

The Rapture of the Saints (3)

In the previous installments of this department we considered the rapture of the saints as revealed in the Gospels and Revelation. In Matthew 24 and 25 the Lord spoke of the time of His second coming, the sign of His coming, and the sign of the consummation of the age in a threefold way (24:3). In verses 1 to 31 He spoke concerning Israel, admonishing the Jews who are alive at the end of the age to be ready to flee the persecutions and dangers of the great tribulation, the last half of the seventieth week prophesied in Daniel 9:24-27, after the abomination of desolation is set up in the temple. In Matthew 24:32 to 25:30 the Lord spoke concerning the church through parables on watchfulness, readiness, faithfulness, and prudence, warning that at His coming prior to the great tribulation (“the flood”), “one is taken and one is left” (24:39-41); that is, one is raptured prior to the great tribulation and one is left to pass through it. Both the one taken and the one left are genuine, regenerated believers who call Jesus their Lord and their Master (vv. 42, 45). The one taken, however, is found at the Lord’s coming in the maturity of the divine life, being filled with the Spirit as the extra portion of oil (25:8-9), and in the faithful use of the Lord’s gifts, His talents (vv. 15, 20-23). Finally in verses 31 through 46, the Lord spoke concerning those of the nations who will survive until His coming in glory.¹

In Revelation many details concerning the Lord’s coming, the rapture, and the great tribulation are revealed. Verse 10 of chapter 3 says, “Because you have kept the word of My endurance, I also will keep you out of the hour of trial, which is about to come on the whole inhabited earth, to try them who dwell on the earth.” This is a promise to the overcomers in the church in Philadelphia to be kept from the great tribulation. In chapter 12 the man-child, the stronger part of God’s people, is caught up to God and to His throne prior to the thousand two hundred and sixty days, the three and a half years of the tribulation, while the rest of the believers are preserved in the wilderness during this time from the attack of the dragon (vv. 5-6, 13-14). In chapter 14 the one hundred and forty-four thousand living overcomers stand on Mount Zion in the heavens (vv. 1-5) before the events of the tribulation in verses 6 through 13. After these things, the remaining believers, the general harvest, are reaped to meet the Lord not in the heavens but in the cloud (vv. 14-16), to which His parousia has moved.

Through the many details provided in the Gospels and Revelation, it is clear that the truth concerning the rapture of the saints is multifaceted. It is presented not only as an encouragement and consolation but also as a warning and incentive for an overcoming life. Those believers who overcome in this age and live until the Lord’s return will be rewarded by an early rapture prior to the great tribulation. Those who do not overcome, however, will be left to pass through the tribulation for their discipline and perfection, and they will be raptured only at the Lord’s coming in glory after the three and a half years. In this way, as David M. Pantton writes, the rapture is a “judgment act” (43), an act of discernment for reward or discipline. Robert Govett notes, “The rapture takes place, not in the day of grace, but in the day of reward according to works” to reward the watchful and ready believers (*Studies* 65). This is an important aspect of the word of righteousness in the New Testament (Heb. 5:13).

In this installment we will consider the rapture as revealed in the Epistles, focusing primarily on 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Because the predominant view of the rapture among many evangelical Christians derives from the dispensational school of pretribulation, premillennial eschatology, we will spend much time to bring to light the posttribulation aspect of the rapture, invoking some of its most noted advocates. However, this is for the sake of balance only; we are not taking up the cause of the posttribulation school. Rather, we will emphasize that the light that we have received from the Scriptures is two-sided. It is important to realize this from the outset.

The Rapture in the Epistles: the Transfiguration of Our Body

In the Epistles, Paul rarely deals with the eschatological details of the rapture. Rather, his view is organic, emphasizing the operation of the divine life and the divine Spirit in the believers’ experience of the full salvation of God. In Romans 8:23 he says, “We ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan in ourselves, eagerly awaiting sonship, the redemption of our body.” Witness Lee writes,

Although we have the divine Spirit as the firstfruits in our spirit [v. 16], our body has not yet been saturated with

the divine life. Our body is still the flesh, linked to the old creation, and is still a body of sin and death that is impotent in the things of God. Hence, we groan together with the creation (vv. 19, 22) and eagerly await the glorious day when we will obtain the full sonship, the redemption and transfiguration of our body, and will be freed from the slavery of corruption.

This sonship began with the regeneration of our spirit, is continuing with the transformation of our soul, and will be consummated with the redemption of our body. (Recovery Version, Rom. 8:23, notes 2 and 3)

The redemption of our body will take place either in resurrection or in rapture at the end of this age. In Ephesians 4:30 Paul says, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed unto the day of redemption.” Today the sealing Spirit is the pledge of our inheritance, a guarantee, a foretaste, and a sample of our divine inheritance, until our body is transfigured in glory, at which time we will inherit God in full (1:13-14). From the time that we are saved, the Holy Spirit as the seal in us seals us continually with the element of God that we may be transformed in nature until our body is completely transfigured and redeemed. In Philippians 3:21 Paul says that the Lord Jesus Christ “will transfigure the body of our humiliation to be conformed to the body of His glory, according to His operation by which He is able even to subject all things to Himself.” The body of our humiliation is our natural body, made of worthless dust (Gen. 2:7) and damaged by sin, weakness, sickness, and death (Rom. 6:6; 7:24; 8:11). The body of His glory is Christ’s resurrected body, saturated with God’s glory (Luke 24:46) and transcendent over corruption and death (Rom. 6:9). The transfiguration of our body, which will transpire in resurrection or rapture, is accomplished by the Lord’s great power, which subjects all things to Himself. This is Paul’s organic view of the rapture as the transfiguration, redemption, and glorification of our body. It is the view of God’s New Testament economy and transcends mere eschatological debate.

The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians: the Hope of the Lord’s Coming

Paul’s longest word concerning the rapture is found in 1 Thessalonians. The subject of the first Epistle to the Thessalonians is a holy life for the church life, a life structured upon faith in the Lord, love toward Him and His members, and hope in the One who promised to come to take them to Himself (1:3). The believers should live, walk, and work by faith and love in the hope of the Lord’s coming back. Accordingly, the Lord’s coming is mentioned at the end of every chapter. Verse 10 of chapter 1 says, “Await His Son from the heavens, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath which is coming.” Then 2:19 says, “What is our hope or joy or

crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Are not even you?” Verse 13 of chapter 3 says, “That He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” Finally, in 5:23 Paul says, “The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In 4:13-18 Paul gives a longer word concerning the Lord’s coming and the rapture of the believers. As befits the condition of the Thessalonian believers, however, his word here is elementary. Paul’s intention is to give the new believers in Thessalonica a basic concept of the hope of our Christian life, which is the Lord’s coming, including the resurrection and rapture of the saints. Verses 15 through 17 say,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are living, who are left remaining unto the coming of the Lord, shall by no means precede those who have fallen asleep; because the Lord Himself, with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are living, who are left remaining, will be caught up together with them in

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the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and thus we will be always with the Lord.

Those Who Are Living and Are Left Remaining

What Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4 is the general hope of all believers, the hope of a holy life for the church life. It is the thesis of the dispensational school of eschatology that the rapture here is the secret rapture of the church prior to the great tribulation. John Walvoord states,

[First Thessalonians] contributes more to the doctrine of the Rapture than any other book of the New Testament. It is most significant that this truth is given such prominence in teaching a young church that is being introduced to basic truth...Because of the frequent reference and extensive revelation relating to the subject of the Rapture, most pretribulationists find basic proof for their position in 1 Thessalonians...Most posttribulationists tend to ignore the details given here. (*Question 197*)

As a word of comfort, however, the rapture of believers at the Lord’s coming is mentioned only in a general way. Concerning this matter, details are revealed

in other books of the New Testament, such as Matthew and Revelation. This passage in 1 Thessalonians is not, therefore, intended to be a catalogue of eschatological doctrines and details. Nevertheless, several key phrases in it are worthy of close consideration for our present purpose. As we shall see, they are best understood in the light of the Lord's open coming at the end of the tribulation.

