks of “times and dates” in verse 1 without specifying the time or date of what. The omission of any specific event here could indicate that the previous topic is still in Paul’s mind.

Next, then, we must seek to determine what Paul includes in the “day of the Lord.” Can the Rapture be part of that Day?

In the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord (also “that day,” etc.) denotes a decisive intervention of God for judgment and deliverance.25 It can refer to a relatively near event or to the final climactic event—it is not always clear that the prophets clearly distinguished the two. Although the Day is frequently described as one of judgment, deliverance for the people of God is often involved also (cf. Isa. 27; Jer. 30:8–9; Joel 2:32; 3:18; Obad. 15–17; etc.). In the New Testament, the term is almost universally related to the end. From the great variety of expressions which are used in the New Testament, it is clear that there is no fixed terminology26 and that distinctions on that basis cannot be drawn.27

All agree that the final judgment is included, but is the Tribulation period also part of the Day of the Lord? Several factors suggest that it is not. First, no reference to the eschatological “day” in the New Testament clearly includes a description of the Tribulation. In fact, it is interesting that the only two occurrences in the Revelation (6:17; 16:14) refer to the final judgment brought through the Parousia. Second, Malachi 4:5 (the coming of Elijah) and Joel 2:30–31 (cosmic portents) place what are generally agreed to be Tribulation events before the Day (cf. Acts 2:20). Third, Paul seems to suggest in 2 Thessalonians 2 that the Day cannot come until certain, clearly tributional, events transpire. While these points carry considerable weight, it must be said that the evidence

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is not entirely clear, and it will be best not to base too much on the exclusion of the Tribulation from the Day.

However, while there is some indication that the Tribulation should not be regarded as an element of the Day, it would seem that the resurrection of the saints is included. Five times in John’s Gospel Jesus proclaims that He will raise those who believe in Him on “the last day” (6:39, 40, 44, 55; 11:54). And since the Rapture occurs at the same time as the resurrection of believers, the Rapture, too, must be part of that Day. That this is so finds confirmation in the fact that Paul frequently describes the Day as an event to which believers in this life look forward (1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:8; cf. also Heb. 11:25)—it is a “day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).

Thus in the New Testament, the Day includes the destruction of the ungodly at the Parousia of Christ, along with the Rapture and the resurrection of the righteous dead. That is, for Paul as for the other New Testament writers, the “Day” is “a general denotation of the great future that dawns with Christ’s coming.”

The fact that the Tribulation seems not to be part of that Day suggests that it precedes all these events, but this is not certain. What is certain is that believers cannot be excluded from involvement in the events of 1 Thessalonians 5 simply because the Day of the Lord is the topic.

In this passage, the emphasis is undoubtedly on judgment, which comes suddenly and certainly on those not expecting it (v. 3). Does Paul suggest that the Thessalonian believers may have a relationship to this judgment? If so, this would constitute strong support for the posttributional position because either (1) believers will be alive during the Tribulation (if this is the judgment Paul thinks of), or (2) believers will be on earth when the posttributional Parousia occurs (if the judgment occurs then). (The fact that people are saying “peace and security” does not mean that the Tribulation period cannot be indicated—such people were doing the same thing during Old Testament calamities, and Revelation 13:16–17 indicates a high degree of normality for those following the Beast.)
That Christians are associated with the Day is the clear inference of verse 4. Here Paul tells the Thessalonian believers; “You are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you as a thief.” Why, if believers are raptured before the Tribulation, would Paul have qualified his assertion with “as a thief”? Much more appropriate would have been the simple statement “that the day not overtake you.” If you had a friend visiting from another country who was worried about becoming involved in a war you both knew would soon break out, and if you knew that he would, in fact, be safely out of the country before it started, you would assure him by telling him; “Don’t worry—this war will not affect you.” Only if you knew he would be present during it would you say, “Don’t worry—this war will not affect you as the kind of disaster it will be for citizens of this country.” In other words, what Paul rather clearly suggests is that the Day overtakes both believers and unbelievers—but only for the latter does it come “as a thief”—unexpected and harmful.30

A second reason for thinking that in 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul associates believers with the Day in a setting after the Tribulation has begun, is found in his close dependence on two gospel passages in which Jesus encourages watchfulness in view of the *posttributional* Parousia—Matthew 24:42–44 and Luke 21:34–36. The parallels between the latter text and 1 Thessalonians 5:2–6 are particularly compelling—both have as their subject the Day, which, it is warned, will come upon those unprepared suddenly and unexpectedly (“as a trap,” Luke 21:34); both emphasize that there will be no escape (cf. Luke 21:35); both encourage believers to watch in light of that coming “Day”; both use the same verb (ἐφιλοτημα) and the same adjective, ἀφενδιος (“suddenly”) of the “Day”—and the latter is used only in these two places in biblical Greek.31 There is every reason for thinking that the same event is depicted in both and, in fact, strong indications that one is dependent on the other. But if Luke 21:34–36 encourages watchfulness in light of the posttributional coming (as both, e.g., Pentecost and Walvoord argue32), there is every reason to think that 1 Thessalonians 5:2–6 does also.

Finally, the logical connection between Paul’s assertion
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in verses 4–5 and the following exhortations is also better explained if the Thessalonians are to experience the Day. It is not Paul’s point to encourage the believers to “watch” for the Day so that they might escape it entirely. For the verbs Paul employs in his commands (vv. 6, 8) do not connote watching for something, but faithfulness to Christ, as incumbent upon those who belong to the “light” and to the Day.33 Nor can 1 Thessalonians 5:9 be used to argue that Paul promises believers such an escape—since Paul never uses wrath without qualifiers to denote a period of time, and in view of its contrast with “salvation” here, it must indicate the condemning judgment of God associated with the Day, not the Day itself.34

To summarize Paul’s argument: the salvation to which God has destined the Thessalonians (v. 9), and which they already experience (v. 5), should act as a stimulus to holy living—holy living that will enable them to avoid experiencing the Day in its unexpected and destructive features. In other words, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to live godly lives in order that they might avoid the judgmental aspect of that Day—not that they might avoid the Day itself. Whether this Day includes the Tribulation or, as is more probable, the climactic return of Christ at the end of the Tribulation, believers on earth are clearly involved in it; and only a posttributional Rapture allows for this. Finally, this interpretation provides a coherent explanation of the transition from chapter 4 to chapter 5—whereas Paul has comforted believers about the position of the dead at the Parousia in chapter 4, he turns to exhort the living about their responsibilities in light of that Parousia in chapter 5.

