

A CRITIQUE OF THE PRE-WRATH RAPTURE VIEW

Introduction

When will the Rapture take place relative to the coming seven-year Tribulation period? At least *four* differing timing perspectives exist. These include Pre-Tribulationism, which is the idea that the Rapture will take place before the Tribulation period even begins. Beyond this, there is Mid-Tribulationism and Post-Tribulationism, which each teach that the Rapture will transpire at the midpoint or the end of the Tribulation period respectively. Pre-Wrath Rapturism, by contrast, locates the Rapture of the church somewhere in the middle of the Tribulation period's second half. In this paper, we will briefly explain and analyze Pre-Wrath Rapturism.

Description of the View

In order to best describe the Pre-Wrath Rapture perspective, let us identify its primary proponents as well as the controversies surrounding its name and origin. Then, we will define the view by noting its three-fold structure.

Proponents

Pre-Wrath Rapture theory has been promoted into modern-day evangelicalism through the relatively recent writings of Robert Van Kampen¹ and Marvin Rosenthal.² Alan Kurschner represents an even more recent promoter of this view.³

¹ Robert Van Kampen, *The Sign of Christ's Coming, and the End of the Age: A Biblical Study of End-Time Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992); idem, *The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple* (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell, 1997).

² Marvin J. Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: A New Understanding of the Tribulation, and the Second Coming* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990).

³ Alan Kurschner, *The Antichrist Before the Day of the Lord: What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Return of Christ* (Pompton Lakes, NJ: Eschatos, 2013).

Name

At the onset, the very name of the view, the “Pre-Wrath Rapture,” has caused confusion concerning how the view is actually defined. David Reagan explains:

I have a number of objections to this concept of the Rapture's timing. 1) The Name — I object to the name given the viewpoint by its proponents. The name is both confusing and vague. It is confusing because both the Pre-Trib and Mid-Trib views are ‘Pre- Wrath.’ The Pre-Trib view argues that the entire 7 years of the Tribulation (Daniel's 70th Week of Years) constitutes a pouring out of the wrath of God. The Mid-Trib view takes the position that only the second half of the Tribulation is the period of God's wrath. So, Rosenthal's name for his viewpoint does not distinguish it from the Pre-Trib and Mid-Trib views. All three are prewrath views. The ‘Pre-Wrath’ name is also vague because it does not give a clue as to when the Rapture occurs in relation to the Tribulation. The name of the Pre-Trib view signifies a belief that the Rapture will occur before (pre) the Tribulation begins. The name of the Mid-Trib view clearly indicates a belief that the Rapture will occur in the middle of the Tribulation. The name of the Post-Trib view puts the Rapture after (post) the Tribulation. But the name, ‘Pre-Wrath’ gives no indication of when the Rapture will occur with relation to the Tribulation. For that reason, I have decided to call the ‘Pre-Wrath’ view the Three-Quarters Tribulation Rapture viewpoint. And I will be abbreviating it throughout the rest of this article as the ‘3/4 Trib Rapture.’ I have given it that name because its proponents believe the Rapture will occur about three-quarters of the way through the Tribulation, or shortly thereafter.⁴

Origin

The Pre-Wrath Rapture view is also controversial not only because of its name but also due to its origin. Non Pre-Tribulationists frequently seek to discredit the position on account of how the view allegedly arose through Margaret MacDonald and John Nelson Darby. Such arguments ultimately prove unpersuasive since they epitomize a logical fallacy known as the Genetic Fallacy. “The genetic fallacy is the act of rejecting or accepting an argument on the basis of its origin rather than its content. Under the genetic fallacy, we judge a claim by paying too much attention to its source or history, even though this criticism is irrelevant to the truth of the claim.”⁵ Moreover, the final authority on such matters is “what saith the Scriptures?” rather than how a given view was discovered or popularized. However, since Pre-Wrathers have made

⁴ David R. Reagan, "Is There Any Validity to the 'Pre-Wrath Rapture' Concept?" *Lamplighter*. January–February 2015, 10.

⁵ <https://www.scribbr.com/fallacies/genetic-fallacy>

much of the alleged suspect origin of Pre-Tribulationism, it becomes appropriate to briefly delve into the controversial origin of their own theological perspective.

David Reagan again summarizes:

In 1990 Marvin Rosenthal presented a fourth viewpoint in his book, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*. Rosenthal was not the originator of this new viewpoint. Rather, he was the one who popularized it with his book. The person who conceived the "Pre-Wrath" view of the Rapture was a man named Robert Van Kampen (1938-1999). Van Kampen became one of America's richest men through his involvement in investment banking. During his lifetime he accumulated one of the largest private collections of rare and antique Bibles in North America. In the 1970's Van Kampen began developing the "Pre-Wrath" concept of the timing of the Rapture. Once he had completed his work on the concept, he started trying to find a well-known person in the field of Bible prophecy to endorse his new view. That person finally turned out to be Marvin Rosenthal, who at the time was serving as the director of a very influential ministry called Friends of Israel. Rosenthal tried to convince the board of the ministry to abandon its commitment to the Pre-Trib view and accept the new viewpoint. They refused, and Rosenthal was forced to depart. He went to Florida where he built the Holy Land Experience — a Christian theme park which has since been taken over by the Trinity Broadcasting Network. Today, Rosenthal serves as the director of Zion's Hope, a ministry located in Winter Garden, Florida. Rosenthal's book was financed by Van Kampen's fortune, and he mailed out thousands of copies to pastors all over America. Later, Van Kampen wrote his own books about the 'Pre-Wrath' view, the most important being *The Sign* (1992).⁶

Tripartite Structure

Perhaps the best way to understand the Pre-Wrath Rapture view is to note how Pre-Wrath Rapturists divide the coming Tribulation period, or Seventieth Week of Daniel (Dan. 9:27), into *three* distinct phases.⁷ *First*, the "beginning of sorrows" is the label Pre-Wrath Rapturists give to the first-half of the Tribulation period. This segment represents the three-and-one-half year time period from the beginning of the seven-year period with the signing of the peace treaty between the Antichrist and unbelieving Israel and terminating with the Antichrist's desecration of the rebuilt Jewish temple at the Tribulation's midpoint. Sometimes Pre-Wrath Rapturists, based upon Matthew 24:4-8, refer to this segment as "unexpected soft labor pains."

⁶ Reagan, 9.

⁷ Rosenthal, 112.

Pre-Wrath Rapturists contend that the first four seal judgments (Rev. 6:1-8) will transpire during this time period.⁸

Second, the next major section of the Tribulation period, according to Pre-Wrath Rapturists, is called the "Great Tribulation." This segment will begin with the desecration of the temple by the Antichrist at the Tribulation's midpoint when he will erect a pagan statue in the rebuilt Jewish temple (Dan. 9:27; 12:11; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:3-4; Rev. 13:15). Apparently, this segment will be initiated with the opening of the fifth seal judgment (Rev. 6:9-11) and will conclude with the opening of the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:12-17). This section will last roughly twenty-one months. During this time period, both the wrath of Satan and man through the Antichrist will be brought forth in an unprecedented manner (Matt. 24:21-22; Rev. 12:12-17). It is during this period of time that the restrainer (2 Thess. 2:6-7), who Pre-Wrath Rapturists interpret as Michael the Archangel, will stand aside and cease from restraining evil and satanic lawlessness.⁹ Rosenthal notes:

Speaking of this one who will hinder the Antichrist, Paul said, "only he who now hindereth will continue to hinder until he be taken out of the way" (2 Thess. 2:7). The word hindereth means to hold down, and the phrase taken out of the way means to step aside. Therefore, the one who had the job of hindering the Antichrist will step aside; that is, he will no longer be a restraint between the antichrist and those the Antichrist is persecuting.¹⁰

Pre-Wrath Rapturists are careful to note that only the wrath of man through the Antichrist or Satan's wrath has been exhibited up until this point of the Tribulation period. In other words, the wrath of God will be absent from the Tribulation period's first sixty-three months.

