

THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE IN 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching about the rapture of the church began to be widely disseminated in the nineteenth century. Since that time on, the rapture of the church has been universally embraced by the premillennialists. However, there is little consensus as to the time of the rapture. The primary disagreement today lies between pretribulationists and posttribulationists, and this disagreement seems to have reached its peak in the wake of the appearances of Robert H. Gundry's *The Church and the Tribulation* (1973) and John F. Walvoord's rebuttal *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (1976). Moreover, the most recent release of *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-tribulation?* (1984) seems to make the issue hotter. Probably the debate between the two camps may continue until the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Gundry, Moo, Ladd, and other posttribulationists teach that the rapture and the Second Coming of the Lord are facets of a single event occurring at the very end of the Great Tribulation. Walvoord, Feinberg, Ryrie, and other pretribulationists, on the other hand, set the two events apart and argue that the church will be raptured before the Great Tribulation begins.

It is noteworthy that the debate over the time of the rapture primarily revolves around the Thessalonian epistles. Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists heavily draw on these epistles to build arguments in favor of their own position. Thus, it seems to be essential to deal with these epistles in the examination of the time of the rapture. In an effort to determine the time of rapture in these epistles, this writer will focus on the passages which have direct bearings on this issue and pay special attention to the text in context.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:10

After the apostle Paul gives thanks to God for their reception of

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the gospel and the progress of faith (1:2-8), he shows the results² of their turning to God from idols —to serve the living God and to wait for the coming of the Lord (1:9-10).

The Significance of *anamēnw*

The present infinitive *anamēnein* (v.10) has some significance in discussion of the rapture question. The verb is *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament and basically means “to wait for, expect.”³ Gundry argues that the “usage outside the NT does not require imminence” and quotes such passages as Judith 7:12; Sirach 2:7; 5:7; 6:19; 2 Maccabees 6:14; 1 Kings 13:8 and Psalm 24 (25): 5.⁴ It is common knowledge among the students of the Greek that the diachronic study of a word sheds some light on the meaning of a given word but the primary determinative of the meaning is the usage in the context.⁵ Thus, Gundry’s argument on this point carries little weight. Unlike Gundry, many commentators, including those who are no friends of pretribulational rapture, see the imminency in this verb. Bruce, for example, states, “The Advent (*Parousia*) of Christ in glory is not treated in the early church simply as the consummating event due to take place in the indefinite endtime but as something to be actively expected in the near future.”⁶ If the Lord’s Second Coming is imminent, the

²Some commentators take the two infinitives here (*doulēin* and *anamēnein*) as purpose (Robert L. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978]), 11:247-48; James E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, ICC [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912], 88; George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.], 14; Charles J. Elicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* [Andover, MA: Warren P. Draper, 1865], 29 and others). However, it seems better to understand it as result (I. Howard Marshall, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, NCB [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983], 57-58; D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. New American Commentary [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995], 66). The line of distinction cannot be sharply drawn, but, generally speaking, when the intention is emphasized it is better to take the infinitive as purpose; otherwise, the result seems to be better (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996], 592). In this case, *doulēin* can be taken either way, but *anamēnein* can hardly fit into the purpose idea. Thus, it seems to make better sense here to take both as result.

³Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v., “*anamēnw*,” 57.

⁴Robert Gundry, *The Church and Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 32.

⁵For an excellent study on this, see Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 137-69, esp., 139.

⁶F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publishers, 1982), 18; See also

pretribulational rapture makes better sense here. In case of posttribulational rapture, His coming is at least seven years distant; thus, there is little reason for imminency. In case of pretribulational rapture, His coming can be any time; thus, there is every reason for imminency.⁷

The Significance of *ruomai . . . ek*

The construction *ruomai . . . ek* is very significant for the discussion of the time of the rapture. The participial phrase *ton ruomenon* may be taken to mean “the one who continually delivers us,” but, as most commentators take it, it can be better understood as *nomen agentis* (“The Deliverer”).⁸ In this view, the emphasis of the phrase is on the character of the Savior as the deliverer.⁹

According to the text, the deliverance is “from the coming wrath” (*ek th orgh th ercomenh*). That the *orgh* here refers to the eschatological wrath is very obvious because it is associated with the return of the Lord, and the word *ercomenh* is used to show the futureness of the *orgh*.¹⁰ Moreover, the anaphoric use of the article characterizes the wrath as well-known, definite, specific wrath in the future (cf. Isa. 2:10-22; Zeph. 3:8, etc.).¹¹ According to Stahlin, “There are two points in the future where eschatological *orgh* has a place, first, in the tribulation before the end, then in the final judgment itself.”¹²

Frame, 88; Milligan, 14; D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Revised Edition (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 72-73; Thomas, 248; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1955), 57; Marshall, 58.

⁷For a detailed discussion on the imminency, see Gerald B. Stanton, “The Doctrine of Imminency: Is It Biblical?” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, Eds., Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 221-33.

⁸Bruce, 19-20; Hiebert, 74; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT. Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 54; Frame, 89; Thomas, 248; Ellicot, 29; Raymond Kelcy, *The Letters of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Austin, TX: R. B. Sweet Co., Inc., 1968), 37.