2 THESALONIANS 1–2

Second Thessalonians was written by Paul shortly after 1 Thessalonians in order to correct some misapprehensions about eschatology, particularly with respect to the erroneous belief that the end had to occur almost immediately. Thus, Paul in chapter 1 assures the Thessalonians of the certainty of the end, with the judgment it will bring on those who are
now "distressing" them. Then he seeks to calm their excitement over the nearness of the end in chapter 2.\(^\text{35}\)

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5–7 Paul appears to provide strong support for the view that believers will not be raptured until the Parousia of Christ at the end of the Tribulation. For there can be no doubt that in verses 7–8 Paul depicts this coming in glory, which he characterizes as "the revelation of the Lord Jesus from Heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels." Yet it is at (ἐν) this time that the believers who are suffering tribulation are given "rest." In other words, it is only at the posttribulational Advent that believers experience deliverance from the sufferings of this age. Attempts to avoid this conclusion take two forms.

First, it is argued that since the Thessalonians were not in fact delivered at the time of Christ's return (they died long before it) and their persecutors will likewise not be destroyed at the return (being dead, they will not experience judgment until the conclusion of the Millennium), Paul must be saying that "God in His own time will destroy their persecutors."\(^\text{36}\) But not only does this interpretation fail to explain the fact that Paul obviously links both the "rest" and the destruction to "the Revelation of the Lord Jesus" (How can this mean "in God's own time"?), it overlooks the fact that everywhere in Paul's letters he speaks as if the generation in which he lived might be the last. Thus in both 1 Corinthians 15:51 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15, he indicates that the participants in the Rapture are "we who don't sleep/are alive." Does this mean that Paul cannot be describing the Rapture in these texts? Moreover, the eschatological "rest" Paul describes here does come to all believers at the time of Christ's revelation—for dead saints (including the Thessalonians) through resurrection; for living saints through the Rapture. And that Paul associates the destruction of unbelievers with the "revelation" of Christ is likewise no difficulty: Scripture often associates events that will, in fact, be separated by the Millennium—see John 5:29.

A second way of avoiding a posttribulational interpretation of these verses is to claim that the "rest" promised to the Thessalonians need not occur at the Rapture.\(^\text{37}\) While this point must be appreciated—believers who die before the Lord's
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return are certainly delivered from earthly trials before the Rapture—the clear temporal link between the rest and the "revelation" of Christ cannot be severed. The only satisfactory way of explaining this text is to assume that Paul addresses the Thessalonians as if they would be alive at the Parousia—and he states that they experience "rest" only at the posttribulation revelation of Christ.

Paul's purpose in chapter 2 is to calm the Thessalonians with reference to "the Parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him." The emotional state of the Thessalonians suggested by the prohibitions in verse 2 is not clearly one of fear or disappointment such as could be induced by the belief that they had missed the Rapture; the verbs suggest rather that they were agitated and unsettled—abandoning their normal common sense and daily pursuits in nervous excitement over the nearness of the end. This improper excitement was caused specifically by the belief that the Day of the Lord had come, a belief that is not easy to explain. Although we have suggested that the Day includes the Parousia and the Rapture, it must have been obvious even to the excitable Thessalonians that these events had not occurred. Perhaps then the Tribulation should be included in the Day, and the Thessalonians regarded their extreme sufferings as evidence that they were in it. But a better interpretation is to regard this excitement as caused by their conviction that the dawning of that Day was regarded as even then occurring, with the other events associated with it just around the corner. However weexplain this statement, one thing is clear—the Thessalonians had not experienced the Rapture, yet they thought themselves to be in the Day. How does Paul disabuse them of this notion?

He does so by citing events that must occur before that Day comes. According to the apostle, there are two of these: the ἀδικία and the revelation of "the man of lawlessness, . . . the man doomed to destruction" (v. 3). The latter is probably to be identified as the eschatological Antichrist, described also in Mark 13:14 and parallels and in Revelation 13:1–8—all these descriptions depend on the characterization of this figure in Daniel 7:8, 20–25; 11:36–39. And it is im-
probable that this “revelation” can indicate anything other than the actions enumerated in verse 4. The other necessary antecedent to the Day, the ἀποστάσις, is best understood as a religious rebellion against God.⁴³ Although some have argued that it should be translated “departure” and have seen in it a reference to the Rapture,⁴⁴ such a translation is most improbable in light of the meaning of the term in biblical Greek.⁴⁵

What is crucial to notice in Paul’s response to the Thessalonians’ unrest is that he does not say anything about the Rapture as a necessary antecedent to the Day. If the Thessalonians were to be raptured before the Day, we would expect Paul to say something like, “You know that your present sufferings cannot represent the final Tribulation because you will be taken to heaven before then.”⁴⁶ To use the illustration introduced earlier, if you knew that your foreign friend was to be safely out of the country by the time the war broke out, and he, in seeing great unrest beginning to happen, thought he was becoming involved in it, would you calm him by telling him that certain events had to happen before the war without reminding him that he would be safely out of the country when it actually occurred? The fact that Paul points to the nonpresence of an indisputably tribulational event, the revelation of the Antichrist, as evidence that the “Day” has not come, surely implies that believers will see it when it does occur. Furthermore, it cannot be argued in reply that Paul simply assumes the Thessalonians know that the Rapture will occur before that Day; the fact that the Thessalonians believed themselves to be in the Day shows either that they had forgotten or were never taught that the Rapture preceded it. In either case, it is difficult to see why Paul would not mention it.