In verses 15 and 17 Paul speaks not only of those who are living but those "who are left remaining." Paul's use of this twofold designation—"living" and "left remaining"—in both verses is definite and meaningful. *Left remaining* (περιλειπόμενοι) is used only in these two verses in the New Testament. The root verb, λείπω (Luke 18:22; Titus 3:13; James 1:4-5), means "to lack, leave undone, forsake." When passive, it means to be left behind, as if by a rival in a race (Thayer 375). The phrase *who are living* is adequate to denote all the believers who live unto the Lord's coming. If *who are left remaining* were a simple appositive, it would, in this sense, be redundant. Rather, it is a qualifier to further clarify Paul's meaning. Its use indicates, or at least implies, that there are some living ones who do not remain. The living ones who are gone, that is, not remaining, are the overcomers who have been raptured prior to the great tribulation (Rev. 3:10). Those who remain are those who pass through the tribulation to be raptured near the end of that time. Concerning Paul's definite use of περιλειπόμενοι in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 17, George H. Lang notes,

It means, to be left after others are gone...In this place it seems redundant save on our view that the rapture there in question is at the close of the Tribulation and that some saints will not have been left on earth until that event, but will have been removed alive earlier; for to have marked the contrast with those that had died it would have been enough to have said "we that are alive," without twice repeating this unusual word. (41)

As we have seen, the watchful and ready believers, the resurrected overcomers who constitute the man-child and the living overcomers who compose the firstfruits (Rev. 12:5; 14:1-5), are raptured prior to the great tribulation. Those who are alive and are "left remaining" will remain on the earth during the tribulation to be raptured at a later time. These are typified by the woman in Revelation 12:1-6 and the general harvest in 14:14-16.

A Shout of Command and the Voice of the Archangel

First Thessalonians 4:16 says that the coming of the Lord will be accompanied "with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God." In Matthew 24:43 the Lord said, "Know this, that if the householder had known in which watch the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have

allowed his house to be broken into." Similarly, in Revelation 3:3 He says, "If therefore you will not watch, I will come as a thief, and you shall by no means know at what hour I will come upon you." In the Lord's secret coming prior to the tribulation, He will come as a thief to steal the watchful, ready, and first-ripe believers. In 1 Thessalonians 4, however, *shout*, *voice*, and *trumpet* all indicate a loud summons and are in strong contradistinction to the silence and stealth of the Lord's thief-like coming. Thus, verse 16 refers to the open coming of the Lord in power, which will be conspicuous, like a flash of lightning from the east to the west (Matt. 24:27). This aspect of the Lord's coming will be at the end of the great tribulation (v. 29).

The Lord's coming in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 is accompanied by the "shout of command" (ἐν κελύσματι). Thayer describes this as,

A stimulating cry, either that by which animals are roused and urged on by man, as horses by charioteers, hounds by hunters, etc., or that by which a signal is given to men, e.g. to rowers by the master of a ship..., to soldiers by a commander. (343)

To be sure, the shout of command is vocal, loud, and stimulating. This shout corresponds to the cry in Matthew 25:6, which says, "At midnight there was a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Go forth to meet him!" At this cry, the ten virgins arise, signifying the resurrection of the dead saints. The voice of the archangel in 1 Thessalonians 4 may be that of Michael, the only angel by that designation in the New Testament (Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). Such a vociferous proclamation aptly befits the open coming of the Lord in glory. Concerning His open coming, Jesus said, "The Son of Man is to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will repay each man according to his doings" (Matt. 16:27). Since the Lord will come in His open manifestation at the end of the great tribulation, the rapture of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4 must be at that time.

John N. Darby softens the connotation of the sound of command, stating, "The only persons who hear it are 'the dead in Christ,' Christ being represented as in this way gathering together His own troops" (235). Some who follow Darby to teach a universal rapture of the entire church prior to the tribulation make further attempts to minimize the impact of *shout of command* and *voice of the archangel*. Gerald Stanton, a leading contemporary advocate of this teaching, says,

It is sufficient, rather to understand this "shout" simply as a signal cry, heard only by the Church, and accompanied by the *voice* of the archangel...This may indeed be descriptive of only *one* great signal from heaven...It is a signal to the Church, both dead and living, and if it is

heard by the world at all, it will not be understood and will engender no response. (86)

The force of placing *shout*, above, in quotation marks is to infer that it is not a true shout at all but a kind of “cry” that is heard only by the church. However, the stimulating cry that rouses and urges on a charioteer’s horses, and the shout of a commander to his soldiers, are heard by all around. To attempt to say that the shout is heard only by the church is a poor attempt to differentiate the shout in 1 Thessalonians 4 from the open proclamation of the Lord’s coming in power. Stanton’s explanation is “sufficient” to uphold the pretribulation teaching of the school of dispensationalism, but it is not at all sufficient to interpret the plain text of this passage. This form of exegesis is not worthy of the school founded by Darby, which insists upon taking words at their plain, literal, historical-grammatical meaning, as the “golden rule of biblical interpretation” (Stanton 138). The plain and simple sense of the shout of command and the voice of the archangel are the open and public signals that occur near the end of the great tribulation. It is at this time that the majority of the believers are resurrected and raptured.

The Trumpet of God

Verse 16 says that the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with the trumpet of God. Understanding what the trumpet of God is will help us to identify the time at which the events of chapter 4 take place. The trumpet of God here is also found in 1 Corinthians 15:52. This verse says, “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed.” The details of the trumpet of God, which is the “last trumpet,” are revealed in Revelation. A great part of Revelation, particularly chapters 6 through 9 and 15 through 16, discloses the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. The seven seals in Revelation 6:1 through 8:5 unveil the mystery of God’s economy concerning the church, Israel, the world, and the universe. In 6:12-17, the great tribulation is initiated by the supernatural calamities of the sixth seal. Following this, the seventh seal brings in the seven trumpets, which are the contents of the seventh seal. The seven seals are opened secretly, whereas the seven trumpets are sounded openly. In 8:7-12 the first four trumpets begin the supernatural calamities, and in 8:13 to 9:21 the fifth and sixth trumpets bring in the first and second woes, initiating the most severe woes of the great tribulation. Lastly, the seventh trumpet is sounded in 11:15. This verse says, “The seventh angel trumpeted; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever.” The trumpet of God in 1 Thessalonians 4, the last trumpet in 1 Corinthians 15, and the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11 are all one.

William Kelly states the dispensational precept to the contrary, “It is a superficial mistake to think that the last trump has any reference to the seven trumpets of the Revelation, which are the loud warnings of divine judgments” (“Hope” 23-24). His objection is that the last trumpet in 1 Corinthians 15 is for the resurrection of the saints, but the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11 is related to judgment on the world. The seventh trumpet, however, comprises both negative and positive things (Lee, *Revelation* 327), such as the resurrection of life (John 5:27-29). The negative things are the wrath of God, which consists of the last plagues of the seven bowls (Rev. 15:1; 16:1-21) as the last woe to the dwellers on the earth (11:14), and the destruction of the destroyers of the earth, which transpires at the Lord’s coming back to earth (v. 18; 17:14; 18:1-2; 19:19—20:3). The positive things consist firstly of the eternal kingdom of Christ, which is the kingdom in its manifestation (11:15, 17). They also include the judgment of the dead (v. 18), not the final judgment after the millennium but the discrimination as to who should share in the resurrection of life before the millennium. Lastly, the positive aspect of the seventh trumpet includes the giving of rewards to the prophets and to the saints, which transpires at the judgment seat

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of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) after the resurrection and rapture of the saints, and the giving of rewards at the throne of Christ’s glory to those who feared God’s name (Matt. 25:31-34; Rev. 14:6-7). In this way, the seventh trumpet—with both its positive and negative aspects—will end the great tribulation, close the present age, and usher in the kingdom for the thousand years and afterward for eternity.