⁹Hiebert, 74-75

¹⁰Buist Fanning, “Thessalonian Epistles,” class notes (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1983). See also Hiebert, 75; Morris, 55-56.

¹¹*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-76), s.v., “*orgh*,” by G. Stahlin, 5:430; *New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology*. ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), s.v., “Anger, Wrath,” by H. C. Hahn, 1:111.

¹²Stahlin, 5:430.

The pretribulationists in general take the *orgh* as referring to the entire seven-year period of the Tribulation and argue that the church will not go through the period by being snatched away before the beginning of the period. Posttribulationists, on the other hand, make distinction between *qliyis* and *orgh*, and argue that the believers will suffer the *qliyis* but that they will never suffer God's *orgh*. *orgh* as God's "settled state of wrath" will be poured out upon the unbelieving, God-rejecting world, never upon His people.¹³ Gundry says, "The church will receive shelter from the penal judgments of God but will suffer persecution from other quarters."¹⁴ In an attempt to justify this argument, the posttribulationists place the outpouring of God's wrath at the very end of the Great Tribulation.¹⁵ Thus the question crops up here: When will the wrath of God fall upon the earth?

According to Gundry, *hlqon* in Revelation 6:17 is to be taken either as ingressive or as dramatic aorist; thus, God's wrath does not come until the very end of the Tribulation when the sixth seal is opened up.¹⁶ This thought is grammatically possible, but the context here favors the constative use of the aorist. As the Greek text indicates, verse 17 gives the reason why the dignitaries want to be hidden from the face of the Lamb. Not because the wrath of the Lamb is about to break forth as Gundry argues, but because they have just experienced the terrors of the Lamb's wrath in 6:1-14, they want to be hidden from the face of the Lamb. Moreover, it is the Lamb who opened the six seals (6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12); and 6:16 describes this wrath as "the wrath of the Lamb." Thus, the context demands to take the wrath in verse 17 as referring to the past six seal judgments. This being the case, Gundry's attempt to place God's wrath at the end of the Great Tribulation proves to be fruitless.

This, however, still does not answer the question as to when the wrath of God will be poured out, though it is shown that God's wrath

¹³George Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 120-29; Gundry, 44-53; Douglas L. Moo, "Posttribulation Rapture Position," in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* ed. Gleason L. Archer, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 174-76; Millard Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 153;

¹⁴Gundry, 51.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Gundry, 76.

will not be clustered together at the very end of the Tribulation. The answer to this question demands some further discussion. Several lines of evidence will show that the entire seven-year period is to be considered God's wrath.¹⁷

(1) Revelation 9:12 and 11:14 show that there is a sequence in the judgments (at least in the fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpet judgments). Moreover, the fact that the seventh seal is the seven trumpet judgments and the seventh trumpet is the seven bowl judgments supports that not all of these judgments are clustered together at the end of the Tribulation, but they occur one after the other.

(2) Revelation 9:5 and 10 indicate that the fifth trumpet judgment occurs at least five months before the end of the Tribulation.

(3) Revelation 15:1 describes seven bowl judgments as completing God's wrath, which logically implies the seal judgments and trumpet judgments chronologically precede the bowl judgment.¹⁸

(4) The seven bowl judgments (Rev 16:1-21) bring about the worse destruction and suffering upon the earth; yet, people did not repent of their deeds. Thus, the sixth bowl judgment prepares for Armageddon. This is itself not the final point, but a point leading up to the final stage.

(5) A comparison of Daniel 9:24-27 and Matthew 24 shows that Matthew 24:15 ("Abomination of Desolation") is the mid-point of the Tribulation, and a comparison of Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 shows that there is a close parallel between Matthew 24 and Revelation (Matt 24:4-5 and Rev 6:1-2; Matt 24:6-7 and Rev 6:3-4; Matt 24:7b and Rev 6:5-6; Matt 24:7-9 and Rev 6:7-8; etc.). If Matthew 24:15 is the mid-point of the Tribulation, it is safe to infer that events mentioned in Matthew 24:4-14 are to occur in the first half of the Tribulation; and, if this is the case, the seal judgments—at least the first four judgments—will begin to be poured out in the first half of the Tribulation. Considering all these evidences, it would not be too much to say that the wrath of God covers the entire seven-year period (or at least most of the period).

Gundry, however, contends that the construction *ruomai . . . ek*

¹⁷This argument is adapted from Fanning.

¹⁸For a further discussion, see Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know about the Rapture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 111; Paul D. Feinberg, "Pretribulation Rapture," in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* 58-59.

does not give any clue to the method of deliverance.¹⁹ He, unlike those who argue for the external deliverance, contends for the internal deliverance, or the preservation through the Tribulation.²⁰ However, there are a few lines of evidence in favor of external deliverance by means of being removed from the scene.

First, *ruomai . . . ek* construction is employed eight times in the NT, of which six instances are clearly external preservation, not preservation through (Luke 1:74; 2 Cor 1:10; Col 1:13; 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 4:17; 2 Pet 2:9). Romans 7:24 is not very clear; but, if “the body of this death” means “the condition of life in the body as we know it under the occupation of sin which has just been described, a life which, because of sin, must succumb to death,”²¹ the *ruomai . . . ek* construction can be better taken as external preservation. Whether it is possible or not, the Apostle Paul’s desire is not to be preserved through, but delivered from such a miserable condition.