Before leaving this text, one final argument brought against a posttribulational interpretation must be dealt with. It is often argued that the tribulational events described here by Paul cannot transpire until the church is physically removed, because it is the Holy Spirit through the church who now “restrains” the Antichrist (vv. 6–7). Three points need to be made with reference to this argument. First, it is unlikely that the Holy Spirit is the One whom Paul describes in these
verses. There seems to be no reason for using such mysterious language if the Holy Spirit is intended, nor is it probable that Paul would have spoken of the Spirit as being "taken out of the way." Neither does the fact that Paul uses both a masculine participle ("He who restrains") and a neuter participle ("That which restrains"), sometimes adduced in support of this interpretation, favor it. I can find no place in Paul's writings where he uses a neuter term to designate the Holy Spirit except where it is directly dependent on the term πνεύμα ("Spirit"). Second, even if the Holy Spirit is intended, there is nothing in the passage that would indicate that His restraining activity must be carried out through the church. Third, whatever one's view, it is improper to base very much on a text that is so notoriously obscure—the verb κατέχω can be translated "hold back" or "hold fast," "occupy," and has been understood as signifying Rome/the emperor, civil government, God and His power, Michael the archangel, the preaching of the Gospel/Paul, Satan, general evil forces, a combination of benevolent forces, the Jewish state, and James, or a mythic symbol with no particular content.

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

Many scholars have claimed that this discourse is the most difficult portion of the Gospels to interpret. In investigating this address, it will be necessary to confine ourselves to those questions that are of relevance for this present topic. These would appear to be: (1) What did the disciples ask? (2) Does the "abomination of desolation" and tribulation mentioned in conjunction with it refer to end-time events? (3) Is Jesus' end-of-the-age Parousia described in Mark 13:24–27/Matthew 24:29–31? (4) Does Mark 13:27/ Matthew 24:31 refer to the Rapture? (5) To whom is the discourse addressed?

Jesus has just shocked the disciples by predicting the complete destruction of the temple, which they have just been admiring (Mark 13:1–2). In response to this, the disciples ask, "When will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" Matthew makes it clear that their question is essentially twofold: "Tell us, when will
these things [the destruction of the temple and associated events] be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" It is probable that the disciples, in keeping with much Jewish eschatological expectation, believed that the close of the age would include the destruction of the temple.59 The relationship between these two events in Jesus’ answer constitutes one of the great difficulties in the discourse.

The focus of this difficulty, to take up our second question, is the reference to the “abomination of desolation” in Mark 13:14; Matthew 24:15,60 Is Jesus envisaging an event that transpired in A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the armies of Rome, or an end-time event? In favor of the former is the parallel passage in Luke’s gospel, which substitutes “Jerusalem surrounded by armies” for the “abomination of desolation” and records as a consequence of this event the scattering of the Jewish people among the Gentiles (21:20–24). Moreover, warnings associated with the “abomination” in Mark and Matthew seem to envisage a local situation (“let those in Judaea flee,” “pray that it might not be on a Sabbath”). On the other hand, a number of indications that Jesus thinks of an event at the end of the age are present. The phrase “abomination of desolation” clearly alludes to several verses of Daniel’s prophecy. These verses cannot properly be interpreted as having their fulfillment until the end of the age. Mark (13:14) clearly indicates, by using a masculine participle after the neuter “abomination” that he is thinking of a person—and the similarities to the Antichrist described in 2 Thessalonians 2 are clear. Clear temporal links in the text also demonstrate that this is the case. The “abomination” occurs in the days of a tribulation “as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be” (Mark 13:19)—a probable reference to the final Great Tribulation.61 But this Tribulation, in turn, is said to precede immediately the Parousia (Matt. 24:29; although Mark 13:24 does not have “immediately,” this seems to be implied).62

This latter point involves us necessarily in our third question—does Matthew 24:29ff. really depict the end-of-the-age Parousia? This is disputed by some who find in this language a metaphorical description of God’s judgment on Jerusalem
in A.D. 70. But this view is very difficult—two crucial objections can be cited. First, the association of Jesus’ “coming” with clouds (dependent on Dan. 7:13) always has reference to the Parousia in the New Testament. Second, the cosmic signs of Mark 13:24-25 are held by the author of Revelation to be future (6:14-17)—and he is probably writing after A.D. 70.

Thus, to return to our initial point, the structure of the text itself demonstrates that the “abomination of desolation” probably refers to an event at the end of the age—almost certainly the usurpation of God’s position by the Antichrist. However, there is much to be said for the view that finds a reference also to A.D. 70 here. Luke 21:20-24 does appear to be parallel to the reference in Mark and Matthew—it comes at the same point in the structure of the discourse and shows verbal similarity (cf. “devastation” in v. 20). But if, as it appears, Luke gives a historical application of this portion, there would seem to be a need to find this in Matthew and Mark also. Furthermore, it is hard to see how Jesus could have ignored in His answer the destruction of the then existing temple about which the disciples asked Him. Probably, then, Jesus “telescopes” A.D. 70 and the end of the age in a manner reminiscent of the prophets, who frequently looked at the end of the age through more immediate historical events.

What relevance does this discussion have for the question of the relationship between the Tribulation and the Rapture? Much. For Jesus clearly asserts that the disciples standing before Him will see the “abomination of desolation,” which, we have seen, comes in the midst of the Great Tribulation. But it is obvious that the disciples did not, in fact, see the eschatological “abomination.” Thus, the crucial question becomes: Whom do the disciples represent in this passage—Israel or the church? In order to approach this question properly, it is important to keep in mind a fundamental consideration. No one doubts that the disciples in most contexts of the gospels stand for Christians of all ages—or else why do we take Jesus’ teaching as our own instruction? Only if the context clearly necessitates a restriction should any narrowing of the audience be suggested.

Are there clear indications in the Olivet Discourse that
Jesus did not intend His words to apply to all the people of God, including the church? Walvoord argues that the nature of the question in Matthew 24 excludes a reference to the church because the disciples were asking about the coming of the millennial kingdom. There are some real difficulties with this argument, however. First, it apparently demands that Jesus answered a different question in Mark and Luke than He did in Matthew. But where is the indication in the text of such a difference? The question relating to the temple is identical—word for word—in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Second, this view assumes that Jesus answered the question about the destruction of the temple and the question about the coming of the kingdom in virtually identical discourses. Doesn’t this degree of resemblance indicate that it is improper to separate them in the way Walvoord suggests? Third, Walvoord claims that the disciples asked about the coming of the millennial kingdom, which has no relevance for the church. Not only is there no indication in the disciples’ question or in Jesus’ answer that the millennial kingdom is the topic, but Jesus in Matthew 28:20 promises the disciples, that as representative of the church He will be with them “to the close of the Age”—and this is the same phrase used in the disciples’ question in Matthew 24:3. It is difficult to see why the Parousia of Christ and the consummation of the age would not be relevant to the church.