The Last Trumpet Being the Seventh Trumpet of Revelation 11:15

Concerning 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Kelly argues from the dispensational school:

The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a call of command (κελεύσαστι), with archangel’s voice, and trump of God. It is exclusively to raise the sleeping saints and change us who remain alive for His presence...Not a word implies that the world hears at that moment, not a word that earth and heaven are shaken...This violence is beneath a sober believer. It is absurd to say that the archangel’s voice or the trumpet of God must be heard beyond the saints concerned. (“Coming” 59)

Although the details of the universal effect of the shout of command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God are not provided in 1 Thessalonians 4, Kelly's "not a word" does not stand against the extensive details unveiled in Revelation. At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the last trumpet, not only will the great tribulation end, but also this age will close, the mystery of God will be finished, and another age, the age of the kingdom, will begin. Thus, the last trumpet will have a universal effect on man, the earth, and the entire universe. Samuel P. Tregelles, an early member of the Brethren and a Hebrew scholar, remarks concerning 1 Thessalonians 4,

The scene presented is the very reverse of secrecy: the Lord comes with a shout; His call shall wake the dead; but besides this, the voice of the archangel shall be also heard; and, as if the notion of publicity were intended to be specially enforced, there shall be the sounding of the trump of God. This is just what Christ has promised in Matt. 24:31, when He comes with the clouds of heaven. To say that this triple sound shall not be heard by all, would be a mere addition to Holy Scripture of a kind that contradicts its testimony. (23)

The trumpet of God in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15:52, is none other than the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11:15. In defense of the teaching of the pretribulation rapture of the church, John Walvoord disputes, "There are many other trumpets mentioned in Scripture, both in the Old Testament and in the New, which should not be confused with this event" (*Question 202*). In the New Testament, *trumpet* (σάλπιγξ) is used for a sounding to battle (1 Cor. 14:8), the very loud and long blast that accompanied the Lord's presence at Mount Sinai (Heb. 12:19; cf. Exo. 19:13, 16, 19), and to describe the loud voice that John heard (Rev. 1:10; 4:1), all of these denoting an audible and conspicuous call. The seven other instances of the word all refer to the loud trumpet call that signals the Lord's open coming (Matt. 24:31), the last trumpet (1 Cor. 15:52), the trumpet of God (1 Thes. 4:16), and the seven trumpets in Revelation (8:2, 6, 13; 9:14). Similarly, ten out of the twelve instances of the verb form (σαλπίζω) refer to the seven trumpets (8:6-8, 10, 12-13; 9:1, 13; 10:7; 11:15), and an eleventh is again in 1 Corinthians 15:52.² That "there are many other trumpets," particularly in the New Testament, is hardly defensible. Walvoord does not tell us which of the "many" trumpets corresponds to the trumpet of God in 1 Thessalonians, or if the trumpet there is an altogether different one.

In the same vein as Walvoord, Stanton concludes, "Those who make 'last trumpet' a technical term do so based on a prior assumption rather than upon solid Biblical evidence" (371). The proscription against taking *last* according to its literal, plain meaning is to avoid equating

the last trumpet as the seventh trumpet, which according to Revelation is certainly the last one. Stanton says, "We believe that the 'last trump' will close the Church age, but that it will sound several years prior to the seven judgment trumpets of Revelation" (193). To say that the "last" trumpet comes before the seven trumpets is once again a violation of the literal, grammatical interpretation of *last*, which puts Stanton's view in the class of "flagrant departures" that he elsewhere condemns (157).³ The "solid Biblical evidence" demanded by Stanton actually points to the conclusion that the trumpet of God in 1 Thessalonians 4 is the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15, which is the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11, that begins to sound near the end of the great tribulation. It is the last trumpet because after it there will be no other trumpets. Once again, the implication for 1 Thessalonians 4 is that the rapture of the majority of the saints occurs near the beginning of the sounding of the seventh trumpet, that is near the end of the great tribulation. Thus, these believers will have passed through the greatest part of the tribulation.⁴

Caught Up Together in the Clouds

First Thessalonians 4:17 says, "Then we who are living, who are left remaining, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Almost all commentators agree that in this verse Christ's meeting with the raptured saints is in the air, not in the third heaven, where Christ sits at the right hand of God (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20).⁵ To understand the significance of this, we need to see the sequence of Christ's coming, His parousia, at the end of this age, which will extend over a period of time. It will begin with the resurrection and rapture of the man-child, the overcoming saints of past generations, who will be caught up to God and to His throne prior to the "thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev. 12:5-6). Near the same time, the firstfruits—the first-ripe, overcoming believers living at the end of the age—are raptured to the heavenly Mount Zion to stand before the throne of God, the four living creatures, and the twenty-four elders (Rev. 14:1-5; Heb. 12:22). This rapture transpires prior to the "hour of His judgment," the fall of religious Babylon, and the worship of the beast (Rev. 14:7-9). Clearly, these raptures take place in the highest heaven, the third heaven, the heaven of heavens (2 Cor. 12:2; Deut. 10:14; Psa. 148:4), where the Lord Jesus and God are today. Moreover, they occur prior to the great tribulation.

Near the end of the three and a half years, Christ continues His parousia by coming down from heaven to the air. Revelation 10:1 and 2 say,

I saw another strong Angel coming down out of heaven, clothed with a cloud; and the rainbow was upon His head, and His face was like the sun, and His feet like pillars of fire. And He had in His hand a little opened scroll. And

He placed His right foot on the sea and the left on the land.

The strong Angel, as in 7:2; 8:3; and 18:1 is Christ, the “Angel of Jehovah,” who is God Himself (Gen. 22:11-12; Exo. 3:2-6; Judg. 6:11-24; Zech 1:11-12). The vision in Revelation 10 is part of an insertion between the sixth and seventh trumpets (9:12-21; 11:14-18), indicating that before the seventh trumpet, Christ is on the way to earth. Christ’s placing His feet on the sea and on the land is His treading on them, and to tread on them is to take possession of them (Deut. 11:24; Josh. 1:3; Psa. 8:6-8). This indicates that at this point Christ is coming down to possess the earth. This transpires near the end of the great tribulation, while He is still hidden in, “clothed with,” a cloud.

Revelation 14:14 says, “I saw, and behold, there was a white cloud, and on the cloud One like the Son of Man sitting, having a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand.” If we treat the wording of this verse carefully, we will see a progression in the Lord’s parousia. At this point, Christ is no longer hidden, clothed with a cloud (περιβεβλημένον νεφέλην); He is manifest, that is, on the cloud (ἐπὶ τῇ νεφέλῃν). Matthew 24:30 and 26:64 also speak of this event. The former verse says, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds [ἐπὶ τῶν νεφελῶν] of heaven with power and great glory.”⁶ This appearing is the open, manifest coming of Christ at the end of the great tribulation, at which time He will be seen by all the tribes of the land (Rev. 1:7). Here we repeat 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “Then we who are living, who are left remaining, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The rapture in verse 17 is in the clouds, that is, in the air. Thus, this rapture differs from that of the man-child and the firstfruits in at least three ways. In verse 17 the believers are caught up to the air; in Revelation they are caught up to the throne of God in the third heaven. In the former they are taken at the last trumpet, the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11:15; in the latter they are taken prior to the thousand two hundred and sixty days, the three and a half years of the great tribulation. In the former the catching up is announced vociferously; in the latter no announcement is mentioned, for it is carried out in secret.