Third, the final section of the Tribulation period, according to Pre-Wrath Rapturists, is known as the "Day of the Lord." The opening of the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:12-17), with

⁸ However, note Van Kampen's pull-out chart typically accompanying his book "The Sign" where he places the fourth seal judgment in the Tribulation's second half. Thus, not all Pre-Wrath Rapturists agree on every prophetic issue.

⁹ Rosenthal, 256-61.

¹⁰ Ibid., 257.

its cosmic disturbances, will herald the rapidly approaching Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord will begin with the opening of the seventh seal judgment (Rev. 8:1-6) and will continue as the angels sound the various trumpet judgments (Rev. 8:7-11:19). It too will last twenty-one months, and it is during this segment that the world for the first time will experience divine wrath during Daniel's Seventieth Week.

Pre-Wrath Rapturists are also quick to note that God's wrath is not mentioned in the Book of Revelation until the events surrounding the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:16-17). The Rapture will occur prior to the Day of the Lord. Pre-Wrath Rapturists place the Rapture at this juncture since they maintain that the Bible only promises that believers will be delivered from God's wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rom. 5:9) rather than from tribulation. Since, according to this scheme, the wrath of God will not exist until the Tribulation period's final twenty-one months, the church will be present for the Tribulation period's first sixty-three months. Thus, the seventh seal judgment will not only launch the Day of the Lord, or the Tribulation period's final twenty-one months, but also the Rapture of the church.

Problems with the View in Comparison to Standard Pre-Tribulational Arguments

While several excellent book-length and in-depth refutations of Pre-Wrath Raptureism are available,¹¹ this present brief critique will focus on only six general problems with the Pre-Wrath Rapture view. These *six* problems have been selected since they best represent the arguments most relied on by Pre-Tribulationalists in defense of their position. Pre-Tribulationalists typically rely upon six major arguments to substantiate their view. *First*, the Tribulation period's purpose concerns Israel rather than the church. *Second*, there is no reference to the church as being on the earth in Revelation 4–19. *Third*, the church has been promised an exemption from divine wrath. The *fourth* reason is that the Rapture is an imminent

¹¹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *A Review of Marvin Rosenthal's Book "The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church"* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel, 1991); Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); Paul S. Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is It Biblical?* (Langhorne, PA: BF Press, 1991). See also George Zeller, "Pre-Wrath Confusion," online: <http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/proph/prewrath.htm>, accessed 01 September 2015.

event and only the Pre-Tribulation view is in harmony with this doctrine. The *fifth* reason is that only Pre-Tribulationism is in harmony with the New Testament's presentation of the Rapture as a comforting event. The *sixth* reason that the Rapture will take place before the Tribulation period begins is because the Antichrist cannot even come forward until the Holy Spirit's restraining ministry through the church is first removed. In this section we will examine how Pre-Wrath Rapturism stands in light of each of these arguments representing the heart of Pre-Tribulationism.

It Places the Church in Daniel's Seventieth Week

First, the Pre-Wrath Rapture view is problematic because it places the church, a distinct spiritual organism, into Daniel's Seventieth Week, which is a time period when God will be exclusively dealing with national Israel (Dan. 9:24). Since God deals with Israel and the church on a mutually exclusive basis, the church cannot be present for any of Daniel's Seventieth Week. The Pre-Wrath Rapture view ignores this fundamental principle by placing the church into the first three quarters of Daniel's Seventieth Week, which represents a time period comprising God's program with national Israel.

As Robert Lightner well observes, "The Pre-Wrath Rapture view is different from the normal Pre-Tribulation view in that it does not consistently distinguish between God's program with Israel and His program with the church. The way it differs is that it has the church in Israel's seventieth week..."¹² George Zeller similarly offers the following excellent analysis:

The Pre-Wrath view CONFUSES the mysterious and parenthetical nature of the Church Age. It confuses CHURCH HISTORY with ISRAELITE HISTORY. God has a program for the Church and God has a distinct program for His people Israel. The two must not be confused. The clearest and most complete chronological prophecy that God has given to us is the 70-week prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27. These 70 weeks involve 490 years of Jewish history: "Seventy weeks are determined UPON THY PEOPLE AND UPON THY HOLY CITY." These 490 years pertain to the Jews and to Jerusalem, not to the Church. Of the 490 years, the last seven years are yet unfulfilled. After the first 69 weeks the Messiah was

¹² Robert P. Lightner, *Last Days Handbook: A Complete Guide to the End Times, Including the Meaning of the Year 2000 in Bible Prophecy*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 95.

cut off and we know that the Church Age began less than two months after the Messiah was cut off. Daniel's 70th week has remained unfulfilled for nearly 2000 years. The prophetic time clock has stopped ticking for all these years. The clock stopped ticking after the 69th week and has not yet resumed ticking. How can we explain this large 2000-year gap between the 69th week and the 70th week? The answer is revealed on the pages of the New Testament. DURING THIS 2000 YEAR GAP GOD IS INVOLVED IN THE FOLLOWING PROGRAM:

He is building His Church (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:47).

He is taking out a people for His Name (Acts 15:14).

He is bringing in the fullness of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:25).

He is placing believers into a living organism (1 Cor. 12:13).

He is saving a "showcase" that will eternally display His matchless grace (Eph. 1:7).

He is manifesting Himself through His body which is upon the earth (1 Tim. 3:15-16).

Just as the Church had an abrupt beginning on the day of Pentecost shortly after the conclusion of the 69th week, it should be expected that the Church will have an abrupt removal shortly before the beginning of the 70th week. The Pre-tribulational model harmonizes perfectly with Daniel's 70th week prophecy while at the same time recognizing the parenthetical and mysterious nature of the Church Age. It is "mysterious" in the sense that Church truth was unrevealed on the pages of the Old Testament and the Church Age was not foreseen by the prophets. The Old Testament prophets did not tell us about the gap simply because they did not see the gap. It was unrevealed to them. They saw only the two mountain peaks which represent the first and second comings of Christ but they did not see the large valley in between. The Pre-Wrath view sees the Church as being on earth during a large part of Daniel's 70th week (the Church will be on earth, according to Rosenthal's charts, for approximately 3/4 of the last seven years, or approximately five years or more). This mixes up and confuses God's purpose for Israel and God's purpose for the Church. THE CHURCH HAS NEVER AND WILL NEVER BE PRESENT ON EARTH DURING ANY OF ISRAEL'S 70 WEEKS. The Church began after the 69th week ended, and the Church will be raptured before the 70th week begins....¹³

Recent Pre-Wrath advocates seek to mitigate the force of this argument by noting that since the birth of the modern state of Israel, and also in the Book of Acts, both Israel and the Church exist together on earth. Such an assessment is true. Concerning the Book of Acts, Fruchtenbaum observes, "In the book of Acts, both Israel and the church exist simultaneously. The term Israel is used twenty times and *ekklēsia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always

¹³ Zeller, "Pre-Wrath Confusion," 6-7.

kept distinct.”¹⁴ Thus, Pre-Wrathers query, if this is true, why cannot both the Church and Israel exist together on earth for the first three quarters of the Tribulation period?