On the other hand, there are a number of indications which, taken together, make it clear that Jesus addressed the disciples as representative of all believers (we do not want to exclude Israel, but to include the church). First, the depiction of the end-time events in Matthew 24–25 is clearly parallel to the description of the Parousia found in Paul’s epistles, directed to the church. Some of these have already been noted, but it will be helpful to set them out in parallel columns. See the chart on page 194.

Particular attention should be directed to the obvious parallels between the Olivet Discourse and both 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (the Parousia and the Rapture) and 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 (the Parousia and the judgment on the wicked)—in fact there are closer parallels to the former than to the latter.
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<td>lawlessness, delusion of the nonelect, signs and wonders</td>
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<td>exhortation to watch!</td>
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Paul clearly describes in these two passages what Jesus depicts as *one event*—showing that it is illegitimate to separate the Parousia of 1 Thessalonians 4 and the Parousia of 2 Thessalonians 2 in time and making it overwhelmingly probable that Jesus addresses the *church* in the Olivet Discourse. For surely, if Paul addresses the church in the Thessalonian epistles, it is obvious that Jesus, who says virtually the same thing, is also addressing the church.

A second reason for thinking that the Olivet Discourse is directed to the church is the use of the term "elect." The word is used to describe those who are on the earth during the events portrayed in the Discourse and therefore presumably denotes those addressed (Matt. 24:22, 24, 31). Yet this word, denoting one graciously chosen by God, is consistently used in the New Testament to refer to members of the *church*; there is no verse in which there is indication that any restriction is in mind. Nor is there any hint of such a restriction in meaning in the Olivet Discourse. Moreover, Jesus has not many days previously pronounced this judgment upon Israel: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matt. 21:43). Could Jesus, after this, think that the
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disciples would have understood Israel to be the elect to whom He refers in Matthew 24.68

A third reason for thinking that the church cannot be excluded from that group represented by the disciples has to do with the nature of the exhortations addressed to the disciples at the end of the discourse. Matthew 24:36–25:13 describes the situation that will exist at the same time of the Parousia of the Son of Man—certainly the Parousia (posttribulational) that has just been described. Yet, these same exhortations appear in other contexts in the Gospels where it seems obvious that the disciples as representatives of the church are addressed (cf. Luke 12:39–46; 19:11–27). Furthermore, the same command addressed to the disciples in Matthew 24–25, “Watch!” (γευγορέω), is addressed to Christians elsewhere in the New Testament.

That the church is involved in the end events depicted in the Olivet Discourse would be conclusively proven if a reference to the Rapture were found in it. There is some reason for finding such a reference in two places. As an event which transpires at the time of the Parousia, Jesus describes a gathering of the saints “from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt. 24:31; cf. Mark 13:27). It is to be observed, first, that this “gathering” takes place at the sounding of “a great trumpet”—a feature that Paul mentions in both of his presentations of the Rapture (1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thess. 4:16–17). Second, it should be noted that the verb used here, ἐπιοῦμαι (“gather together”), is employed in its noun form, ἐπιοῦμαγι, to depict the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:1. Since the verb and noun together occur only nine times in the New Testament and there are so many other parallels between 2 Thessalonians 2 and the Olivet Discourse, there is good reason to accord significance to this verbal contact. But it is probable that the “gathering” includes more than the Rapture—inasmuch as the description seems to envision a great coming together of all God’s saints, one would be well-advised to think that the resurrection of the righteous is included also. Thus, Jesus would be depicting the great, final gathering of all saints—the dead through resurrection, the living through the Rapture.69 In a manner typical of the
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New Testament, Jesus takes the prophetic depiction of the posttributional regathering of Israel (cf. Deut. 30:4; Isa. 27:12-13; 43:5-7; Zech. 2:6-13) and applies it to all the people of God.70

A second text that may refer to the Rapture is the reference in Matthew 24:40-41 (parallel in Luke 17:34-35) to the “taking” of one who is contrasted with another who is “left.” It may be that the one “taken” is taken in judgment while the one left is allowed to enter the kingdom.71 But the verb for “taking” is used of the Rapture in John 14:3 (although, to be sure, it is also used in other ways) and it is significant that the verb for “take” in judgment in verse 39 is different than the one used in verses 40-41. And the analogy to the flood may suggest that just as Noah was saved by being taken away from the scene of judgment, so believers at the Parousia will be taken away, through the Rapture, from the scene of judgment.72

For the reasons cited above, we conclude that Jesus in the Olivet Discourse is addressing His disciples as representatives of all believers. This leads necessarily to a posttributional location of the Rapture, since those addressed in the Discourse are indisputably said to be on the earth until the posttributional Parousia.

REVELATION

With the concentration on the events of the end found in Revelation, we would expect that here, if anywhere, we could find clear evidence for the relationship of the Tribulation to the Rapture. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Many would argue, in fact, that the Rapture is never even mentioned in Revelation; all would agree that it is not described in direct temporal association with the Tribulation. Therefore, evidence for the topic before us comes from three sources: promises and warnings made to the seven churches; specific texts in which the Rapture may be indicated; and the descriptions of the saints who experience the Tribulation.

Although attention is often given exclusively to Christ’s promise to the Philadelphian church in 3:10, there are, in fact, three other texts in Revelation 2-3 in which related promises
and warnings are given. In the letter to the church at Smyrna, Christ warns the believers that they can expect tribulation (θλιψίς) for ten days (2:10). While it is probable that this is not referring to the climactic, end-of-history Tribulation, it should be noted that believers (and they are clearly regenerate—cf. v. 10) are promised persecution and possible death. Similar to this verse is 2:22, only in this case those who engage in Jezebel’s sin are promised “great tribulation”—the lack of article suggests that this refers to suffering in a general sense. Thirdly, Christ exhorts the church at Sardis to repent and warns: “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you” (3:3). The close similarity between this language and that used in 1 Thessalonians 5 and in Jesus’ warnings about His posttributional coming in Matthew 24:42–44—all three passages have “as a thief,” “watch” (γρηγορεῖ), and the note of uncertainty—suggests that the church at Smyrna has exactly the same need as those addressed in Jesus’ parable and in Paul’s letter: to watch lest the coming of Christ in glory take them by surprise. But this, of course, assumes that the church will not be raptured previously.