2 Timothy 3:11 is also a little debatable, but the point here is that Paul has gone through all these sufferings and persecutions but now is delivered from all these. Paul here is not saying that he is still being preserved through these sufferings. Thus, here again, the construction is better taken as external protection, rather than internal protection.

Thus, in all of its eight occurrences in the NT, none of the *ruomai . . . ek* constructions supports internal preservation, or preservation through persecution. Several uses outside the NT also support external preservation (Ps 33:19; 56:19; Prov 23:14; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4.2.1; 12.10.5; 13.6.3).

According to Townsend, there is a close parallel between Revelation 3:10 and 1 Thessalonians 1:10. *threw ek* is in parallel with *ruomai . . . ek*, and *thwra tou peirasmou* with *thorgh th ercomenh*. A comparison of the use of *threw ek* in Revelation 3:10 with that of John 17:15 shows that this phrase is a Johannine expression for external preservation.²²

Second, internal preservation would be better expressed by

¹⁹Gundry, 54.

²⁰Ibid. See also Moo, 175, 197-200

²¹C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*. ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 367.

²²Jeffrey Townsend, “The Rapture in Revelation 3:10,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980): 252-66.

ruomai with *en* or *dia*, rather than with *ek*.²³ Gundry has a lengthy treatment on this from his own perspective; yet, it is not very convincing.²⁴

Thus, we can conclude that, according to 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the coming of the Lord is imminent and His coming will be the occasion for the church to be delivered from the seven-year Tribulation, which is the period of the outpouring of God's wrath upon the earth.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

The Cause of Grief (4:11)

A careful reading of verse 13 seems to indicate that the Thessalonians' ignorance about the fate of the deceased believers led them to grief. Obviously, some Christians died after Paul had been forced to leave the city of Thessalonica. Paul must have taught the church about the rapture (cf. 1 Thess 5:1), but he did not seem to have taught the church about the place of the dead Christians. Thus, the problem arose: What will become of the deceased Christians at the time of the parousia?

There are some debates over the cause of their grief,²⁵ but the above-mentioned conclusion seems to be most reasonable. Marshall, who does not seem to be aware of the controversy over the time of rapture, concludes that "the death of some members of the church have accordingly led to grief because they feared that they were excluded from the future salvation associated with the parousia."²⁶ Pretribulationists such as Walvoord concur in essence with Marshall.²⁷

Gundry, however, in an effort to support a posttribulationist position, suggests an entirely different reason for the grief of the

²³Fanning, class notes.

²⁴Gundry, 55-61; See also Moo, 198.

²⁵Marshall, 120-22.

²⁶Marshall, *Ibid.*; Phil Ware, "The Coming of the Lord: Eschatology and 1 Thessalonians," *Restoration Quarterly* 22 (1979): 113-16; Bruce, 95; Joseph Plevnik, for example, thinks that the cause of the Thessalonians' grief is "the inadequate understanding of the question of their sharing in parousia of Christ." ("The Taking Up of the Faithful and the Resurrection of the Dead in 1 Thess 4:13-18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 276. This is slightly different from that of Marshall, but may be taken as one of the viable options.

²⁷John Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 95.

Thessalonians. He conjectures,

The Thessalonians thought that only living believers will be raptured at the second coming and so the dead will not share in meeting with Jesus and the honor of joining His retinue as He descends. The Thessalonians further thought that departed brethren, along with the wicked dead, will not rise until after the Messianic kingdom, and thus will miss the blessedness of Christ's earthly reign.²⁸

This conjecture may lend support to the posttribulational scheme, but it is extremely doubtful whether this is what Paul teaches here. As Walvoord points out,²⁹ there are some insurmountable problems with this view. (1) This is a novel interpretation never before suggested by any other commentator. This does not necessarily make Gundry's suggestion wrong, but makes the reader very doubtful about its validity. (2) Gundry simply asserts his case without giving any evidence in favor of his view. (3) In light of 1 Thessalonians 3:4 and 2 Thessalonians 2:5-6, among others, it can be seen that what the Thessalonians have in view is related to the rapture, not to the millennial kingdom. (4) Most importantly, there is no indication whatsoever in the Thessalonian epistles that Paul's discussion includes details of the millennial kingdom.

Cure of Grief (4:14-17)

In verse 14 the apostle teaches that, on the basis of the historically certain fact of Jesus' death and resurrection, the dead believers in Christ will be brought back to life at His parousia.

In verse 15 the apostle validates what he just stated in verse 14 and further elaborates that in no sense (*ou mh*) whatever will those who are still alive at His coming have any advantage over those who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ. The apostle refers to *logw Kurious* as the source of his validation. Various attempts have been made to identify Paul's source of the reference,³⁰ but it seems best to take it either as the

²⁸Gundry, 101.

²⁹Walvoord, 97.