However, the issue is not mere coexistence but rather useability. When God uses the church as His preeminent servant, He does not simultaneously use Israel in this regard. Conversely, when He uses Israel, He does not simultaneously use the church. Although Israel and the church both co-exist in the Book of Acts, by that time in redemptive history, God had already taken His hand off of national Israel as His primary vessel of blessing and was now at work through the Church (Matt. 27:51; Rom. 11:11). There is no future identifiable point when He will stop using the Church (Matt. 16:18; 28:20). Thus, when God places His hand back on Israel in the Tribulation period (Rev. 7; 11:1-13; 12), the Church cannot be present on earth.

It Fails to Acknowledge the Missing Church (Rev. 4–22)

The *second* problem with Pre-Wrath Rapturism relates to the absence of any reference to the church on earth in Revelation 4–19. After all, if the church is going to be present on the earth for roughly three quarters of the Tribulation period, as espoused by Pre-Wrath advocates, then there should be at least one clear biblical reference to it in any eschatological passage. This criticism becomes clear upon considering the broad structure of the Book of Revelation. Revelation 1:19 furnishes the three-part structure of the book. It says, "Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things." "The things which you have seen" consist of John's interaction with the glorified Christ as recorded in Revelation's first chapter. "The things which are" comprise the seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor as recorded in Revelation 2–3. "The things which will take place after these things" constitute the futuristic section of the book as recorded in Revelation 4–22. That Revelation 4:1 begins this third and futuristic section is evident from the two-fold repetition of the expression "after these things" (*meta tatuta*), which is the same

¹⁴ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 118.

phrase used to describe this final section of the book in Revelation 1:19. It is in this final section of the book that we discover the most vivid description of the Tribulation period in the entire Bible (Rev. 4–19).

Yet, this section contains no single clear reference to the church on the earth during this time period. While the Greek word *ekklēsia*, translated "church," is found nineteen times in Revelation 1–3 comprising the first two sections of the book, the word is not found a single time in the book's futuristic section (Rev. 4–22). In fact, the only time in this section that *ekklēsia* is ever used is when John signs off in the benediction reminding his readers of Christ's exhortation to preach these prophetic truths in the churches (Rev. 22:16). Other than this scant reference to the church, the word "church" is totally absent from the book's futuristic section. We might inquire as to why? The obvious answer lies in the fact that the church will not be on the earth during this horrific time period having already been raptured to heaven before the Tribulation even begins.

Moreover, in the book's second section, the following exhortation occurs seven times: "To him who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). It is worth pointing out that the nearly identical expression occurs in Revelation 13:9, which is given to encourage those experiencing persecution from the Beast during the Tribulation period. This verse says, "if anyone has an ear, let him hear." Notice that the familiar expression "what the Spirit says to the churches" is omitted from Revelation 13:9 despite the fact that it is attached to the same expression seven times in Revelation 2–3. We might ask why "What the Spirit says to the churches" is left off in Revelation 13:9 despite its seven-fold prominence in Revelation 2–3? Once again, the answer lies in the fact that the church will not be on the earth during this seven-year time period having already been raptured to heaven before the Tribulation even begins. At this point, non-Pre-Tribulationists, like Pre-Wrathers, are not assisted by references to the "the saints" identified as being in the Tribulation period (Rev. 13:7). In Old Testament times, God's people were typically designated as "saints" (Ps. 50:5; 149:1 NKJV), long before the church, or the body of Christ, was in existence (Matt.

16:18; Eph. 3:5-6). Thus, the identifying of God's people as saints after the church has been removed is not problematic for Pre-Tribulationists.

Not only is the word "church" (*ekklēsia*) absent from the section of John's Apocalypse directly pertaining to the Tribulation period, but the concept of the church is missing as well. Paul routinely described the church, or the body of Christ, as consisting of all people from all nations on equal footing as joint heirs in one new man or spiritual organism. According to Galatians 3:28, in the Church Age, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 2:14 similarly explains, "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall." Thus, national barriers or boundaries no longer positionally divide believers from one another in the Church Age. Today, the preeminent servant of God is no longer national, ethnic Israel but rather the church, or the body of Christ, consisting of believers in Jesus from all nations.

Yet, the Book of Revelation, chapters 4–22, describes a period of time when national barriers will once again be erected as God will again use national Israel as His special instrument to bless the world. Prominently among them will be the one-hundred-and-forty-four thousand Jews from the 12 tribes of Israel (Rev. 7:1-8) who will evangelize the world (Rev. 7:9-16). Similarly, during the future Tribulation period, He will appoint two Jewish witnesses, who will most likely be Moses and Elijah (Rev. 11:3-14). Moreover, despite the fact that the church is the object of satanic opposition in the present age (Eph. 6:10-20), during the coming Tribulation, Satan will relentlessly attack national Israel (Rev. 12:1, 13; Gen. 37:9-10). Thus, not only is the word "church" absent from Revelation's depiction of the future Tribulation, but the Pauline concept of the church as a body with no national barriers is also absent from this horrific time period. Unlike today, the singular national entity Israel will be the object of not only divine blessing but also satanic wrath in the futuristic section of the Apocalypse. The only logical explanation for this abrupt transition is that the church has already been raptured to heaven before the events of the Tribulation period unfold. If the church is ever hinted at or mentioned at

all in Revelation's description of the Tribulation period, she is always portrayed as being in heaven and never on earth. For example, Revelation 1:20 symbolizes the church as seven lampstands. These lamps and lampstands are described as already being in heaven once the events of the Tribulation period begin to unfold (Rev. 4:5).

This missing church concept is not only evident in John's description of the Tribulation period as recorded in the Book of Revelation, but it is also apparent in virtually all other Tribulation passages recorded throughout the entire Scripture. Thus, no matter how hard one tries, they will not be able to find the church either in word or concept in such passages as Jeremiah 30:7; Ezekiel 38-39; Daniel 9:24-27; Matthew 24-25, etc. The silence is deafening! In sum, much to their consternation, Pre-Wrath Rapturists are unable to locate, in a single eschatological passage, the church as being on the earth during the first three quarters of the Tribulation period.

It Confines God's Wrath to Only a Portion of the Tribulation's Second Half

Third, Pre-Wrath Rapturism is problematic in that it confines the wrath of God to the final quarter of the Tribulation period and fails to recognize that the entire Seventieth Week of Daniel actually represents God's wrath. For example, of the future Tribulation period, Zephaniah 1:14-15 says, "Near is the great *day of the Lord*, near and coming very quickly; Listen, the *day of the Lord!* In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of *wrath* is that day, a day of *trouble and distress*, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (italics added). Interestingly, the Hebrew word *tsarah* translated "trouble" here is also translated by the LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament created nearly two centuries before the time of Christ) with the Greek word *thlipsis*, or "tribulation." Thus, far from separating divine wrath or the Day of the Lord from the preceding Great Tribulation as is maintained by Pre-Wrath Rapture advocates, notice that Zephaniah 1:14-15 indicates that the Day of the Lord constitutes both a time of divine wrath and tribulation.