By assimilating all of the above verses, we can see that Christ’s parousia transpires over a period of time. It begins with the rapture of the man-child and the firstfruits and ends with Christ’s appearing on the earth with His saints. During the period of His parousia there will be the great tribulation, which will include supernatural calamities (Rev. 6:12-17; 8:7-12), Christ’s descending to the air (14:14), the rapture of the majority of the believers to the

air, the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), and the marriage of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9). Although Paul’s burden in writing 1 Thessalonians was not to teach a school of eschatology, his use of certain crucial phrases in 4:15-17 are most consistent with, and best understood in, the light of Christ’s parousia, which includes the rapture of the majority of living believers near the end of the great tribulation.

A Basic and Elementary Word concerning the Rapture

We must emphasize that Paul’s word to the Thessalonians in chapter 4 is a basic and elementary word concerning the rapture. It was not his intent or desire to initiate them into a certain school of eschatology. The two Epistles to the Thessalonians were written in the early days of his work, while he was on his second journey of ministry. In the course of this journey, Paul stayed in Thessalonica for less than a month. According to Acts 17:1-2, Paul worked there for three Sabbaths. Even at the time Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, the church there was very young. Hence, Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians are more or less to those in a childhood stage, and some of what he says to them is different, in principle, from what he says to other churches that were more experienced (Lee,

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Thessalonians 1-2). Because Paul viewed the Thessalonians as young believers, the tone of these two Epistles is different from that of the Epistles, for example, to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

By the time the first Epistle was written, some of the believers in Thessalonica may already have died, causing the saints there to grieve. Paul’s burden was to write to them to assure them that those who were sleeping will be resurrected, just as those who would be alive will be raptured. Thus, the hope for all the believers, in their holy life for the church life, is the Lord’s coming with resurrection and rapture. As a word of comfort, the rapture of the believers at the Lord’s coming is mentioned here only in a general way. Hence, it is incorrect to take 1 Thessalonians 4 as an all-inclusive teaching of the rapture. This is the error made by both extremes in the debate.

To compare Paul’s word concerning the resurrection and rapture in verses 13 through 18 to his word concerning the will of God in verses 3 and 4 will help us to see the nature and intent of the Epistles to the Thessalonians. Verses 3 and 4 say, “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know

how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.” This is Paul’s statement of the will of God to inexperienced believers who had been saved for less than a year. Concerning the will of God, Paul says in Romans 12, “Do not be fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and well pleasing and perfect” (v. 2). He then goes on to say that we who are many are one Body in Christ (v. 5). According to Romans, the will of God is that we whom God has chosen, called, redeemed, justified, sanctified, and conformed unto glorification in chapters 1 through 11 may be members one of another to have the living Body of Christ, which is the peak of the divine revelation presented in this Epistle.

Ephesians 1:5 also speaks of the will of God, saying, “Predestinating us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.” Verses 9 and 10 continue,

Making known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself, unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, in Him.

In Ephesians, the will of God for those whom He predestinated is to be joined to the Son of God and conformed to His image to be His Body, which is His fullness, the new man, the temple of God, the bride of Christ, and the warrior (vv. 23; 2:15, 21; 5:27; 6:11). By the dispensing of the abundant life supply of the Triune God into all of Christ’s members, God’s eternal administration and economy will be fulfilled at the consummation of all the ages for the eternal praise of God (3:21).

Colossians also speaks of the will of God. Verse 9 in chapter 1 says, “We also, since the day we heard of it, do not cease praying and asking on your behalf that you may be filled with the full knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” According to this Epistle, the will of God is His will regarding His eternal purpose, His economy concerning Christ as the all-inclusive, preeminent One, the mystery and embodiment of God, the Head and constituent of the church, the allotted portion, life constituent, and hope of the saints, and the body of all positive things (vv. 18; 2:2, 9; 3:11; 1:12, 27; 3:4; 2:17).

By all of the foregoing, we can see that the will of God is deep, mysterious, transcendent, and universal. However, because 1 Thessalonians was written to new believers, its tone is altogether different from that of Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians, lacking both the depths of the riches and the profound terms found in those books. To the new Thessalonian believers Paul simply said, “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from

fornication” (4:3). At that time in Thessalonica, sensuality and immorality were rife in the pagan religion and even were fostered by pagan worship. Hence, the apostle strongly charged the newly converted Gentile believers to be sanctified unto God and abstain from fornication. Such a word is basic and elementary, and by no means should we consider it as an all-inclusive statement concerning the will of God. In the same way, in chapter 4 Paul spoke concerning the rapture in a basic and elementary way, without the burden to teach eschatological details as a goal in itself. To take an interpretation of verses 13 to 18 as a comprehensive statement on the rapture of the saints leads to error and one-sidedness.

The Error of One-sided Interpretations of 1 Thessalonians 4

To interpret the details of this encouraging but simple chapter and fit them to a one-sided eschatological school is the predominant approach to this portion of the word. As an example of this, the teachers of dispensationalism claim that Paul’s lack of making an explicit mention of the great tribulation proves that all the saints will be raptured before it. C. I. Scofield states,

It is, indeed...remarkable that any should have supposed it possible in the light of Scripture for the true church to go through the great tribulation...The great tribulation is...never mentioned in connection with the departure of the church to meet the Lord in the air. (*Prophets* 135-137)

Walvoord echoes, “It would seem natural, if the great tribulation actually intervened before the rapture could be fulfilled, that this would have been a good place to put the whole matter into proper perspective” (*Tribulation* 94). Again he says, “Obviously, if the Great Tribulation is going to precede the Rapture, it would be natural to state this in a book dedicated to the exposition of the doctrine of the Rapture” (*Question* 197). Arguments such as these lead their advocates to conclude, “The pretribulation rapture is woven into the very warp and woof of this cardinal Scripture” (Stanton 87). This is the error on one side of the debate, the side of dispensational pretribulationism.

Walvoord somewhat weakens his own insistence by saying elsewhere, “It is not unusual in presenting prophetic events for only selected events to be included” (*Question* 186). Stanton says likewise, “There is no need that all the accompaniments of the rapture be restated at every mention of the event” (199). Thus, it is not unusual for Paul to not mention the tribulation in 1 Thessalonians 4. *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, by Alexander Reese, is acknowledged as “the most voluminous and important posttribulation work to date” (Stanton 23). In addressing Paul’s omission of certain outward signs of Christ’s coming in 1 Thessalonians 4, Reese says,

The reason why there is no mention of preceding signs and seals in 1 Thess. iv. is because the Apostle does not profess to be *describing* the Second Coming. His theme, properly speaking, is not the Second Advent, but the relation of survivors to the dead at that event. In other words, the Apostle is dealing with a single aspect of the Coming, and *that* as it concerns the dead in Christ. And this avails also to explain why no mention is made of the bearing of the Advent upon the unbelieving world. (155)

This observation is faithful to the subject and purpose of 1 Thessalonians. Reese further notes that no mention is made in this chapter of the judgment seat of Christ, the recompense of the saints, the marriage feast of the Lamb, or the relation of Christ's coming to Israel and the world. He concludes,

To argue from the Apostle's silence upon other points—such as the destruction of Antichrist, the judgement of the ungodly, and the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom—that therefore these events do not occur at this time is an unreasonable attitude. (155)

Henry Alford concludes,

That [Paul] advances no further in the prophetic description, but breaks off at our union in Christ's presence, is accounted for, by his purpose being accomplished, in having shewn that they who have died in Christ, shall not be thereby deprived of any advantage at His coming. The rest of the great events of that time...are not treated here, but not therefore to be conceived of as alien from the Apostle's teaching. (276)

Thus, the argument that the saints at the time of the Lord's coming will have no involvement with the tribulation, based upon Paul's silence concerning the tribulation in 1 Thessalonians 4, is one sided and not valid.