³⁰Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. Black's NT Commentaries (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977), 189-93; cf. J. G. Davies, "The Genesis of

direct revelation to Paul or to the church through one of her prophets (cf. Acts 9:5-6; 22:17-21; Gal 1:12; 2:2; 1 Cor 11:23),³¹ or an agraphon.³² Whatever the case, the authority for Paul's statement lies in the Lord Himself, not in Paul.

It is very significant here that the writer expects to be raptured during his lifetime, as is expressed by the phrase *hmei oi zwnth*. The pronoun *hmei* created many problems among the commentators; and, thus, various suggestions have been made in an effort to identify this.³³ Some suggest that Paul's initial expectation of the Lord's Coming during his lifetime was revised due to the delay of His Coming. Witherington, however, makes a strong case that Paul expected that the end of the world could come at any time, although he did not predict its timing. When speaking of the end time and seeing himself in relation to it, Paul naturally put himself in the category of the living.³⁴ Thus, it seems best to take this as Paul setting an example of expectancy for the church.³⁵ Since Christ could come at any moment, there is nothing wrong or mistaken in Paul's expecting that Christ may come during his lifetime. This fits very well into the pretribulational scheme because the imminency of His coming precludes any identifiable signs preceding the coming, and because it is doubtful that the writer would have been so confident of remaining alive through the terrible persecutions of the Tribulation period, assuming the posttribulational view as the correct one.

The emphatic use of *auto* in verse 16 shows that rapture involves Christ's "own august personal presence,"³⁶ and agency of Jesus Christ. It will not be the angel or other created deputy to whom will be committed the task of bringing the saints back to life; Christ Himself will

Belief in an Imminent Parousia," *Journal of Theological Studies* 14 (1963): 104-07; Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*. NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 170-71; Martin, 147-48.

³¹Thomas, 277; Best, 193; Milligan, 58; Hiebert, 209.

³²Morris, 141; Frame, 171.

³³Hiebert, 210; Ellicott, 75; James Denny, "The Epistles to the Thessalonians," in *An Exposition of the Bible* (Hartford, Conn: S. S. Scranton, 1903), 6:175-77; Morris, 141-42; Milligan, 58-59; Thomas, 278.

³⁴B. Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 10, 23-35.

³⁵J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, Reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957), 67; Thomas, 278.

³⁶Ellicott, 76.

return personally for them in His glorified body. Gundry, however, argues that “the very context forbids exclusiveness, for it speaks of the archangel who accompanies Christ.”³⁷ He further asserts that the archangel and trumpet are in line with Matthew 24:31, which places the rapture in a posttribulational framework.³⁸ However, this argument cannot be sustained because of some significant differences between the two passages. Hiebert points out,

The subjects are different: here the reference is to the church; there the Olivet discourse portrays Jewish believers during the Great Tribulation. The circumstances are different: here the trumpet is connected with the raising of the believing dead; there no mention is made of a resurrection but it is connected with a regathering of the elect who have been scattered over the earth. The result is different: here the blowing of the trumpet results in the uniting of the raised dead with the living as one body to be caught up to meet the Lord in the air; there the elect are the living believers who are regathered from all parts of the earth at the command of their Lord who has returned to earth in open glory.³⁹

It is quite obvious from the above observation that the events described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 are different from those in Matthew 24:31. This distinction seems to show the two phases of Christ’s return, rather than one posttribulational phase. If this is the case, evidence goes for the pretribulational rapture.

One other significant argument is suggested by Gundry in an attempt to support his position. He says that the verb *katabainw* indicates a complete, uninterrupted descent to earth,⁴⁰ which obviously supports the posttribulational advent of Jesus Christ. However, this position cannot stand because of some difficulties.⁴¹ (1) The descent is interrupted by the meeting with the saints. (2) The text says that the meeting takes place in the air without any mention of His descent to earth. (3) Rapture is pointless if Christians immediately come back to the

³⁷Gundry, 103

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Hiebert, 213.

⁴⁰Gundry, 103.

⁴¹Fanning, class notes.

earth with the Lord. Why is it necessary for the Christians to meet the Lord in the air unless they stay there for some time? Moreover, the verb itself does not carry inherently the idea of “a complete, uninterrupted descent.” In Acts 7:15, the text says, “And Jacob went down to Egypt” (*kai katebh lakwb ei Aiguptou*). If Gundry’s understanding of the meaning of the verb *katabainw* is correct, it follows that Jacob went all the way down to Egypt without any interruptions on the way, but Genesis 46:1ff. shows that the descent was interrupted at least at Beersheba. Whether the descent is interrupted or not depends upon the context, not upon the word itself. Thus, reasons given above are sufficient to show that the descent in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 is not an uninterrupted descent as Gundry wishes to maintain.