In addition, it is lexically and grammatically difficult, if not impossible, to embrace the argument advanced by the Pre-Wrath Rapturist that the actual wrath of the Lamb does not really begin until the opening of the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:12-17). Revelation 6:16-17 says, "and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne and from the *wrath* of the Lamb; for the great day of their *wrath* has come, and who is able to stand?'" (Italics added). Regarding these verses, Thomas explains:

The verb *elethen* ("has come") is aorist indicative, referring to a previous arrival of wrath, not something that is about to take place. Men see the arrival of this day at least as early as the cosmic upheavals that characterize the sixth seal (6:12-14), but upon reflection they probably recognize that it was already in effect with the death of one-fourth of the population (6:7-8), the worldwide famine (6:5-6), and the global warfare (6:3-4). The rapid sequence of all of these events could not escape notice, but the light of their true explanation does not dawn upon human consciousness until the severe phenomena of the sixth seal arrive.¹⁵

Stanton makes a similar grammatical observation:

...Rosenthal...constantly asserts that the outpoured wrath of God does not commence until Revelation 8:1, the seventh seal, which immediately introduces the unprecedented judgments of the seven trumpets...Even the most casual reading of Revelation 6:12-17 reveals that the cry of verses 6-17 is a scream of terror from the wicked, rebellious human leaders who have endured war and famine, death and destruction, a shattering earthquake, and a frightful disruption of heavenly bodies under the earlier judgments. Obviously, they are responding to past judgment and not judgments yet to come, for wicked men have no ability to speak a prophecy! It is true that the aorist tense normally has no time significance. But the verb *ēlethen* is in the aorist tense and indicative mood, and when this occurs it refers to a past action and not to a future [H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 178]. Hence, the proper translation is 'the great day of his wrath is come,' or as the vast majority of translators put it, the great day of his wrath has come.' It is a major error to force the translation to declare, 'the great day of his wrath will come.' One can only conclude that this strong reference to the wrath of God is the direct response of the wicked to their shattering experience under the first six seals, and not a veiled prophecy of coming trumpet judgments.¹⁶

¹⁵ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 457-58.

¹⁶ Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept From the Hour: Biblical Evidence for the Pretribulational Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1991), 387-88.

Also without merit is the Pre-Wrath contention that the wrath of God is absent from the first five seal judgments merely on the grounds that the actual word "wrath" is not found in the verses describing these judgments (Rev. 6:1-11). Geisler appropriately observes, "Absence of a word does not prove absence of the concept. For example, the word wrath does not appear in Genesis, yet God's wrath was poured out during the flood (6–8) and on Sodom and Gomorrah (19)."¹⁷ Moreover, although tribulations (John 16:33), or *thlipsis*, is used to depict the first five seal judgments (Rev. 7:14), this term can be used interchangeably for divine wrath as Romans 2:8-9 clearly indicates. These verses say, “⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath [*orgē*] and indignation [*thumós*].⁹ There will be tribulation [*thlipsis*] and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.”

If the first five seal judgments do not represent the wrath of God, then what exactly do they represent? According to Pre-Wrath Rapturism, they represent the wrath of man and Satan rather than God's wrath. Yet, how can this be when Jesus is portrayed in heaven as opening the seven-sealed scroll (Rev. 5:7; 6:1), which brings forth the various seal judgments, including the first five seal judgments? If Jesus opening of the seals brings forth these judgments, then they simply cannot be categorized as the wrath of man and Satan and not the wrath of God. While it remains true that human activity is the cause of many of these first five seal judgments, human activity alone is not their ultimate cause. The ultimate cause of these judgments is the Lamb's heavenly activity of opening the seven-sealed scroll.

Pre-Wrathers will find no refuge in the contention that it is actually one of the four living creatures bringing forth these judgments rather than God Himself (Rev. 6:1, 3, 5, 7). When God brings forth judgment, He frequently delegates the task of imposing judgment to an angelic being. For example, although an angel ultimately destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:15, 22), in so doing no one would suggest that God was not the ultimate author of that city's

¹⁷ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 2004), 652.

destruction (Gen. 19:24). In the same way, God is the ultimate author of the destruction brought by the earlier seal judgments in spite of the fact that God delegated the task of destruction to angelic beings.

The first of these five judgments is none other than the advent of the Antichrist himself (Rev. 6:1-2). While the Antichrist along with his satanic empowerment brings judgment to the earth, it is Christ opening of the first seal from heaven that will allow the Antichrist to come forth in the first place. This should come as no great surprise to diligent Bible readers since God often uses human instruments to execute His judgment. The Old Testament depicts the Arameans (Isa. 9:11-12), Assyrians (Isa. 10:5-6), and Persians (Isa. 13:3, 5, 9, 17-19) all as instruments of God's "indignation," "anger," or "wrath" against a sinful people. The New Testament similarly depicts the agents of human government as an instrument of His wrath. Romans 13:4 says, "For it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil" (italics added). If God frequently uses human instruments to execute His wrath, then why cannot the Antichrist of the first seal judgment (Rev. 6:1-2) also not be understood as an agent of divine wrath? Paul seems to indicate as much regarding the future Antichrist when he states, "that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of *Satan*, with all power and signs and false wonders...For this reason *God will send upon them* a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false" (2 Thess. 2:9-11; italics added).

Similarly, Satan can also be used as an instrument of divine wrath. For example, although Second Samuel 24:1 indicates that God's anger incited David to number Israel's troops, Satan was used as the instrument to prompt David in this regard (1 Chron. 21:1). Second Samuel 24:1 says, "Now the *anger of the Lord* burned against Israel again, and He incited David against them to say, 'Go, count Israel and Judah.'" First Chronicles 21:1 says, "Then *Satan* stood up against Israel and incited David to count Israel." (italics added)

Pre-Wrathers typically see the birth pains of Matthew 24:4-9 as transpiring before the wrath of God is manifested during Daniel's Seventieth Week. In his eschatological chart, Kurschner lists the birth pain of Matthew 24:7 as merely "famine."¹⁸ However, this verse not only mentions "famines," but it also points to "earthquakes." This fuller description creates further problems for the Pre-Wrath interpretation since that would mean that the earthquakes are caused by either man or Satan rather than God Himself. Larry Pettegrew well observes this problem when he notes:

This means that the earthquakes described in Matthew 24:7 (which Rosenthal thinks will occur in the first half of the seven-year era) are the result of the power of Satan or man. Toussaint observes, 'Interestingly, Rosenthal never explains how the earthquakes in Matthew 24:7 are triggered by humans!' (Toussaint, "Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?" *The Return*, Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy, eds. [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 133).'¹⁹

Interestingly, the second and third seal judgments will bring forth war via the sword (Rev. 6:3-4) and famine (Rev. 6:5-6) respectively. The Old Testament also routinely describes these realities as instruments of God's wrath (Job 19:29; 2 Chron. 36:15-17; Isa. 51:19-20; Jer. 21:5-7, 9; 44:8, 11-12; 50:13, 25; Ezek. 7:14-15). If this is so, then consistency seems to dictate that the warfare and famine of the second and third seal judgments should also be categorized as God's wrath. Moreover, the famine, death, and pestilence of the fourth seal judgment (Rev. 6:8) are spoken of in the pages of the Old Testament as not only God's wrath (Ezek. 5:15-17; 7:3, 8, 15; 14:19, 21), but also the Day of the Lord (Ezek. 7:19).