George Eldon Ladd says concerning the Lord's coming with a shout of command, "It is very difficult to find a secret coming of Christ in these verses," and concerning 2 Thessalonians 2 he says, "This is obviously no secret event, for the parousia of Christ will be an outshining, a manifestation" (63). Both of these are correct observations. However, Ladd's error is in his deduction:

The vocabulary of the Blessed Hope knows nothing of two aspects of Christ's coming, one secret and one glorious. On the contrary, the terminology points to a single indivisible return of Christ. Scripture says nothing about a secret coming of the Lord. (162)

This single coming of Christ, he says, is at the end of the tribulation. This is the error on the other side of the debate, the side of posttribulationism.

Being Balanced by the Twofoldness of Divine Truth

As we have seen, the truth of the Scriptures is neither on one extreme or the other. If we would know the details concerning the Lord's coming and our being caught up to Him, we must consider not only 1 Thessalonians but also 2 Thessalonians, Matthew 24 and 25, 1 Corinthians 15, and the entire book of Revelation. These details include the rapture of the overcoming saints, the great tribulation, the rapture of the majority of the saints, the judgment at the judgment seat of Christ, the reward in the kingdom, and the discipline by the kingdom. All these things are involved in the Lord's coming and our rapture, although not all are mentioned in any single portion of Scripture.

Paul's burden for the new Thessalonian believers was not to teach a particular school of "tribulationism." Rather, it was to relieve the Thessalonian believers' concerns for those among them who had fallen asleep. However, we can draw a secondary, eschatological conclusion from this chapter: There is a posttribulation aspect of the rapture in addition to the pretribulation features revealed particularly in Matthew and Revelation. This is the only consistent way to understand *left remaining*,

The Lord's coming will be in two aspects, a secret coming before the great tribulation and an open coming at the end. Both aspects of His coming will include a stage of the rapture.

shout of command, voice of the archangel, trumpet of God, in the clouds, and in the air. Douglas Moo says,

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 posttribulation setting. (Reiter 181-182)

Nevertheless, the larger truth concerning the rapture is in the proper synthesis of two apparently opposing views. The Lord's coming at the end of this age will be in two aspects, a secret coming before the great tribulation and an open coming at the end. Moreover, both aspects of His coming will include a stage of the rapture. Prior to the tribulation Christ will come as a thief to take away the watchful and ready believers, the firstfruits. Then near the end of the tribulation He will reap the general harvest, the majority of the believers, who will have remained on the earth during those three and a half years. In previous installments of this department we invoked Robert Govett's insight on the twofoldness of divine truth and the error of taking only one side of the truth to the

exclusion of the other. It is worth while to do so again. He says,

It is taken for granted that we are to make our choice between the two; and that, if we cannot reconcile the two systems, we are at liberty to give the preference to whichever we please. This is sheer unbelief. The same God who spake the one spake also the other. Do you ask which you are to believe? Which? Both!...The Lord give us a single eye, and the teaching of His Holy Spirit that each part of His Word may leave its due impression on our judgments, our hearts, and our conduct! (*Twofoldness* 6, 23)

Being Watchful and Sober

First Thessalonians 5:1-6 says,

Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need for anything to be written to you; for you yourselves know perfectly well that like a thief in the night, so the day of the Lord comes. When they say, Peace and security, then sudden destruction comes upon them, just as birth pangs to a woman with child; and they shall by no means escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as the rest do, but let us watch and be sober.

Immediately after Paul presents the hope of a holy life for the church life, he covers the need for the watchfulness and soberness of this life. As we wait for the Lord's coming back, we need to be watchful and sober. In chapter 4 the coming of the Lord is mainly for comfort and encouragement, but in chapter 5 the day of the Lord is mainly for warning, since it is mentioned in the Word mainly in relation to the Lord's judgment (1 Cor. 1:8; 3:13; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14). First Thessalonians 5:8 speaks of the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation. Both *breastplate* and *helmet* indicate spiritual warfare. As they awaited the coming of the Lord, Paul exhorted the new Thessalonian believers to fight the spiritual warfare to safeguard the three basic structures of the holy life for the church life: faith, love, and hope.

In verse 6 the meaning of *let us watch* (γρηγορῶμεν) is "to be roused from sleep, to be awake." It is to "give strict attention to, be cautious, active...lest one fall into sin" (Thayer 122) and is in contrast to *sleep* in verse 7. Similarly, *be sober* (νήφωμεν) is in contrast with *get drunk*. In verse 7 Paul speaks in the third person, "Those who sleep," but in verses 6 and 8 he speaks in the first person, "Let us be sober." Stanton concludes too generally that the contrast here is between true believers and unbelievers:

If language means anything, Paul is here distinguishing carefully between those who are ready for the rapture, and those who have not put on the helmet of salvation at all, and so must enter into the tribulation of the Day of the Lord. (89)

We may ask, though, if the rapture prior to the tribulation is the entitlement of all living believers in that day, why Paul would exhort the Thessalonians to watch and be sober. This at least implies that some genuine believers at the end of this age, as throughout all the centuries of this age, will be found sleeping, in the spiritual and moral sense, drunk with the enjoyment of the world, darkened with spiritual ignorance, and befuddled and in a stupor as regards spiritual reality. If the comfort and encouragement of 1 Thessalonians 4 is taken without heed to the warning and exhortation of chapter 5, then, as Govett notes, Paul may well have said,

O happy believer! come Christ when he may, you are always ready. Fear not! Though you pamper the lusts of the flesh, though you are seeking to heap up riches as the sand, though you love the world, and mingle in all its gaieties, you will sustain no damage. Fear not! None but the wicked will be left. Sleep on and take your rest! (*Rapture* 86)

Fear not and *watch* are not for the same persons in the same circumstances. Although a true believer is a son of light and a son of the day in position and status (Luke 16:8; Eph. 5:8), he may fall into a darkened condition, whether through sin, failure, or misleading. In such a case, his condition will not match his position. The Scriptures, church history, and our own experience provide adequate and numerous examples of this. Therefore, we must be vigilant and wakeful in this dark age, and we must also be sober and accurate concerning our view of the Lord's return and the rapture of the saints. "Sugar-coated" teachings about the Lord's coming and the rapture do not prepare the believers for fighting, watchfulness, readiness, and sobriety. Many such teachings actually cause them to be drugged, in a stupor, darkened, and in danger of slumbering.