Verse 17 teaches that, immediately following the resurrection of the dead Christians, the living will be translated into the air together with the resurrected ones. A great deal of emphasis is laid on the significance of *apantesis* by the posttribulationists. Bruce explains the significance as follows:

When a dignitary paid an official visit or parousia to a city in Hellenistic times, the action of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escorting him on the final stage of his journey was called the *apantesis*; it is similarly used in Mt. 25:6; Acts 28:15. So the Lord is pictured as escorted to the earth by His people—those newly raised from death and those who have remained alive.⁴²

However, it is not very clear whether this is the only possible meaning of the word. Some commentators and posttribulationists, such as Ladd⁴³ and Gundry,⁴⁴ follow this view; but others simply relate the word to the welcome reception of the newly arriving magistrates or dignitaries without any reference to escorting them back to the city.⁴⁵

⁴²Bruce, “1 Thessalonians,” in *New Bible Commentary*, ed. Donald Guthrie, et al. Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 1159

⁴³Ladd, 91.

⁴⁴Gundry, 104-05.

⁴⁵Morris, 146; John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, 169-170; Frame, 176; TDNT 1:380-81; Recently, M. Lattke also takes it as “the civic custom of according a public welcome to rulers upon their arrival at a city,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI:

Moreover, the difference between the Hellenistic concept and Pauline use here makes the equation impossible. Best aptly puts it this way: “Unlike the citizens who go out to meet their visitor the Christians are snatched away by the God who sends the visitor.”⁴⁶ Still more, if the posttribulation argument is correct, there is no need of meeting the Lord in the air. Since Christ will come to the earth anyway to reign on earth, the church does not have to leave the earth at all.

In response to the fear and worry of the Thessalonian Christians concerning the dead in Christ, Paul offers a cure for it by elaborating that the living Christians have no advantage over the dead. Just as God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, He will bring the dead in Christ back to life at the parousia, which will be immediately followed by the translation of the living saints into the air to be with the Lord for ever. Although the time of the rapture is not made explicit in this passage, the majority of the data here supports the pretribulation rapture.

Comfort of Grief (4:18)

In Paul’s mind, eschatology is not a fancy speculation on the future events, but has a very practical value for Christians’ everyday living. The logical and practical outcome (*wsth*) of the knowledge on rapture is *katakaleite allhlou*. Pretribulationists have every reason to be comforted, but posttribulationists have little or no reason to be comforted. If the posttribulation position is correct, it follows that many believers will be martyred as a result of “Satanic wrath,” and some will be preserved, and all who survive will be raptured. If so, what kind of comfort will this be to any Christian? Since one is not sure whether one will be martyred or preserved, how can one have any sure hope of rapture? Walvoord points out,

If the only way a Christian can experience the rapture is to survive the tribulation, it is no longer either a comforting hope or a blessed hope. Instead there should be grim preparation for probable martyrdom in the most awful time of human suffering

Eerdmans, 1990), s.v., “*apantisis*,” by M. Lattke, 1:115

⁴⁶Best, 199.

and persecution of which Scripture speaks.⁴⁷

Thus the entire context and some details of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 more naturally fit into the pretribulational position. The rapture is the blessed hope for the church to await eagerly because it can occur at any moment.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Coming of the Day of the Lord (5:1-2)

By the phrase *peri de* the apostle now introduces a new subject; yet, in this context it is related somehow to the preceding in the sense that both deal with the end-time events. Since Paul frequently uses this phrase to introduce a separate issue (cf. 1 Cor 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12; 1 Thess 4:9; 4:13; etc.) which may or may not be somehow related to the preceding, it cannot be assumed that 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 continues to discuss the issue of rapture.⁴⁸ Thus, it is exegetically groundless to assert that “the ease with which Paul moves from the rapture and Parousia into the day of the Lord without explanation or differentiation argues strongly for their identification.”⁴⁹ The basic issue the apostle deals with here is the day of the Lord and Christians’ deliverance from the day of the Lord and how Christians should live in light of this.

The author begins his instruction by saying that his readers do not need any information on the times and epochs because they already know very well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief at night. The Thessalonian Christians were well informed of the eschatological subject; yet, nothing definite could be known as to the actual date because the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

Gundry, however, is of the opinion that “Paul did not need to write concerning the times and epochs because the Thessalonians already know the appointed signs from his oral teaching.”⁵⁰ Thus, they did not have to be caught by surprise by recognizing the signs. This may

⁴⁷Walvoord, 103; cf. Hiebert, 217.

⁴⁸For a further discussion, see Thomas, 280; Walvoord, 115-16; Ryrie, “The Church and the Tribulation: A Review,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (1974): 175; Best, 203.

⁴⁹Gundry, 105-06.

⁵⁰Gundry, 107.

be a possible explanation, but the text lends no support to this conjecture.

The primary cause of controversy in this passage revolves around the *terminus a quo* of the day of the Lord. Gundry excludes the Tribulation period from the day of the Lord and contends that it begins with the out-pouring of the divine wrath at the battle of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation.⁵¹ But Isaiah describes the day of the Lord as that time when man shall go to the caves of the rocks and holes of the ground (Isa 2:12, 19). This includes the same events described under the sixth seal judgment as well as other judgments of the Tribulation period; and it is already demonstrated that the seal judgments will be poured out in the Tribulation, possibly in the first half of the Tribulation. Thus, the day of the Lord includes the Tribulation; and most pretribulationists rightly understand it as beginning with the rapture. Unlike Gundry, pretribulationists like Ryrie define the day of the Lord as follows:

It is a time when God deals with the world in judgment for its sin; it is the period of great tribulation on the earth. But it is also a time of blessing when the earth shall enjoy the personal reign of Christ during the millennium. Thus the day of the Lord as revealed in the Old Testament includes a time of wrath and judgment upon the wicked, followed by the era of peace when Christ will rule over the earth.⁵²

Passages like Isaiah 13:9-11; Joel 1:1ff.; Amos 5:18; Zephaniah 1:14-16; 3:14; Jeremiah 30:7; Isaiah 2:12-22; Jeremiah 30:9; Isaiah 19:23-25, among others, support the accuracy of Ryrie's definition. Thus, the day of the Lord is both a day of judgment to the unbelievers and a time of salvation to the believers.⁵³

The coming of the day of the Lord is compared to the coming of a thief in the night. The point of the comparison is not to represent the coming Lord as a thief, but rather to indicate that the coming is unexpected and unwelcome.⁵⁴ As Marshall correctly observes, "Paul is

⁵¹Ibid., 89-99. Moo also excludes the Tribulation from the Day of the Lord (Ibid., 183-84).

⁵²Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*. Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 68-69.

⁵³Marshall, 133.

⁵⁴Fanning, class notes; Hiebert, 227; Martin, 159; Marshall, 133; Morris, 151; Wanamaker, 179.

looking at the matter from the point of view of those who will find that the day is one of judgment, and therefore he says that it will be as sudden and unwelcome as the visit of a burglar.”⁵⁵

The Effect of the Day of the Lord (5:3-5)

The introduction of the somewhat negative metaphor to indicate the unexpectedness of the day of the Lord leads Paul to develop the thought slightly further in the direction of what kind of effect the day will have on the unbelievers (v.3) and then on the believers (vv.4-5).

According to verse 3, when the unbelievers say “peace and safety,” the sudden destruction will come upon them. The meaning is clear enough; yet, the time is debatable. When will the unbelievers say “peace and safety”? According to Gundry, there are two possible explanations. One is, “Perhaps just before Armageddon there will be a lull, a seeming end of world upheavals, which will excite men’s hopes for peace which has so long eluded them.”⁵⁶ Gundry’s own chronology militates against this guesswork. If all judgments are clustered together at the very end of the Tribulation, as Gundry argues, when will there be a time of peace and safety? Moreover, the Bible gives no evidence of such a lull at the end of the Tribulation.⁵⁷ Another explanation Gundry suggests is that the word *legwsin* does not express the actual condition, but the “wish and/or expectation of men.”⁵⁸ To this Ryrie adequately responds,

This is novel since the passage contrasts peace and safety with destruction. Now if peace and safety means a wish in the midst of a time of war and danger, then any contrast with destruction that will follow disappears.⁵⁹

Thus, Gundry’s effort proves to be untenable. However, all these events can fit very nicely into the pretribulation system since

⁵⁵Marshall, 133.

⁵⁶Gundry, 92.

⁵⁷Ryrie, “Review,” 131:176; Ryrie, *What You Should Know about the Rapture*, 99.

⁵⁸Gundry, 92.

⁵⁹Ryrie, *What You Should Know about the Rapture*, 100.

pretribulationists place the time of peace and safety right before the Great Tribulation,⁶⁰ or at the very beginning of the Tribulation.⁶¹

By the emphatic contrast (*umei de*), verses 4 and 5 clearly indicate that the day of the Lord will not overtake the believers like a thief because they belong to a different time frame. The thief is going to come in the night, but the believers are declared not to belong to the night or the darkness. The coming of the thief to the unbelievers will be unexpected and hostile, but believers are exempt from this hostile coming. Two evidences can be adduced here. First, the writer is making a sharp contrast between two groups of people (they/you; sons of light-day/sons of darkness-night); thus, those who belong to one will not be subject to the other because both are mutually exclusive. Second, verse 9 clearly states that the believers will be removed from the day of the Lord.

Thus, the day of the Lord has two effects. On the unbelievers, it will be sudden and hostile so that they cannot escape. On the believers, it will not overtake them at all.

Response to the Day of the Lord (5:6-11)

Based upon the believers' relation to the day of the Lord, the apostle draws a conclusion (*ara oun*) in verses 6-11. Christians are to be alert and spiritually prepared for Christ's coming (vv. 6-8) because God has destined them for deliverance through Christ, not for wrath in the day of the Lord (vv.9-10).

Gundry, however, takes *nhfw* and *grhgorew* here in the sense of being alert and looking for the appointed signs of the Second Coming.⁶² Contrary to Gundry's claim, the text mentions nothing about the signs at all. The context (esp. 5:8) is clear enough to show that these terms are used in the sense of ethical alertness of living a godly life, not looking for the eschatological signs (cf. 1 Pet 4:7; 5:8; 1 John 2:28-3:3).⁶³

The causal conjunction *oti* introduces a reason why as believers we must put on our armor and live a godly Christian life (vv.4-10). God

⁶⁰Walvoord, 117; Zane C. Hodges, "The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 72.

⁶¹Ryrie, 101-02.

⁶²Gundry, 107.

⁶³Fanning, class notes.

has appointed Christians not for wrath, but for deliverance through the Lord Jesus Christ, whether by rapture or resurrection.