In addition, the fourth seal judgment will bring about the death of one-fourth of the world's population (Rev. 6:7-8) and the fifth seal judgment will introduce wide spread martyrdoms (Rev. 6:9-11). Pre-Wrath Rapturists see these judgments involving massive deaths as mere acts of man or the devil. However, it remains interpretively significant to connect these

¹⁸ Kurschner, 99.

¹⁹ Larry D. Pettegrew, "The Messiah's Lecture on the Future of Israel," in *Forsaking Israel: How It Happend and Why It Matters*, ed. Larry D. Petegrew (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2020), 364 n. 24.

judgments involving death to a statement made at the beginning of the Book of Revelation that God is the one who is in control of death. Revelation 1:18 says, "...I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades."²⁰ Since God's sovereignty over death is clearly proclaimed at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, then we should understand the massive deaths portrayed later on in the book as within His sovereignty and part of His judgments and not as mere acts of Satan or man only, as is taught by Pre-Wrath Rapturists.

Interestingly, Revelation 6:16-17 uses the verb *erchomai*, which is translated as "come," when it says, "¹⁶ and they said to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the sight of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath [*orgē*] of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of Their wrath [*orgē*] has come [*erchomai*], and who is able to stand?'" Pre-Wrathers contend that these verses depicting the sixth seal judgment represents the first description of God's wrath in the tribulation. While it is true that the word translated "wrath" (*orgē*), first appears here in Revelation's chronology, the word "come" (*erchomai*) has already been used several times in Revelation chapter six depicting the prior seal judgments (Rev. 6:1, 3, 5, 7). This repetition of "come" (*erchomai*) throughout seems to link all six seal judgments. Since they are linked in this way, it seems unnatural to categorize the first five seal judgments distinctly by arguing that they do not represent God's wrath while the sixth seal judgment does in fact describe divine wrath.

In sum, all of these preceding points cumulatively demonstrate that it is highly problematic to interpret the first five seal judgments as devoid of God's wrath. Yet, interpreting them in such an innocuous manner is a key ingredient of the pre-wrath rapture position. All of the seal judgments represent God's wrath and the Day of the Lord.

²⁰ See also Deuteronomy 32:39.

It Denies the Rapture's Imminency

Fourth, the Pre-Wrath Rapture of the church denies the imminent return of Christ. Pre-Tribulationism contends that the rapture is the very next event on the prophetic horizon. It is a sign-less event that can transpire at any moment. Wayne Brindle provides the following objective test concerning whether a given New Testament text speaking of Christ's return can be categorized as an imminency passage:

"Four criteria may be suggested, any one of which indicates imminence:

- 1) The passage speaks of Christ's return as at any moment.
- 2) The passage speaks of Christ's return as 'near,' without stating any signs that must precede His coming.
- 3) The passage speaks of Christ's return as something that gives believers hope and encouragement, without indicating that these believers will suffer tribulation.
- 4) The passage speaks of Christ's return as giving hope without relating it to God's judgment of unbelievers."²¹

According to this definition, the New Testament constantly exhorts New Testament believers to be looking for Christ's imminent return in the rapture (John 14:3; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:15; 1 Cor. 1:7; 15:51; Philip. 3:20; Titus 2:13; Jas. 5:8; 1 John 3:2-3) rather than to be focused on the Antichrist, the rebuilding of the Temple, the first five seal judgments, or some other prophetic sign as the very next event on the prophetic horizon. The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the church, by placing the rapture in the middle of the second half of the Tribulation period, denies the idea that the rapture is imminent and in fact can happen today. An entire prophetic scenario consisting of roughly three-fourths of the Tribulation period must first transpire according to Pre-Wrath Rapturism.

Kessinger well explains the signs that first must transpire before the rapture can occur according to the Pre-Wrath Rapture scheme and how this notion represents a gross violation of the doctrine of imminency:

The doctrine of imminence holds that Christ can come to rapture His church at any moment. Believers in the early church, including the apostle Paul, believed that Christ could come

²¹ Wayne Brindle, "Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 630 (April-June 2001): 139.

in their lifetime (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13-15; Titus 2:13). The church sees this doctrine as an incentive for ministry and godly living. Does this mean that Christ's return for His church will be at any moment, without any sign, and with no yet-to-be-fulfilled prophesied event to precede it? Pre-wrath rapturists argue that Christ could come in any generation but that signs will herald the general time. Those signs include (1) the emergence of the antichrist, (2) wars and rumors of war, (3) famine, (4) pestilence, and (5) cosmic disturbance. Pre-wrath rapturists emphasize Christians' expectancy of Christ's return rather than its imminency. This expectancy of Christ's return is the catalyst for holy living.²²

Robert Lightner similarly notes:

The Pre-Wrath Rapture view is different from the normal Pre-Tribulational view in that it does not consistently distinguish between God's program with Israel and His program with the church. The way it differs is that it has the church in Israel's seventieth week and does not hold to the doctrine of imminency.²³

There is little doubt that the scriptural doctrine of imminency furnishes a natural stimulus for holy living. According to Matthew 24:46-50:

⁴⁶ Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that evil slave says in his heart, '*My master is not coming for a long time,*' ⁴⁹ *and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and he eats and drinks with those habitually drunk;* ⁵⁰ then the master of that slave will come on a day that he does not expect, and at an hour that he does not know. [italics added]

J. Dwight Pentecost notes the nexus between imminency and holy living:

A short time ago, I took occasion to go through the New Testament to mark each reference to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and to observe the use made of that teaching about His coming. I was struck a new with the fact that almost without exception, when the coming of Christ is mentioned in the New Testament, it is followed by an exhortation to godliness and holy living.²⁴

Pre-Wrath Rapturism, like all other non-Pre-Tribulation schemes, removes this natural stimulus for holy living naturally provided through the doctrine of imminency. Stanton observes:

²² Tony Kessinger, "Pre-Wrath Rapture," in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy: Over 140 Topics from the World's Foremost Prophecy Experts*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2004), 293.

²³ Lightner, 95.

²⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Prophecy for Today: The Middle East Crisis and the Future of the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 20.

Rosenthal's last chapter incorporates a final summary of his various positions, and also a final...attack against Pre-Tribulationalism and some of its leaders. The chapter sets forth the 'Pre-Wrath Rapture' view as a 'catalyst for holy living,' without recognizing that much of that catalyst is lost if forty-two months of 'sorrows' and another twenty-one months of battle and martyrdom from the beast must come first.²⁵

It Fails to Consistently Explain How the Rapture is a Comfort to the Believer

Fifth, Pre-Wrath Rapturism denies the comfort that the rapture is designed to bring to the believer. The New Testament frequently mentions comfort when the rapture is presented (John 14:1; 1 Thess. 4:18; Titus 2:13). As noted previously, this notion of comfort harmonizes well with the Pre-Tribulational rapture position, which teaches that the church will be kept out of Daniel's Seventieth Week entirely. However, where is the comfort in Pre-Wrath Rapturism? How can the biblical passages related to comfort be honestly harmonized with a belief that says before experiencing the hope of the rapture, the church must first endure the diabolical reign of the Antichrist, wars and rumors of war, famine, pestilence, the death of a quarter of the world's population, wide-scale martyrdom, and unprecedented cosmic disturbances (Rev. 6:1-8)?