Rest and Vengeance at the Revelation of the Lord

Although 2 Thessalonians contains further words of encouragement to the new believers, much of it is devoted to Paul's correction of their misconception concerning the day of the Lord's coming. In 1:4-8 Paul says,

We ourselves boast in you among the churches of God concerning your endurance and faith in all your persecutions and the afflictions which you bear, a plain indication of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be accounted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which also you suffer; since it is just with God to repay with affliction

those afflicting you, and to you who are being afflicted, rest with us at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power, in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

According to this word, the persecuted believers will be granted rest from their afflictions at the revelation of the Lord Jesus. *Angels of His power, flaming fire, and vengeance* all indicate that this revelation is the open coming of the Lord Jesus at the end of the great tribulation (Matt. 16:27; 24:30-31; Rev. 19:11-16). This is the revelation spoken of in Luke 17:29-30, which says, “On the day in which Lot went out from Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be in the same way on the day in which the Son of Man is revealed.” Thus, the believers will receive rest, praise, glory, honor, and grace and will rejoice exultingly (1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 4:13), and at the same time their persecutors will be destroyed (Rev. 11:18). This will transpire at the Lord’s open coming in power at the end of the last three and a half years of this age. Although 2 Thessalonians 1:4-10 does not make an explicit mention of the rapture of the saints—either before or after the tribulation—it at least allows that some persecuted believers will be on the earth until the time near to the revelation of the Lord Jesus in power. Walvoord argues from the pretribulation view by stating,

In fact, the Thessalonians were not delivered by the second coming of Christ and actually died before either the Rapture or the Tribulation overtook the world...Indeed the persecutors of the Thessalonians will not be present at the second coming of Christ. (*Question 236*)

Instead, he points out, the persecutors will resurrect and be judged after the millennium. Walvoord’s meaning here is that since the Thessalonians themselves did not receive rest at the Lord’s coming, nor were their persecutors repaid in their lifetime, the sequence of events strongly indicated in this passage should not be taken literally. He continues,

Only if the Thessalonians are taken as representative of the saints at the time of the Second Coming, and their persecutors are taken as representative of the wicked at the time of the Second Coming, can this passage have any relationship to a posttribulation rapture. (236-237)

Walvoord’s assumption is that this is not the case, and by this logic he claims, “The posttribulation argument falls apart” (237). However, we should draw a lesson from 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. In this passage Paul speaks of the coming rapture in the first person plural. Although neither he nor the Thessalonians were caught up to the clouds to meet the Lord in His coming, all agree that Paul and the Thessalonians are representative of the living saints at the

end of this age. Nevertheless, Walvoord insists that the same kind of analogy by representation does not apply to 2 Thessalonians 1. Since he rejects the literal interpretation of this passage and also denies its analogical application, it is stripped of its power, and we are left only with the vague conclusion that God will deal with the wicked “in due time” (237). This demonstrates the defective kind of argument necessary to maintain the dispensational thesis that none of the saints will remain on the earth unto the revelation of Christ. This is not reasonable, because verses 6 through 8 clearly indicate that some persecuted believers will not obtain their rest until “the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power,” which will transpire at the end of the great tribulation. This view fits the overall context of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Gathered Together at the Manifestation of His Coming

Second Thessalonians 2:1-2 says,

Now we ask you, brothers, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you be not quickly shaken in mind nor alarmed, nei-

“Sugar-coated” teachings about the Lord’s coming and the rapture do not prepare the believers for fighting, watchfulness, readiness, and sobriety.

ther by a spirit nor by word nor by letter as if by us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

According to this opening word, Paul is covering two matters: the Lord’s parousia and our gathering together to Him, that is, our rapture. As we have seen, the Lord’s parousia will begin with the rapture of the overcomers to the throne of God in heaven. Then near the end of the great tribulation it will come to the air and last for a time. Finally, it will end with its manifestation, “the manifestation of His coming” (v. 8). During the time in which the Lord’s parousia remains in the air, the majority of the believers will be raptured to meet the Lord there. Verses 3 and 4 continue,

Let no one deceive you in any way, because it will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or an object of worship, so that he sits in the temple of God, setting himself forth, saying that he is God.

The coming apostasy will be a falling away from the straight way of God’s economy as revealed in the

Scriptures. The man of lawlessness, of course, is Antichrist (Dan. 7:20-21, 24-26; 9:27; 11:36-37; Rev. 13:1-8, 12-18; 19:19-20). At the end of the church age there will be a period of seven years, the last of the seventy weeks prophesied in Daniel 9:24-27. Just before the beginning of these seven years, Antichrist will rise up as the final Caesar of the restored Roman Empire (Scofield Bible, Rev. 13:1, 3; Dan. 7:26, notes). He will then make a covenant, an agreement, with the Jews, which will be intended to last for seven years. Halfway through the seven years, however, Antichrist will break the covenant, change laws, destroy and corrupt many to an extraordinary degree, blaspheme God, persecute His people, and deceive men. Hence, the Lord will utterly destroy him, and he will become the son of perdition. This second half of the seven years is the forty-two months, the thousand two hundred and sixty days (Rev. 11:2-3; 13:5), of the great tribulation.

Second Thessalonians 2:8 says, “Then the lawless one will be revealed (whom the Lord Jesus will slay by the breath of His mouth and bring to nothing by the manifestation of His coming.)” This will transpire at the “revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power, in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7-8). As we have seen, Paul’s intention in 2 Thessalonians was to correct the misconception concerning the day of the Lord’s coming. According to the context, *the day of the Lord* in 2:2 refers to the day of the Lord’s parousia (coming), in which the gathering together of the saints to Him will take place.⁷ Verse 3 tells us affirmatively that before that day Antichrist will be revealed to play the major role in the great tribulation. Therefore, prior to the manifestation of the Lord’s parousia, one matter—the apostasy—must appear first, and one person—Antichrist—must also appear. This reveals clearly and definitely that the Lord’s coming to the air and the “gathering together” (rapture) of the majority of the believers cannot take place before the great tribulation. Before all the saints are gathered together to Him, the man of lawlessness must be revealed.

The “Removal” of the Holy Spirit

In 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8 Paul speaks further concerning the coming of Antichrist:

Now you know that which restrains, so that he might be revealed in his own time. For it is the mystery of lawlessness that is now operating, but only until the one now restraining goes out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed.

Here Paul asserts that the coming of the Lord and the gathering of the saints to Him cannot transpire until Antichrist is revealed, but this will not happen until “that

which restrains” goes out of the way. This refers to some power that hinders the revelation of the man of lawlessness. The lawlessness that will characterize Antichrist is already operating in this age mysteriously. It is the mystery of lawlessness working today among the nations and in human society. According to God’s sovereignty, the restraining factor that limits lawlessness will not be removed until the end of this age, at which time Antichrist will be manifested.

Many attempts have been made to identify the restraining factor, identifying it as civil government, the Roman Empire in particular, the Jewish state, the church, the preaching of the gospel, the power of God, or even good in general (Reiter 190; Stanton 93-98), all of which have operated to restrict and limit lawlessness at one time or another. Gleason L. Archer suggests,

The Holy Spirit, operating through common grace...so as to restrain unredeemed human society from a total disregard of the moral law, will...remove His remaining influence, with the result that human society and government will progressively degenerate to the depth of depravity that characterized the generation of Noah (when the Spirit ceased to strive with that fallen and utterly corrupt society, Gen. 6:3). (Reiter 127)

The reference to Genesis 6:3 seems appropriate. Nevertheless, the interpretation is very difficult, being made all the more obscure by the fact that *that which restrains* (τὸ κατέχον) in 2 Thessalonians 2:6 is neuter in gender, and *the one...restraining* (ὁ κατέχων) in verse 7 is masculine. John Peter Lange notes, “Who now is the κατέχων, is really the darkest point in the whole passage” (130). The dispensational interpretation, however, is very specific and has a specific result for its eschatology. Kelly asks,

Who but the Spirit could adequately restrain Satan?...His presence in the church then, as long as it is here, is much the weightiest part in that restraint; and thus Satan cannot go beyond “the mystery of lawlessness,” while the great mystery as respects Christ and as respects the church is being carried on. (“Coming” 97-98)

The restraining factor, he says, is the Holy Spirit Himself, who “goes out of the way” at the end of this age (2 Thes. 2:7). According to the dispensational paradigm, just prior to the great tribulation the entire church will be raptured to heaven, at which time, “the restraining hand of the Spirit shall be removed from the earth” (Stanton 102). The “restraining hand,” however, is more than the work and influence of the Spirit. According to the dispensational teaching, it is the Holy Spirit Himself that will leave the earth. Stanton continues,

The very fact that during the Tribulation, Satan, the

Antichrist, and the False Prophet—that great trinity of evil—shall be on earth and be permitted full sway, argues strongly that the Holy Spirit of God will no longer be resident in the earthly sphere. It would seem that the pretribulation removal of the Spirit fits well into the broad Biblical pattern...