The promise given in verse 9, like 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and Revelation 3:10, is very important for determining the time of the rapture. As was discussed previously in conjunction with 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Gundry makes a distinction between God's wrath and Satanic wrath, and argues that believers go through Satanic wrath but are exempt from the divine wrath. It was already demonstrated that the entire period of the Tribulation is God's wrath and the present text deals with *orgh* without any qualification as to whether it is divine or Satanic and teaches that believers are exempt from this no matter what kind of wrath it may be.

Verse 10 explains *swthria* in verse 9 as the rapture of the church through translation of those "awake" and the resurrection of those "asleep." There is some debate on the meaning of *kaqeuðwmen*. Some take this in the moral-spiritual sense,⁶⁴ but most scholars, including Ryrie, Walvoord, Hiebert, Ironside, Best, Frame, Hendriksen, Lange, W. Kelly, Lenski, L. Morris, G. Milligan, and others, take it in the physical sense—that is, death. The latter seems to better fit into the broader context in that Paul reaffirms what he starts in 4:13-18.⁶⁵ Thus, in this context, this shows that Christians will escape the day of the Lord either by rapture or by resurrection, whether living or dead, and will be delivered from the wrath to come before it overtakes them.

2 THESSALONIANS 1:6-7

After the Apostle Paul gives thanks to God for the growing faith of the Thessalonians and their endurance of persecution (vv3-4), he then turns to encourage them in view of their afflictions (vv.5-10). At the time of His return, the unbelievers who afflict the believers will be repaid with eternal damnation while the afflicted believers will receive relief. According to Gundry, *anesis* (v.6) refers to the release of Christians from the persecution during the Tribulation;⁶⁶ and, thus, this fits

⁶⁴For a further discussion on this view, see Thomas Edgar, "The Meaning of 'Sleep' in 1 Thessalonians 5:10," *JETS* 22 (1979): 345-49; Hodges, 77.

⁶⁵Fanning, class notes.

⁶⁶Gundry, 113.

perfectly into the posttribunational scheme. Certainly believers will be given *anesis* at the time of His return, but there is a good reason to take *anesis* as including not only the relief but also the positive idea of the millennial blessings. Verse 5 clearly shows that the focus here is on the kingdom. Best aptly puts it this way:

From v.5 we infer that it means being in the kingdom of God and the reference in v.7 to the parousia combined with 1 Th. 4:17 implies that it is associated with being “with the Lord.” Whatever it may be the Thessalonians are not the only ones who inherit it; Paul and his companions (together with us) will enjoy the same peace for they too have suffered.⁶⁷

Thus what the apostle teaches here is not the posttribunational rapture as Gundry argues, but the retribution for the unbelievers and the millennial rest and blessing for the believers. In fact, the rapture is not in view here. Ryrie correctly observes: “Actually the rapture can be found in this passage only if one’s eschatological scheme superimposes it there. Exegesis does not produce the rapture from the passage.”⁶⁸

2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-7

Appeal for Calmness (vv.1-2)

By the particle *de* the apostle now moves to a new subject by which he intends to correct some errors and misunderstandings of the Thessalonians in conjunction with the presence of the Day of the Lord and our gathering together to Him (=rapture). Verse 2 seems to indicate that the Thessalonian church had received some form of false information, whether by a prophetic utterance (*dia pneumato*), a vocal utterance (*dia logou*), or a written forgery (*di epistolh*), to the effect that the day of the Lord had already come. Since they were taught the pretribunational rapture, this obviously caused alarm and confusion due to an erroneous conclusion on the coming of the day of the Lord.

Gundry, however, understands the nature of the false teaching in

⁶⁷Best, 257; See also Fanning, class notes; Marshall, 175; Bruce (WBC), 150; Ellicott, 108; Hiebert, 308.

⁶⁸Ryrie, 53.

a different way. According to him,⁶⁹ first, the Thessalonians erroneously thought that the day of the Lord would include the Tribulation; second, they erroneously thought that they had already entered the Tribulation; third, they erroneously concluded that Christ's coming lay in the immediate future, with resultant cessation of work, fanatical excitement, and disorder.

At first glance, this reconstruction of the background seems to carry some weight; yet, a further examination will reveal the untenability of this position. According to verse 2, the Thessalonians were agitated because they thought they were already in the Tribulation (It was already demonstrated that Tribulation is the *terminus a quo* of the day of the Lord). The question is, If the Thessalonians had been taught the posttribulation rapture, why were they "shaken" or "disturbed"? They should have rather rejoiced because their rapture was at hand. Only the pretribulation rapture will adequately explain why they were so agitated. They were frightened at the thought of not being raptured and thus having to go through the wrath of the Tribulation period.

Events Preceding the Day of the Lord (vv.3-5)

As his corrective to the false teaching, Paul lists two events which must occur before the day of the Lord can be truly said to be present. He assures his readers that since these events are not present they are not in the day of the Lord.