Finally, we must consider that much-debated promise of Christ in Revelation 3:10: “I will also keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world to test them who live on the earth.” It is probable that the reference is to the Great Tribulation, and all agree that the Philadelphia church is promised protection from it. The question is how: through physical removal in a pretributional or midtributional Rapture or through divine safekeeping during the period of distress? Attention is focused on the construction τηρήσοιτε ἐκ (“keep from”).

The nearest parallel to this phraseology (and the only other place in biblical Greek where τηρήσοιτε and ἐκ are used together) is John 17:15—“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” Here it seems clear that Jesus prays for the disciples’ preservation from the power of Satan, even though they would remain in the “world,” the sphere of Satan’s activity (cf. 1 John 5:19). Furthermore, it is helpful to note that in only three other
verses in the New Testament does τήρω ("keep") have God or Christ as its subject and believers as its object—John 17:11, 12, 15. In each case, spiritual preservation is clearly intended. With these parallels in mind, it seems best to think that in Revelation 3:10 Christ promises the church at Philadelphia that it will be spiritually protected from "the hour of trial." In this interpretation, ἐκ, "out of," would denote, as it seems to in John 17:15, separation. That this spiritual preservation is to be accomplished through physical removal is not indicated, and had John intended physical removal there were other ways of saying so that would have made it more obvious. It is perhaps more likely that, as in John 17:15, believers are physically in the sphere of that from which they are protected. But it must be said that neither view, nor any other that has been proposed, can be conclusively established. We must conclude that Revelation 3:10 neither offers clear-cut evidence for or against a posttribulational Rapture.

Turning now to texts that may indicate the time of the Rapture, we can rather quickly dismiss 4:1. The command to John to "come up here" (to heaven) is manifestly intended to suggest a visionary experience that John has while still in the body on the island of Patmos. As Walvoord rightly says, "There is no authority for connecting the rapture with this expression." Of more significance is the depiction of events in chapter 11. Although there are many details that are obscure in this chapter it seems reasonably clear that 11:11–12 describes a resurrection of the two witnesses. Does this resurrection have anything to do with the Rapture? The fact that the two are said to go up "in a cloud" may suggest this, for clouds are consistently mentioned in descriptions of the Rapture (cf. Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:9; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 14:14). And, as elsewhere when the Rapture is mentioned, a trumpet is found in this text (11:15). While these indications can certainly not be regarded as conclusive, the determination of the time of this event may shed more light on the question. There are many indications that strongly suggest that the very end of the Tribulation is reached in 11:11–19. The "great earthquake" that is said to take place immediately after the resurrection of the
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witnesses (11:13) is mentioned in only two other verses in Revelation, both of which describe the end—6:12 and 16:18. No one doubts that 16:18 occurs in a posttribulational setting, but it may be necessary to point out that 6:12–17, the sixth seal, also almost certainly depicts the end. For unless one attempts to avoid the literal meaning of the language, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that history as we know it cannot go on after the stars have fallen to the earth, the sky has been rolled up, and every mountain and island has been removed from its place. As Beasley-Murray says, “This language permits one interpretation alone: the last day has come.”89 But the decisive consideration is that Jesus refers to these events as taking place after the Tribulation and immediately in conjunction with His Parousia (Matt. 24:29–30).

If the “great earthquake” points to a time at the end of the Tribulation, there are other factors that suggest the same. The witnesses are said to prophesy for forty-two months (11:2) and then to lie in death for “three and a half days” (11:9). If the former reference is to the first half of the Tribulation period, the second reference could indicate the second half. But it must be admitted that this is far from certain. At the blowing of the seventh trumpet, there can be little doubt that the end is reached; the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of Christ (11:15), the Lord begins His reign (11:17), the time for His wrath and for judging and rewarding comes (11:18), and the heavenly temple is opened (11:19). If the seventh trumpet is chronologically related to the resurrection of the witnesses, then we have a rather clear indication that the resurrection is posttribulational.

While it is therefore probable that the resurrection of the two witnesses is posttribulational, this would have decisive bearing on the question of the time of the Rapture only if it could be shown that the witnesses represent the church.80 But this is not clear, and the most that can be said is that this verse could be suggestive if other similar indications are found.

In one of a series of visions that occur between the depiction of the trumpets and the bowls, John sees “one like a Son of Man” seated on a cloud. He descends to “harvest the earth” (14:14–16). That the Parousia is portrayed here is
probable in light of the references to "Son of Man" and
"clouds." But can the harvesting of the earth in verses 15–16
include the Rapture? This may be the case—Jesus uses the
image of harvesting to describe the gathering of God’s people
into the kingdom (Matt. 13:30). Verses 17–20 would then be
a description of the judgment of God on unbelievers. The
precise reference in the imagery of the harvest is not altogether
clear, however. Scholars debate over whether the first harvest
is solely for the righteous, solely for the wicked, or includes
both. However, it seems difficult to exclude the saints from
this first harvesting, which, unlike the second, has no reference
to God’s wrath. Therefore, if one holds that the church is
addressed in these chapters of Revelation, the Rapture would
almost certainly be included as an aspect of this great ingath-
ering of the saints at the end.