Mark Hitchcock quoting Donald Grey Barnhouse provides, by way of parody, an illustration of the joy that is lost in the Christian life when one abandons the Pre-Tribulational position by instead embracing a non-Pre-Tribulational scheme, such as Pre-Wrath Rapturism.

Jesus may come today, Glad day! Glad day! And I would see my friend; Dangers and troubles would end If Jesus should come today. Glad day! Glad day! Is it the crowning day? I'll live for today, nor anxious be, Jesus, my Lord, I soon shall see; Glad day! Glad day! Is it the crowning day?" By way of parody, Dr. Barnhouse also pointed out that if the midtrib or posttrib [or prewrath] advocates sang this song, it would instead have to say: "Jesus can't come today, Sad day! Sad day! And I won't see my friend; Dangers and troubles won't end because Jesus can't come today. Sad day! Sad day! Today is not the crowning day? I won't live for today, and anxious I'll be, The Beast and the False Prophet I soon shall see, Sad day! Sad day! Today is not the crowning day?"²⁶

²⁵ Stanton, 399.

²⁶ Cited in Mark Hitchcock, "An Overview of Pretribulational arguments," online: www.pre-trib.org, accessed 27 August 2013, 29-30.

It Misinterprets the Restrainer as Michael the Archangel Rather than the Holy Spirit

Sixth, the Pre-Wrath interpretation that the restrainer (2 Thess. 2:6-7) represents Michael the Archangel is problematic. According to Rosenthal:

...of paramount importance is the identification of the one who restrains or hinders the Antichrist until 'he [the restrainer] be taken out of the way.' The restrainer is neither the Holy Spirit nor human government. Evidence is strained to support either of those contentions. There is, however, substantial evidence to identify the restrainer. He who restrains until 'he be taken out of the way' is the Archangel Michael.²⁷

Thus, Pre-Wrath Rapture advocates contend that Michael will step aside from his function of restraining the Antichrist during the Great Tribulation.

However, the problem with identifying Michael as the restrainer is that Jude 9 tells us that Michael is reluctant to contest Satan, when it says, "But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" Therefore, consistency seems to dictate that Michael would also be unwilling to actively contribute to the present restraining of the satanically controlled Antichrist.

In addition, it is unlikely that Michael is the restrainer since the restrainer holds back the Antichrist from making his global debut (2 Thess. 2:6-7) while Michael is more focused on protecting national Israel (Dan. 12:1). Furthermore, how could the restrainer, who at some point stops restraining (2 Thess. 2:6-7), be Michael since Michael never stops protecting Israel? Thus, Kessinger concludes, "The Pre-Wrath view holds to the rather inventive idea that Michael the archangel is the restrainer. This concept fails to take into consideration Michael's special protective ministry toward Israel."²⁸

Moreover, the best interpretive option is that the restrainer mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 is the Holy Spirit rather than Michael the Archangel. There are *two* primary reasons for reaching this conclusion. *First*, the force restraining the Antichrist must be more

²⁷ Rosenthal, 256.

²⁸ Kessinger, 294.

powerful than Satan. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:9, the Antichrist will be Satan's masterpiece who will be directly controlled and empowered by Satan himself. Thus, the restrainer must be powerful enough to prevent Satan from unleashing the Antichrist onto the world scene until the proper time. Only deity possessing the attribute of omnipotence ("all power") has unlimited power. Certainly, the Holy Spirit meets this criterion since He is full deity (Acts 5:3-4).

Second, the Greek participle "restrainer" is neuter in 2 Thessalonians 2:6 and masculine in verse 7. Identifying the restrainer as the Holy Spirit handles well this abrupt transition from the neuter to the masculine gender. The Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma*, which is a neuter noun. Moreover, in the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus identified the Holy Spirit with the masculine personal pronoun "him" or "he." For example, in John 14:17, Christ said, "that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see *Him* or know *Him*, but you know *Him* because *He* abides with you and will be in you." (italics added) The Holy Spirit is designated by the personal pronoun "he" in other sections of the same discourse (John 15:26; 16:13-14). Thus, in contradistinction to Pre-Wrath Rapture theology, while identification of the restrainer as Michael is problematic, identifying the restrainer as the Holy Spirit represents the better interpretive option.

Summary

Pre-Wrath Rapturism fails on six counts. It places the church in Israel's Seventieth Week. It is unable to locate a clear reference to the church on the earth during the first three quarters of the Tribulation period. It erroneously confines God's wrath to the Tribulation period's final twenty-five percent. It denies imminency. It fails to acknowledge the rapture's promises of comfort. It erroneously identifies the restrainer as Michael the Archangel.

Additional Problems with the View

Now that we have responded to the arguments of Pre-wrath Rapturism in contradistinction to some of the more commonly embraced arguments associated with Pre-

Tribulationalism, let us now observe some remaining miscellaneous problems with the Pre-Wrath Rapture position.

It Imposes an Artificial Construct on Daniel's Seventieth Week

First, Pre-Wrath Rapturism imposes an artificial and unnatural construct upon Daniel's Seventieth Week (Dan. 9:27). This important passage says:

And he will make a firm covenant with the many for *one week*, but in the *middle of the week* he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate (*italics added*).

Any intellectually honest reading of this important prophecy will see that it will encompass a seven-year period comprised of two equal three-and-one-half year periods. The eschatological event demarcating these halves from one another will be the Antichrist's desecration of the Temple at the Tribulation's midpoint. The Book of Revelation builds upon this foundation by simply adding details. Revelation focuses on the different halves of the seven-year Tribulation period by calling the reader's attention to them through the use of various synonyms. Such synonyms include "forty-two months" (Rev. 11:2; 13:5), "one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev. 12:6), and a "times time and half a time" (Dan. 12:7; Rev. 11:3; 12:14). These are all different ways of saying "three and one-half years." Regarding the latter expression, a "time" is a Jewish year. The plurality of "time" or "times" represents two Jewish years. "A half a time" comprises half of a Jewish year. When these various parts are added together, the sum of the parts is a three-and-one-half year time period. The Lord Jesus Himself similarly recognized this two-part structure when He spoke of end time events in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25). In Matthew 24:15-16, 20, He said: "¹⁵ Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) ¹⁶ then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains...²⁰ But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath."

The Pre-Wrath Rapture view ignores this basic two-part structure by imposing a three-part, or tripartite, concept upon Daniel's Seventieth Week. As mentioned earlier, according to Pre-Wrath Rapturism, the first half of Daniel's Seventieth Week will be the "beginning of sorrows." The second part will be the "Great Tribulation" and will last an additional twenty-one months beyond the Tribulation's midpoint. The third part will constitute the "Day of the Lord" and will comprise the final twenty-one months of Daniel's Seventieth Week.