The first event that must precede the day of the Lord is "the apostasy." Some pretribulationists, such as Wuest, English, Pentecost, and Wood, take the secondary sense of the word *h apostasia* and render it "the departure," meaning the rapture of the church. This may lend some support to the pretribulation rapture; but, since LXX, Koine, and NT uniformly use the word otherwise, it seems better to take the word in its usual sense—that is, "the apostasy" in the sense of "a deliberate abandonment of a formerly professed position or view, a defection, a rejection of a former allegiance."⁷⁰ Moreover, rapture is not

⁶⁹Gundry, 121.

⁷⁰Hiebert, 331-32; See also Martin, 232-33; Wanamaker, 244; Morris, 218-19. For a detailed discussion on the meaning of *apostasia*, see H. Wayne House, "Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 261-96; Paul D. Feinberg, "2 Thessalonians 2 and the Rapture," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 309-11.

an act of believers' departure in the positive sense, but that of being "snatched away" in the passive sense.⁷¹ The anaphoric use of the definite article and the context indicate that the apostle has a definite, specific eschatological apostasy in mind (cf. Rev 13:17), although the apostasy is already influencing the church to a certain degree.

The second event that must precede the day of the Lord is the appearance of "the man of sin." Descriptions of this man given in 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Daniel 7:8; 9:26-27; 11:36; 1 John 2:18 and Revelation 13:1-10 show that this man is the anti-Christ who will be working during the Tribulation period.

This seems to lend support to the posttribulational position because both events are to precede the day of the Lord and both are associated with the Tribulation. In other words, this seems to show that the day of the Lord does not include the entire Tribulation period.

However, the passage can be understood that Paul here is not discussing the time sequence, but the signs of the day of the Lord.⁷² Thomas puts it this way:

But here in 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul is not discussing the timing of the rapture. He is simply reassuring his readers that "the day of the Lord" had not come. Nor does he at any place in this context (2 Thess. 2:1-12) tell his readers that they will at some future time "see the two initial phenomena" of "the day of the Lord." Had he said that, there would indeed be a problem. But he did not speak of the Thessalonians' actually seeing the phenomena. He simply stressed the present nonarrival of the phenomena.⁷³

This understanding seems to better fit into the context and be in line with the pretribulational position that the day of the Lord begins with the rapture.

The Restrainer (vv.6-7)

Paul now turns from the two signs preceding the day of the Lord

⁷¹Hiebert, 331.

⁷²Fanning, class notes.

⁷³Thomas, 321.

to the restrainer who holds back the man of sin so that he may appear on the scene in his own time. The man of sin is already at work to a limited degree, but when the restrainer is taken out of the way, then the man of sin will be revealed to his full capacity.

Various suggestions have been made to identify *to katecon* (= *o katecwn*) as the Roman empire, human government, Satan, church;⁷⁴ but none of these are satisfactory because the restrainer must be more powerful than Satan who empowers the man of sin, and because he must be the one who fit into the neuter and masculine descriptions. Thus, the only person who satisfies these two conditions is the Holy Spirit. Even Gundry himself identifies *to katecon* with the Holy Spirit.⁷⁵ Gundry, by this view, places himself in a difficult position because the logical conclusion would be as follows: the Holy Spirit indwells the church; and, if the Holy Spirit is taken out of the way before the appearance of the man of sin, the church will be evidently raptured before the day of the Lord begins.

Pretribulationists usually understand the restrainer as operating primarily in and through the church (=body of believers or the body of Christ); thus, the removal of the church and the end of the restraining power will occur simultaneously. Gundry, however, argues that “the spirit restrains directly and personally, rather than mediately through the church.”⁷⁶ This, of course, allows him to end the restraint and begin the Tribulation without the rapture of the church. This may sound plausible to some, but a very serious question can be raised here: What will become of the Christians who lose the indwelling of the Holy Spirit all of sudden? Gundry apparently realizes this problem and argues that the Holy Spirit continues to indwell the believers during the Tribulation,⁷⁷ but there is no biblical evidence whatsoever that the Holy Spirit continues to do so. Thus, ministry related to the Holy Spirit and His removal from the world in the sense that His ministry goes back to the pre-Pentecost state supports the pretribulation rapture.

⁷⁴For a further study, see Paul D. Feinberg, “2 Thessalonians 2 and the Rapture,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 306-08; Douglas J. Moo, “The Case for Posttribulation Rapture Position,” in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-tribulation?* 189-90; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 259-61; Marshall, 196-200; Martin, 239-40.

⁷⁵Gundry, 125. Unlike Gundry, Ladd identifies *to katecon* with God (*Blessed Hope*, 95); but this again does not meet the two qualifications.

⁷⁶Gundry, 127-78.

⁷⁷Gundry, 126.

CONCLUSION

A brief study of the Thessalonian epistles in an effort to determine the time of the rapture shows that (1) the Second Coming of Christ is imminent, (2) the entire seven-year period of the Tribulation is the time of God's wrath and Christians are promised to be delivered from this time, (3) the rapture is the *terminus a quo* of the day of the Lord, and (4) the Holy Spirit will remove His residence from the world before the man of sin appears on the scene. If one puts all these factors and other contextual details together, one can reasonably reach the conclusion that the Bible, especially the Thessalonian epistles, teaches the pretribulational rapture of the church.