A final text that may indicate the time of the Rapture is
Revelation 20:4, in which John describes the "first resurrec-
tion." The participants in this resurrection are not specifically
named—there is no expressed subject of the third person plural verb ἐκ νεκρῶν ("they come to life"). While some would want
to confine the participants to the martyrs specifically men-
tioned in verse 4, there are good reasons for including more
than the martyrs in this resurrection. First, in addition to the
martyrs, verse 4 also describes those who sit on the thrones
and to whom judgment is given—the syntax clearly suggests
that this is a group different from the martyrs. Secondly,
those who come to life are "priests of God and reign with
Him" (v. 6) and Revelation 5:9–10 stresses the fact that this
group will include people "from every tribe and language
and people and nation." If, as is clear, the group in 5:9–10 includes
the church, it is probably not legitimate to exclude the church
in 20:4. Thirdly, John describes only two resurrections in Rev-
elation—the "first," in verse 4 and the "second," in which the
wicked take part. The first resurrection in verse 4 must cer-
tainly have a temporal force, since it is used in conjunction with
"second," and it is not easy to think that John’s language
allows for any resurrection preceding this one. Observe also
that those who do not participate in the first resurrection are
labeled "the rest of the dead"—indication that John includes
in his two resurrections all the dead. Finally, it is inherently unlikely that John, writing to churches (1:4; 22:16), would omit in his grand portrait of the end one of the most blessed and anticipated aspects of that period—the resurrection of believers.

For these reasons, it is probable that Revelation 20:4 depicts the resurrection of all the righteous dead—including church saints. Since the Rapture occurs at the same time as this resurrection, and the first resurrection is clearly posttribulational, the Rapture must also be considered posttribulational.

The third main line of investigation to be pursued in Revelation relates to the identity of the saints whom John sees participating in the tribulational events. Are believers of this dispensation, church saints, included in this group? A negative answer to this question is often given because the word ἐκκλησία ("church") does not occur in Revelation 4–19. But this is hardly conclusive—John plainly has in mind the worldwide body of saints in these chapters, and ἐκκλησία is only rarely used in the New Testament to indicate such a universal group. John, himself, never uses ἐκκλησία other than as a designation of a local body of believers. Moreover, it is important to note that John never in chapters 4–19 calls any group in heaven the church. Thus the lack of reference to ἐκκλησία as such cannot decide this issue.

Nor does the structure of Revelation shed light on the question. Revelations 1:19 suggests that the book unfolds in three major sections: "the things you have seen" (= chapter 1); "the things which are" (= Rev. 2–3); and "the things which are about to happen after these things" (4–22). But while the events of chapters 4–22 are probably regarded as future from John’s perspective, there is nothing to suggest that this must be after the "church age."

Therefore, it becomes necessary to ask whether we can identify any particular group in Revelation 4–19 with the church so as to enable us to determine its location during these events. In the heavenly throne room scene of chapter 4, a group of twenty-four “elders” is described, who are grouped around God’s throne and wear white robes and crowns of
THE RAPTURE.

gold (v. 4). Most commentators think a superior order of angels is depicted here,98 but there is some reason to think rather that the “elders” are glorified men.99 However, there are sound reasons for refusing to confine the group to church saints alone. In Revelation 5:10 the “elders” address a group that includes the church in the third person—“them.”92 The wearing of gold crowns is certainly not restricted to the church—in Revelation 9:7 the demonic locusts wear “something like crowns of gold.” Neither do the white robes necessarily suggest a raptured church since the Laodiceans are told to wear them on earth (3:18). If John’s own symbolism is to be followed, it would seem that the reference to “twenty-four” most naturally suggests the whole people of God, Israel and the church. Thus, in Revelation 21:12–14, the New Jerusalem is pictured as having twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and twelve foundations with the names of “the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” But since Daniel 12 clearly shows that Israel is not raptured until after the Tribulation, the presence of the “elders” in Heaven in Revelation 4 cannot be used to refute a posttribulational Rapture. In this respect, it is significant that the “twenty-four elders” are always portrayed in visions of heaven which bear no clear temporal relationship to any earthly event—in a sense it is asking the wrong question to enquire about when these scenes take place.

It does not seem that it can be definitely concluded what group of saints is depicted in the 144,000 of Revelation 7:2–8, but it does seem that the “bride” of the wedding supper in Revelation 19:7–9 must include the church. But this does not indicate that the Rapture must have preceded the Parousia of 19:11ff., for the visions of 17:1–19:10 appear to give proleptic views of the effects of the Parousia.

Finally, there are some general indications that taken together provide good reason for thinking that the church cannot be eliminated from the body of saints pictured on the earth during the Tribulation. One must take note of the promises and warnings given church saints in Revelation 2–3 that are found also in chapters 4–20. Thus, for example, the church at Smyrna is promised that believers will be spared from "the
second death” if they “overcome.” But it is rescue from this “second death” that the first resurrection of Revelation 20:4–6 provides (cf. v. 6). A continual theme in the letters to the churches is the need to “triumph” (7 times); Revelation 18:2 pictures “those who triumphed over the beast and his image.” Four times in the letters the need for “endurance” is stressed; the same quality is demanded of the tribulation saints (13:10; 14:12). Other such parallels could be mentioned, and whereas they cannot be considered decisive evidence (the same characteristics can be ascribed to two different groups), they do seem suggestive.

The reference to the Parousia in 1:7 is also suggestive. If the church is not to take part in the events of Revelation 4–19 it seems incongruous that John should highlight this Parousia, the great climax of these chapters, in the address to the churches (cf. 1:4). In 22:16, Jesus claims that He has sent His angel “to give you (plural) this testimony for the churches.” It is difficult to see how the chapters on the Tribulation could be a “testimony for the churches” if they are not involved in it. Finally, it simply appears improbable that the event described at greatest length in Revelation (the Tribulation) would have no direct relevance for those to whom the book is addressed.