This alleged tripartite structure is foreign and artificially imposed upon Daniel 9:27. This three-part structure is also a notion that is not honored or referenced by any other New Testament writer who comments upon or adds clarifying details to Daniel 9:27. The emphasis of Daniel 9:27 and all subsequent biblical commentary is a two-part structure rather than the imagined three-part structure that is erroneously taught by Pre-Wrath Rapturism. Pettegrew summarizes:

...the Scriptures never divide the Tribulation period into thirds. Daniel's prophecy divides the seventieth week in two (Dan 9:27); half of the Tribulation is described as numbering 1260 days (Rev 11:3; 12:6). In fact, since Revelation 12:14 explains that God will protect fleeing Jews for 'a time, and times, and half a time' (1260 days); and since the beginning of this period is the beginning of the last three and one-half years, the Great Tribulation (Matt 24:15-22) must last for 1260 days. The Bible never divides the 1260 days into two 630 days.²⁹

It Places the Great Tribulation (Unequaled Distress) Before God's Wrath

Second, while the Pre-Wrath Rapture view labels the first half of the second half of the Tribulation period (from the forty-second to the sixty-third month) as "the Great Tribulation," Christ's prophecy concerning the Great Tribulation would necessitate it being even greater than the Day of the Lord or the final quarter of Daniel's Seventieth Week. Regarding the Great Tribulation, Jesus predicted, "For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will" (Matt. 24:21). Jesus clearly indicates here that the Great Tribulation will be characterized by an unprecedented and an unequalled time

²⁹ Pettegrew, 340.

of distress. Yet, how can this statement fit the Pre-Wrath Rapture scenario of events, which outlines a time period following the Great Tribulation known as the Day of the Lord when God's very wrath will be poured out? In other words, how can the Great Tribulation period, a time without God's wrath, be even greater than the subsequent Day of the Lord, when the very wrath of God will be manifested?

Zeller explains:

The PRE-WRATH view teaches that the Day of the Lord begins after the Great Tribulation and that the Day of the Lord is the time of God's wrath. Matthew 24:21, Daniel 12:1 and Jeremiah 30:7 all teach that the Great Tribulation is the greatest time of trouble that the world has ever known. Therefore, if the Day of the Lord is distinct from the Great Tribulation, then the Day of the Lord must be LESS SEVERE than the Great Tribulation. But how can the great day of God's wrath be less severe and less troublesome than the Great Tribulation? How can God's wrath be less severe than man's wrath? How can the trumpets and bowls be less severe than the fifth seal? How can God's wrath be less severe than Satan's wrath? How can unregenerate men and Satan cause more trouble for this world than the wrathful JUDGE Himself? The PRE-WRATH view, when compared with Matthew 24:21 and these other verses, makes the Day of the Lord an ANTICLIMAX!³⁰

Pettegrew offers a similar criticism of Pre-Wrath Rapturism when he observes:

A...flaw in the pre-wrath interpretation of Matthew 24:22 is its logical failure. The reason that the Great Tribulation is shortened, according to this verse, is that if it were not, no flesh would be saved. The point of the Scripture is that when the Great Tribulation is over, something better comes on the scene. In the pre-wrath scheme, however, something more horrible occurs after the Great Tribulation—the Day of the Lord. If no flesh would have survived if the Great Tribulation were allowed to continue on twenty-one months, surely no flesh would survive if the Great Tribulation were to be cut short and followed by twenty-one months of a more horrible Day of the Lord. Moreover, Matthew 24:21 says that the Great Tribulation will be the worst time ever. So, how can it be replaced by the Day of the Lord which is more horrible? Wouldn't that be the worst time ever? In fact, the Great Tribulation (Matt 24:21) and the Day of the Lord (Dan 12:1; Jer 30:7) are both said to be the worst time ever, so they must be the same time period or at least overlap.³¹

³⁰ Zeller, "Pre-Wrath Confusion," 10.

³¹ Pettegrew, 340-41.

It places the Rapture in Revelation 7:9-17

Third, a significant problem with Pre-Wrath Rapturism relates to its inability to identify any specific biblical text that clearly teaches that the church will be removed from the earth roughly three quarters through the Tribulation period. All non-Pre-Tribulation schemes face the burden of locating the Rapture somewhere in the Tribulation period. The Pre-Tribulationist escapes this burden due to his belief that the rapture transpires before the Tribulation period even begins. The Pre-Wrath Rapturist founders in his ability to biblically document the rapture within the Tribulation period itself.

Once such text that Pre-Wrathers gravitate toward as a potential rapture passage is Revelation 7:9, 13-14. These verses say:

⁹ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all the tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands...¹³ Then one of the elders responded, saying to me, ‘These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?’ ¹⁴ I said to him, ‘My lord, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation [*thlipsis*], and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’”

Note how Rosenthal seeks to turn these verses into a rapture passage by making the heavenly multitude refer to the previously raptured church.

This great multitude represents the true Church which goes into the Seventieth Week of Daniel. They are raptured at the end of the Great Tribulation but before the Day of the Lord begins. They are raptured before God’s wrath is poured out but are not exempt from the ultimate rebellion of unregenerate men...Therefore, in chapter 7 the Church is raptured. But immediately prior to the rapture of the Church the 144,000 Jews are sealed...The 144,000 must be sealed for protection to go through the Day of the Lord before the Church can be caught up to the throne in heaven.³²

Alan Kurschner, in his end times chronology, similarly labels this great heavenly multitude (Rev. 7:9-17) as “raptured saints.”³³

³² Rosenthal, 185.

³³ Kurschner, 99.

Yet, equating this passage with the rapture of the church is problematic on *two* counts. *First*, John seems unable to answer the elder’s question, “who are they?” If they truly were the raptured church, one would think that John would be able to definitively identify them since he himself was a foundational member of the church (Eph, 2:20). *Second*, the verb *erchomai*, translated “come” in verses 13 and 14, is a present tense verb conveying a continuous action. Such a process does not fit the Pauline definition of the rapture, which will take place “in a moment” (*atomos*) and “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52). As Thomas explains:

A...possible understanding that it is a departure after the Great Tribulation is completed (Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990], p. 185) can be dismissed because it neglects the ongoing nature of the departure indicated by the present participle ἔρχόμενοι and rests on an unwarranted distinction between the Great Tribulation and the day of the God’s wrath.³⁴

Stanton similarly observes:

However, the innumerable multitude is not like the Church, which goes to heaven as a group at the rapture. Rather, they are martyrs who one at a time lay down their lives throughout the seven-year period. The Greek present tense in Revelation 7:14 stresses that they ‘continually come’ out of great Tribulation, and obviously do not go to heaven as a single group. It is likewise strange, if they do represent the Church, that John could not recognize them, for John was an apostle of Christ, a member of the early Church, and part of its essential foundation. Also, the Church is composed of all believers since Pentecost, and cannot be limited solely to Tribulation martyrs.³⁵

Far superior is the Pre-Tribulational understanding of the passage, which sees the one-hundred-and forty-four-thousand Jewish evangelists (Rev. 7:1-8) as leading numerous Gentiles to Christ during the Tribulation period (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Matt. 24:14). As these Gentile converts are sporadically martyred by the Antichrist, their souls go into the presence of God during different times throughout the duration of the seven-year tribulation period.

³⁴ Thomas, 497 n. 119.

³⁵ Stanton, 390.

It Places the Rapture in Matthew 24:31, 40-41

Fourth, Pre-Wrath Rapturism is significantly weakened to the extent that it seeks to locate the rapture of the church in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24–25). The two passages cited the most by Pre-Wrath advocates as locations of the rapture are Matthew 24:31 and Matthew 24:40–41.