When He, as restrainer, is removed, there will be a reversal of Pentecost, which will mean that the Spirit will minister from heaven as during the Old Testament economy. He will be present, but not resident; operating, but no longer indwelling. (102, 105)

If there is any doubt as to the meaning of this, Kelly puts it succinctly, “The Restrainer will be then and there clean gone...He goes of Himself, and quits the scene” (“Coming” 99). This is the key link in the circular chain of arguments that brings us back to the pretribulation rapture: “When the Spirit is removed, then the Church must also be snatched away” (Stanton 107); “how manifestly impossible for the Church to go into the Tribulation once the Spirit has been caught away from the earth” (101); “if the Holy Spirit is removed from His present position indwelling the church, then the church itself must also be removed, and hence the Rapture must take place at the same time” (Walvoord, *Question* 242). Walvoord concludes,

Taken as a whole, 2 Thessalonians makes a major contribution to the doctrine of the Rapture...The man of sin, or the lawless one, cannot be revealed as such until the Rapture, that is, the removal of the church indwelt by the Holy Spirit...The truths revealed in 2 Thessalonians 2 are a devastating blow to posttribulationism, labeling it as an early error in the church.⁸ (244-245)

The dispensational argument is that “the one now restraining goes out of the way” is equivalent in every sense to the rapture (2 Thes. 2:7), with all that this event involves. Thus, in the eyes of the above teachers, a problematic interpretation of an obscure phrase with an unclear gender—Lange’s “darkest point in the whole passage”—becomes the basis for a major eschatological, if not theological, conclusion and thus settles a primeval “error” in the church.⁹

The Spirit’s Going Forth into All the Earth

Watchman Nee notes that the eschatology of dispensationalism requires “too many presumptions and assumptions” to maintain its theses (517). He provides several arguments against the “removal” of the Spirit (522-526). First, the Bible calls the Holy Spirit by many names, including the Spirit of God (Gen. 1:2), the Spirit of Jehovah (6:3), the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35), the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), the Spirit of

the Lord (2 Cor. 3:17), the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:4), the Spirit of life (8:2), the Spirit of glory (1 Pet. 4:14), and the Comforter (John 14:26). However, nowhere is He called the Restrainer. To say that the restraining one is the Holy Spirit is clearly a presumption. Second, *goes out of the way* (ἐκ μέσου γένηται, 2 Thes. 2:7) cannot be translated as “is raptured.” Although the phrase probably means “taken out of the way,” to be taken from earth to heaven is not inherent in the meaning. Again, to claim this is a presumption.

Third, according to the dispensational teaching of the sequence of Revelation, the church is raptured at 4:1, in which John is called up to heaven to see the things that must take place afterward, and from this point to the end of chapter 19 we see the details of the great tribulation. However, 4:5 says, “There were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God,” and 5:6 continues, “I saw...a Lamb standing as having just been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.” In essence and existence, God’s Spirit is one, but in the intensified function and work of God’s operation, God’s Spirit is sevenfold. At the time of degradation and dark-

According to God’s sovereignty, the restraining factor that limits lawlessness will not be removed until the end of this age, at which time Antichrist will be manifested.

ness, the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God is needed for God’s move and work on the earth. The teaching of the Holy Spirit’s removal from the earth in chapter 4 contradicts the Spirit’s going forth into all the earth in chapter 5.

The Outpouring of the Spirit for the Salvation of Israel

Fourth, the Holy Spirit must be on the earth in order for men to be saved during the tribulation. Joel 2:28-32 says,

Afterward I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh, / And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; / Your old men shall dream dreams; / Your young men shall see visions. / Indeed even upon the male and female slaves / In those days I will pour out My Spirit. / And I will show wonders in the heavens and on earth: / Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. / The sun shall be turned into darkness, / And the moon into blood, / Before the great and terrible / Day of Jehovah comes. / And everyone who calls on the name of Jehovah shall be saved.

This prophecy concerning the pouring out of God’s Spirit as the early rain for Israel’s salvation (v. 23) was fulfilled as a foretaste by the pouring out of the Spirit on

the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4, 16-21), and it will be fulfilled as a full taste by the pouring out of the Spirit a second time, before the major part of the great tribulation, for the salvation and regeneration of many of the returned Israelites (Lee, *Joel* 18-20). This outpouring is different from the outpouring of the Spirit on the last day of the tribulation (Zech. 12:10) for the salvation of the remnant of the Jews under Antichrist's besieging.

The Spirit poured out on the day of Pentecost was the Spirit of God compounded with Christ's humanity, death, resurrection, and ascension (cf. Exo. 30:23-25). Moreover, this Spirit has been intensified sevenfold for God's move and work on the earth today. Therefore, the One who was poured out not only on the day of Pentecost but will be poured out again at the end of this age is the all-inclusive, compound, sevenfold, life-giving Spirit as the realization of Christ (1 Cor. 15:45b) and the consummation of the Triune God. Such a Spirit was sent forth into all the earth for the salvation of men, and He will still be present on the earth for the salvation of the Jews in particular at the end of this age.

God's saving of Israel by the pouring out of His Spirit will be accompanied by the natural calamities of the sixth seal and the first four trumpets in Revelation on the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth as a prelude to the great tribulation. Joel 2:30-31 and the corresponding word in Acts 2:19-20 speak of blood, fire, pillars (vapor) of smoke, and the sun being turned into darkness and the moon into blood. Clearly, these signs were not fulfilled at the time of the first outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Rather, we see them in Revelation 6 and 8. Verse 12 of chapter 6 says, "I saw when He opened the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black like sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood." In 8:1 the seventh seal is opened, the contents of which are the seven trumpets. Verse 7 says that when the first trumpet was sounded, "there was hail and fire mingled with blood, and it was cast to the earth." At the sounding of the second trumpet, a "great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea; and the third part of the sea became blood" (v. 8). At the third trumpet, "a great star fell out of heaven, burning like a torch" (v. 10). Finally, at the sounding of the fourth trumpet, "the third part of the sun and the third part of the moon and the third part of the stars were smitten, so that the third part of them would be darkened and the day would not appear for the third part of it, and the night likewise" (v. 12). All these things are the fulfillment of the prophecies in Joel 2 and Acts 2.

According to the prophecy in Joel, there will not be much difference in time between the sixth seal and the first five trumpets of Revelation 6 through 9 (Lee, *Revelation* 249). Joel 2:30-31 first mentions the blood of the first and

second trumpets, the fire of the first, second, and third trumpets, and the smoke of the fifth trumpet (Rev. 9:1-3), and then mentions the sun and moon of the sixth seal. Commencing with the fifth trumpet are the three woes (Rev. 8:13—9:21; 11:14; 15:5—16:21), which are the major structure of the great tribulation, in the great and terrible day of Jehovah. Therefore, the events prophesied in Joel and Acts may be considered the introductory portion of the tribulation. It is at this time that the Holy Spirit will be poured out greatly and will do an unprecedented work for the salvation of the returning Jews.

However, many of the returned Jews will not believe but will continue to be stubborn. Eventually, at the end of the tribulation, Jerusalem will be surrounded by Gentile armies under Antichrist, whose intention it will be to destroy Israel entirely. At that juncture the Lord Jesus Christ will descend with His overcomers. Furthermore, according to Zechariah 12, at that time the consummated Spirit will again be poured out, and the remnant of Israel will be saved. This will be the third outpouring of the Spirit.