We would conclude our discussion of the Revelation by attempting to indicate how our understanding of particular events in the Revelation fits into the overall structure of the book. It seems clear that the seventh in each series of seals, trumpets, and bowls brings us to the time of the Parousia. Interspersed among these series are visions of the heavenly warfare that is manifested in the tributional distress (chap. 12), of the satanic power of that time (13) and of the protection and ultimate vindication of God’s people (7, 14). Immediately before the Parousia is given a proleptic vision of the judgment and salvation that the heavenly intervention brings (17:1–18:10). Following the Parousia are portrayed the events that flow from it. In other words, it is the Parousia of Christ that is the focal point of Revelation 6–20—all other events lead up to or follow from it, while periodic visions reveal different aspects of these events. It might be helpful to set out
THE RAPTURE

this structure in a rough diagram (the rectangular border encloses events associated with the Parousia):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seals</th>
<th>Trumpets</th>
<th>12-14</th>
<th>Bowls 17-19:10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Vision of the Redeemed (7:9-17)
- Resurrection (11:11-12)
- Proclamation of Judgment and Salvation

- 14:1-5—Redeemed
- 14:14-20—Rapture
- Resurrection, Judgment

PAROUSIA (19:11-21)
- Binding of Satan
- First Resurrection
- Millennium
- Eternal State

Special attention should be drawn to the way in which the different events that occur at Christ's Parousia are depicted: the deliverance of the saints (7:9–15); the resurrection of the faithful witnesses (11:11–12); the inauguration of the Day of God's judgment and His eternal kingdom (11:15–19); the deliverance of the 144,000 (14:1–5); the final gathering of believers and the judgment (14:14–20); the condemnation of the
POSTTRIBULATION RAPTURE POSITION

evil world system (chaps. 17–18); the union of God and His saints (19:8–9); the binding of Satan (20:1–3); the first resurrection (20:4–6). Based on this proposed structure and the underlying exegesis, it can be observed that all these great events are posttributional.

As a result of our study of key biblical texts, we conclude that the Parousia of Christ is a fundamentally single event at which time both living and dead saints of all dispensations go to be with the Lord and the wrath of God falls on unbelievers. The reconstruction of end events based on this hypothesis demonstrates a remarkable degree of consistency through every important New Testament depiction of the end. (See the chart on p. 206, which includes the major events mentioned in more than one text.) Not every event is included in every text, of course, for the different authors chose to mention only those events which were appropriate for their particular argument. The fact that this reconstruction, founded upon a posttribulation Rapture, fits every passage so naturally is a potent argument in favor of this position.

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

Some brief comments must now be made on this issue, which we purposely set to one side in our exegesis of the New Testament texts. In dealing with these texts, we have found places in which language and prophecies that have reference to Israel in the Old Testament (e.g., the eschatological trumpet, Antichrist and, most obviously, the Tribulation itself) are applied to the church. If, of course, it were to be concluded, on the basis of a thorough study of other texts, that a rigid distinction between Israel and the church were necessary, some of our conclusions would have to be reevaluated. However, it seems that the application to the church of the Old Testament prophecies given to Israel is not at all unusual in the New Testament—see, for one of the clearest instances, the use of Jeremiah 31:31ff. in Hebrews 8 and 10. On the other hand, it is important that Israel and the church not be completely merged: Paul clearly expects a future for racial Israel (Rom.
## RECONSTRUCTION OF MAJOR END-TIME EVENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Matt. 24-25</th>
<th>John 14</th>
<th>1 Cor. 15</th>
<th>1 Thess. 4-5</th>
<th>2 Thess. 2</th>
<th>Seals 6:3-4</th>
<th>6:5-6</th>
<th>Trumpets 12:14</th>
<th>Bowls 17:20</th>
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<tr>
<td>wars</td>
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<tr>
<td>apostasy</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>2:3</td>
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<td>preaching of Gospel</td>
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<td>Antichrist (in temple)</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>2:3-7</td>
<td></td>
<td>14:6-7(?)</td>
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<td>Tribulation</td>
<td>16-25</td>
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<td>6:9-11(?)</td>
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<td>8:6-9:21</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>false signs</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>6:12-17</td>
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<td>Parousia</td>
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<td>19:11-21</td>
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<td>trumpet</td>
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<td>4:16</td>
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<td>4:16</td>
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<td>11:15</td>
<td>14:15</td>
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<tr>
<td>first resurrection</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4:16</td>
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<td>11:11-12</td>
<td>20:4-6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rapture</td>
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<td>4:16</td>
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<td>14:14-16</td>
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<tr>
<td>judgment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<td>5:3</td>
<td>2:8</td>
<td>11:18</td>
<td>14:17-20</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;with the Lord&quot;</td>
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<td>14:1-5</td>
<td>19:4-9</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Watch!&quot;</td>
<td>24:36-25:13</td>
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<td>4:18</td>
<td>5:6-8</td>
<td>7:8-17</td>
<td>throughout Revelation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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9–11). What is important, we would suggest, is to distinguish carefully between prophecies directed to Israel as a nation (and which must be fulfilled in a national Israel) and prophecies directed to Israel as the people of God (which can be fulfilled in the people of God—a people that includes the church!). It should be noted that such an approach is not allegorical or nonliteral; it simply calls upon the interpreter to recognize the intended scope of any specific prophecy. It is our contention, then, that the Great Tribulation predicted for Israel by, e.g., Daniel, is directed to Israel as the people of God. It can therefore be fulfilled in the people of God, which includes the church as well as Israel.

IMMINENCY

There remains to be examined one extremely important aspect of the hope of Christ’s return which has great significance for the time of the Rapture: the belief that this event is “imminent.” Since a posttributional view requires that certain events must transpire before the Parousia, it is often claimed that posttribulationism necessarily involves the denial of imminency. In order to avoid this conclusion, J. B. Payne seeks to explain most events predicted of the Tribulation in such a way that they could be present (or past) even now. This attempt must, however, be deemed unsuccessful—the nature of some of these events, which are asserted to be recognizable by the saints when they occur (cf. e.g., 2 Thess. 2), precludes the possibility that they are “potentially present.” On the other hand, Gundry, convinced of the posttributional Rapture position, wants to do away with “imminency” altogether.

However, one very important fact must be recognized: all the views discussed in the previous paragraph assume that imminent must mean “any moment.” This is simply not the case. The Oxford English Dictionary gives as the meaning of imminent, “impending threateningly, hanging over one’s head; ready to befall or overtake one, close at hand at its incidence; coming on shortly.” Clearly this meaning does not require that there be no intervening events before something said to be imminent transpires. It is quite appropriate to speak of the
adjournment of Congress, for instance, as being "imminent" even if some event(s) (such as a crucial roll-call vote) must elapse before it can occur. In this sense, the term can be applied to an event that is near and cannot at this point be accurately dated, but that will not occur until some necessary preliminary events transpire. Defined in this way, the "imminence" of our Lord's return is a doctrine that should not be jettisoned. It expresses the supremely important conviction that the glorious return of Christ could take place within any limited period of time—that the next few years could witness this grand climax to God's dealing with the world. Granted that imminence can be defined in this way, is this in fact the manner in which the hope of Christ's return is viewed in the New Testament?

The first point to be made is that none of the many words used to describe the nearness of the Parousia, or the believer's expectation of it, requires an "any moment" sense of imminency. Προσδέχομαι, "wait for" (applied to the Parousia in Luke 12:36; Titus 2:13; Jude 21 [?]), is used of Paul's expectation of the resurrection of the just and the unjust (Acts 24:15)—yet the latter does not occur until after the Millennium. Ἀπεκδέχομαι, "await eagerly" (used of the Parousia in 1 Cor. 1:7), can refer to creation's longing for deliverance (Rom. 8:19), which deliverance comes only after the Tribulation. Ἐξεδέχομαι, "expect," is used by James of the Parousia in 5:7, but the analogy in the context is with a farmer who waits for his crops—certainly not "any moment!" Προοόμοιω, "look for" (cf. Matt. 24:50; Luke 12:46 with reference to the Second Coming) is the word used by Peter to exhort believers to "look for" the new heavens and earth (2 Peter 3:12–14). Ἐγγίζω, "be near," and the adjectival form, ἐγγύς, applied to the Parousia in numerous texts, are used of Jewish feasts and the seasons of the year (e.g., John 2:13; Matt. 21:34)—and these, obviously, are not "any moment" events. A number of other terms (γροεσκέω, "watch"; ἀγωνιστέω, "be awake"; νηστιω, "be sober"; Βλέπω, "look at") are used to exhort believers to an attitude of spiritual alertness and moral uprightness in the light of the second return, but imply nothing as to its time.109
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By themselves, then, these terms do not require that the expectation to which they refer be capable of taking place "at any moment." Crucial will be the context in which they are used. The most important of these contexts have already been examined and it will not be necessary to repeat here the evidence that leads us to believe that a posttributional Rapture is consistently indicated. But some additional remarks should perhaps be added with respect to the Olivet Discourse.

In the hortatory section following Christ's depiction of the Tribulation and Parousia, Jesus makes three important points: (1) The disciples do not know when the Lord will come (Matt. 24:42, 44; Matt. 25:13); (2) They must therefore watch and be prepared; (3) When they see tribulational events, they can know that Christ is near (Matt. 24:32–33). What is particularly crucial to note is that all three statements are made with respect to the same event—the posttributional coming of Christ. There is no basis for any transition from the posttributional aspect of the Parousia in Matthew 24:32–35 (or 36) to its pretributional aspect in verses 36ff. Therefore all interpreters, whether they believe the discourse is addressed to the church or to Israel, face the difficulty of explaining how an event heralded by specific signs can yet be one of which it said "no one knows the day and hour." One solution may be to understand Jesus' words about the unknown day to apply to every generation except the last; that generation (γενεὰ in Matt. 24:34), when it "sees these things happening," knows that Christ is at the very gates.101 Or, it may be that while the exact time cannot be known, one will be able to know the general time of the Advent after the Tribulation has begun.102 And in this regard, the statement about the tribulational days being "shortened" (Matt. 24:22) should be noted; it may be impossible to predict the time of the Parousia even after the Antichrist has been revealed.

Within the New Testament there are indications that suggest that New Testament authors could not have intended to portray the Parousia as an event that could happen "at any moment." For, first of all, Jesus in His teaching rather frequently suggests that there will be a delay before His return (Luke 19:11–27; Matt. 24:45–51; 25:5, 19). Second, and
more important, are specific predictions that could not have been fulfilled if Christ had returned immediately after His ascension. Thus Jesus promises His disciples that they will be His witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, in Samaria and unto the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The gospel must be preached to all nations before the end comes (Matt. 24:14); Peter will die a martyr’s death as an old man (John 21:18–19); Paul will preach the Gospel in Rome (Acts 23:11; 27:24). It is not sufficient to say that all these could have been fulfilled in the first century and therefore represent no barrier to an “any moment” Rapture now. 163 For the point is to determine what the statements about the nearness of the Parousia would have meant to those who first heard them. If the original speakers did not intend and the original hearers did not understand a particular statement to require an “any-moment” interpretation, that statement can hardly have such a meaning now. 164

Therefore, it does not appear that the imminence of the return of Christ can be understood in an “any-moment” sense. (The apostolic Fathers also believed in a posttribulational Rapture and expected to participate in tribulation events.) 165 It is better to define imminency as the possibility of Jesus’ coming for His people at any time—“time” being understood broadly as a short period of time. It is in light of that “any-time” coming that the church is called upon to live out its calling. But, it is objected, doesn’t the denial of the any-moment coming of Christ for His church take away the force of those exhortations to right conduct? In negative applications of the return (as when people are warned to be careful lest Christ “surprise” them), an “any-moment” Rapture adds nothing to the associated exhortations, for it is precisely and only those who do not heed the warnings who will be surprised (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2–4; Luke 21:34). And the exhortations to “watch,” because the time is not known require only that the exact moment is unknown for the force of the warning to be maintained. But the stimulus to holy living provided by the expectation of Christ’s return is based primarily on a positive application of the return in the New Testament. Believers are to remain spiritually alert and morally sober because they recognize that they will stand before their Redeemer to answer
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for their conduct. And the force of this appeal surely does not depend on the “any-moment” possibility of such an encounter.

CONCLUSION

The truth of the imminent coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is an important and indispensable element of biblical truth. That this coming is to be premillennial the Scriptures plainly state. That a time of unprecedented Tribulation will immediately precede that coming and that living believers will be raptured into the presence of Christ at His coming are also plainly stated. But the time of that Rapture with respect to the Tribulation is nowhere plainly stated. No Old Testament or New Testament author directly addresses that question or states the nature of that relationship as a point of doctrine. What I think the Scriptures indicate about this relationship has been stated on the preceding pages. But, because this conviction is founded upon logic, inferences, and legitimately debated points of exegesis, I cannot, indeed must not, allow this conviction to represent any kind of barrier to full relationships with others who hold differing convictions on this point. May our discussions on this point enhance, not detract from, our common expectation of “the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).