The Spirit's Work of Regeneration in the Tribulation

It is worthwhile at this point to repeat 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7: "Now you know that which restrains, so that he might be revealed in his own time. For it is the mystery of lawlessness that is now operating, but only until the one now restraining goes out of the way."

As we have seen, the key to the dispensational interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2 is to claim that the above verses declare the Holy Spirit's departure to heaven prior to the manifestation of Antichrist. Then by circular argument, if the Spirit is gone, the church must also be taken in a pre-tribulation rapture. Hal Lindsey states that the Holy Spirit's "unique ministries in, through and for the believer will be removed with the Church" (138). Walvoord asserts, "That the Spirit works in the tribulation all agree. That the Spirit indwells all believers in the tribulation is nowhere taught" (*Tribulation* 128). Moreover, the Spirit's remote operation from heaven is said to revert to the principles of the Old Testament, not of the New, as Charles Ryrie claims: "The Holy Spirit...will nevertheless have a ministry in the world during the tribulation much the same as He had in the Old Testament times" (143). Since, as Kelly states, the Holy Spirit is "clean gone," the church will also have been raptured to heaven. Thus, the opinion that the rapture intervenes between the present time and the coming of Antichrist is held so strongly that it is as if the words *pretribulation rapture* were actually found in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7. Walvoord implies this by saying, "As the passage continues, Paul is not silent about the rapture intervening, if the passage is rightly interpreted" (*Tribulation* 126). However, the departure of the Holy

Spirit in these verses is a very weak hinge for an important eschatological argument to hang on, particularly in light of the future outpouring of the regenerating Spirit prophesied in Joel 2 and Acts 2. Watchman Nee rightly concludes,

If there is one person saved during the tribulation, it will still be the work of the Holy Spirit on earth, because that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit [John 3:6]...If during the great tribulation the Holy Spirit is still on the earth, then our brothers' reasoning, that the Holy Spirit's rapture means the church's rapture, no longer has any biblical foundation to it. (523-526)

Being Sanctified Wholly for the Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians were written to new believers, to whom he was as a nursing mother and an exhorting father (1 Thes. 2:7, 11). Appropriately, his word to them is elementary. In 1 Thessalonians 4 he seeks to comfort and encourage them with a general word concerning the Lord's coming and the resurrection and rapture of the saints, and in chapter 5 he exhorts them to watchfulness and soberness in light of the Lord's coming. Then in 2 Thessalonians he corrects the wrong concept concerning the day of the Lord and our gathering unto Him. Paul's intention is nowhere to teach a kind of "tribulationism," neither pretribulation nor posttribulation. However, the terms, references, sequences, and associations he uses are all best understood in light of the Lord's coming in power at the end of the three and a half years of the great tribulation. They are, as Robert H. Gundry says, "outstandingly posttribulational references" (113). It is at this point that the majority of believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and it is then that they will have rest at the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Although we cannot accept in entirety the traditional posttribulation school of interpretation, we have demonstrated that the two Epistles to the Thessalonians definitely reveal a posttribulational aspect of the rapture of the saints at the end of this age.

However, if we were to have only 1 and 2 Thessalonians without the other books of the New Testament, we would have only a general impression of the Lord's coming and the rapture of the saints. We would not know the subjective, organic aspect of the rapture as the glorification of our body, as revealed in Romans, Ephesians, and Philippians. We would also know nothing of the secret coming of the Lord, the rapture of the man-child and the firstfruits, the judgment seat of Christ, the marriage of the Lamb, or the thousand-year kingdom. Nevertheless, the two simple Epistles to the Thessalonians leave us with a righteous word of exhortation. We, the believers who may live unto the coming of the Lord, must prepare for the day

of the Lord, as for the coming of a thief in the night. We must not sleep but rather be wakeful, watchful, and sober (1 Thes. 5:2, 6-7). We must also put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation (v. 8), fighting the spiritual warfare to safeguard faith, love, and hope as the three basic structures of the holy life for the church life.

First Thessalonians 5:23 says, "The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." We must not only be encouraged by Paul's word in these two Epistles. We must also practice what he wrote concerning watchfulness, soberness, sanctification, and the preservation of our entire being. Only in this way will we be ready, prepared, and qualified for the return of the Lord Jesus and the rapture of the overcomers prior to the great tribulation. On the other hand, if we slumber, become drunk with the enjoyment of the world, are darkened by the things of this age, or become befuddled concerning spiritual reality, we will miss the Lord's secret coming. Those who are found in this condition will pass through the great tribulation for their perfection and discipline and be raptured close to the time of the Lord's appearing in glory afterward.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹For a detailed discussion of these matters, please see parts 1 and 2 of "The Rapture of the Saints," *Affirmation & Critique* XI.2 (Oct. 2006): 74-91 and XII.1 (April 2007): 68-83.

²The other usage of σαλπίζω is the public announcement of the hypocrites (Matt. 6:2), which by no means is a "trumpet of God."

³Stanton further argues that the last trumpet and the seventh trumpet are the last in two different spheres, respectively: "The 'last trump' is last in respect to the Church... The 'seventh trumpet' of Revelation 11 is 'last' only in respect to the other six of the series" (194). This assumes, of course, that the last of anything that concerns the church must transpire before the great tribulation, which is a precept of dispensationalism. Thus, the argument as to whether the dispensational interpretation is correct becomes circular. Stanton, who treats this topic more thoroughly than perhaps any other writer, offers several such explanations, all of which require redefining *last* in one way or another.

⁴The particular timing of the posttribulation rapture with respect to the third and final woe, as the negative content of the seventh trumpet, requires further study, which we hope to provide in a subsequent writing.

⁵The distinction between the air in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and

heaven is commonly acknowledged. Because of this, both the pre-tribulation and posttribulation schools find it necessary to account for the movement—both of Christ and of the believers—between heaven, the air, and the earth at the time of the rapture. The pretribulation school teaches that Christ will descend to the air, the believers will ascend to the air, and they both will return to heaven for the duration of the tribulation. The posttribulation school teaches that after ascending to the air at the end of the tribulation, the believers will immediately return with Christ to the earth. This in itself is a subject of much debate (Walvoord, *Question* 204-206; Gundry 103-104). Gleason Archer, of the “midtribulation” school, is an exception, claiming that *clouds* and *heaven* are equivalent terms (Reiter 215-216).

⁶The *clouds of heaven* refers to the air above the earth (1 Thes. 4:17). The visible clouds may be considered the first heaven, and the sky, the second heaven (Matt. 6:26; 8:20; 13:32). The third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) is the heaven above the heavens, the highest heaven, where Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

⁷Much more must be said concerning the “day of the Lord,” as a technical term, and its relation to the Lord’s return and the rapture of the saints. We will do this in a subsequent writing.

⁸The reader will note Walvoord’s reversal of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3. By assuming that the Holy Spirit Himself must be removed from the earth before the man of sin is revealed, and by equating the removal of the Spirit to the rapture of the church, he concludes that the rapture of the saints must precede the coming of Antichrist. This is nothing less than an inversion of Paul’s meaning. Paul says that the gathering together of the saints to Christ will not take place unless the man of lawlessness is first revealed. Nevertheless, Walvoord claims that his reversal constitutes a “devastating blow” to the teaching of a posttribulation rapture. In actuality, it is a further demonstration of the circularity of the argument based on the assumption of a pre-tribulation “removal” of the Holy Spirit from the earth.

⁹Gavin Hamilton suggests that “that which restrains” (neuter) refers to the church, and “the one now restraining” (masculine) is the Spirit (76). This is an extension of the dispensational teaching in order to solve the problem of dual genders. However, this too is an assumption that puts great strain on Paul’s word in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7.

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