Matthew 24:31

Alan Kurschner, for example, is confident that the rapture is found in Matthew 24:31, which says, "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other."³⁶ Those who hold to a rapture interpretation of this passage frequently point to the numerous similarities between the coming of Christ in Matt 24:31 and other rapture passages such as 1 Thess 4:13–18 and 1 Cor 15:50–58. Examples of such similarities include Christ's coming in a cloud (Matt 24:30), the sounding of a trumpet, and the world-wide gathering of believers (Matt 24:31).³⁷

However, it is a logical fallacy to assume that mere similarity is the same as equality. For example, although one can point to similarities between my two automobiles, this is not to say that one automobile is the same as the other. While there may be some points of similarity between Matt 24:31 and other rapture passages, this does not necessarily mean that the two passages are speaking of the same event especially if it can be shown that there are substantial differences between the passages. Many observe that any similarities between Matthew 24:31 and other rapture passages are outweighed by substantial differences. In fact, the two definitive features of the Pauline description of the rapture are the vertical catching up (*harpazō*) of believers and their bodily resurrection (1 Thess. 4:17; 1 Cor. 15:50–54). Neither factor is even

³⁶ Kurschner, 99.

³⁷ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 135.

remotely found in Matthew 24:31. Rather, this verse is merely speaking of a horizontal regathering of God's people and fails to mention a resurrection of any kind.

Ice observes, "In 1 Thessalonians 4 believers are gathered in the air and taken to heaven, while in Matthew 24 they are gathered after Christ's arrival to earth."³⁸ Sproule queries:

Where does Paul mention the darkening of the sun (Matt. 24:29), the moon not giving its light (Matt. 24:29), the stars falling from the sky (Matt. 24:29), the powers of the heavens being shaken (Matt. 24:29), all the tribes of the earth mourning (Matt. 24:30), all the world seeing the coming of the Son of Man (Matt. 24:30), or God sending forth angels (Matt.24:31)?³⁹

Feinberg similarly notes:

Notice what happens when you examine both passages carefully. In Matthew the Son of Man comes on the clouds, while in 1 Thessalonians 4 the ascending believers are in them. In Matthew the angels gather the elect; in 1 Thessalonians the Lord Himself (note the emphasis) gathers the believers. Thessalonians only speaks of the voice of the archangel. In the Olivet Discourse nothing is said about a resurrection, while in the latter text it is the central point. In the two passages the differences in what will take place prior to the appearance of Christ is striking. Moreover, the order of ascent is absent from Matthew in spite of the fact that it is the central part of the epistle.⁴⁰

In order to equate Matt 24:31 with rapture passages, a reconciliation of all of these differences is needed rather than merely highlighting a handful of similarities.

In order to identify Matthew 24:31 as the rapture Kurschner appeals to the use of the word (*episynagō*), which is translated as "gather." He notes that the same word in noun form (*episynagōgē*), which is translated "gathering," is used in Second Thessalonians 2:1 in reference to the rapture. On the basis of this similarity, Kurschner argues that because the word means the rapture in Second Thessalonians 2:1, that is its obvious meaning in Matthew 24:31.⁴¹ However,

³⁸ Thomas Ice, "Matthew 24:31: Rapture or Second Coming?" online: www.pre-trib.org, accessed 31 August 2011, 2.

³⁹ John A. Sproule, "An Exegetical Defense of Pretribulationism" (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1981), 53.

⁴⁰ Paul D. Feinberg, "Response: Paul D. Feinberg," in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Posttribulation*, ed. Richard R. Reiter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 225.

⁴¹ Alan Kurschner, *Prewrath: A Very Short Introduction to the Great Tribulation, Rapture, and the Day of the Lord* (Pompton Lakes, NJ: Eschatos, 2014), 63-65.

here, Kurschner is guilty of committing a hermeneutical error known as “illegitimate totality transfer.” This error arises when the meaning of a word as derived from its use elsewhere is then automatically read into the same word in a foreign context.⁴² D.A. Carson provides a full explanation of this hermeneutical error:

Unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field: The fallacy in this instance lies in the supposition that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range. This step is sometimes called illegitimate totality transfer.⁴³

It is common for words to take on multiple meanings depending upon the differing context in which the identical word is found. George Gunn illustrates this reality by noting how the word “run” can dramatically and quickly change in meaning depending upon its context.

I *ran* out of ingredients for the salad, so I decided to make a quick *run* down to the store. While at the store, I left the car engine *running* while I made my purchase, thinking that I would be right out again. However, while I was in the store, I *ran* into my good friend Edward who was *running* for county supervisor. This resulted in my having to endure a somewhat long-winded *rundown* on how his campaign was *running*. Finally, fearing that my car would *run* out of gas, I *ran* with great haste out to the parking lot and returned home with the car surely *running* only on fumes.⁴⁴

All of this to say the word “gather” does not mean the same thing in both Matthew 24:31 and Second Thessalonians 2:1, as Kurschner presupposes, due to the radically different contexts of the two passages. At bare minimum, the former passage refers to a horizontal gathering, while the latter passage refers to a vertical gathering.

Also, Showers explains how the imagery of Matt 24:31 has more in common with what the Old Testament predicts concerning Israel's eschatological regathering rather than the church's rapture.

First, because of Israel's persistent rebellion against God, He declared that He would scatter the Jews "into all the winds" (Ezek. 5:10, 12) or "toward all winds" (Ezek. 17:21).

⁴² James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 217-18.

⁴³ D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 60-61.

⁴⁴ George A. Gunn, "Jesus and the Rapture: John 14," in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 110.

In Zechariah 2:6 God stated that He did scatter them abroad "as four winds of the heavens." ... God did scatter the Jews all over the world. Next, God also declared that in the future Israel would be gathered from the east, west, north, and south, "from the ends of the earth" (Isa. 43:5-7). We should note that in the context of this promise, God called Israel His "chosen" (vv. 10, 20)...Just as Jesus indicated that the gathering of His elect from the four directions of the world will take place in conjunction with "a great trumpet" (literal translation of the Greek text of Mt. 24:21), so Isaiah 27:13 teaches that the scattered children of Israel will be gathered to their homeland in conjunction with the blowing of "a great trumpet" (literal translation of the Hebrew)...Gerhard Friedrich wrote that in that future eschatological day "a great horn shall be blown (Is. 27:13)" and the exiled will be brought back by that signal. Again he asserted that in conjunction with the blowing of the great trumpet of Isaiah 27:13, "There follows the gathering of Israel and the return of the dispersed to Zion." It is significant to note that Isaiah 27:13, which foretells this future regathering of Israel, is the only specific reference in the Old Testament to a "great" trumpet. Although Isaiah 11:11-12 does not refer to a great trumpet, it is parallel to Isaiah 27:13 because it refers to the same regathering of Israel. In its context, this passage indicates that when the Messiah (a root of Jesse, vv. 1, 10) comes to rule and transform the world as an "ensign" (a banner), He will gather together the scattered remnant of His people Israel "from the four corners of the earth."⁴⁵

In fact, contextually, the regathering spoken of in Matt 24:31 harks back to Matt 23:37. There Christ expressed a desire to gather an unwilling first-century Israel. He clearly identifies His audience as Israel in verse 37 with the twofold repetition of the word "Jerusalem." However, although first-century Israel was unwilling to be gathered by her Messiah, a future generation of repentant Jews will be regathered by Christ upon His return at the conclusion of the Tribulation. Matthew uses the same verb "gather" (*episynagō*) in both Matt 23:37 and Matt 24:31 in order to draw this connection.

The reader is further made aware of the larger Jewish context of Matthew 24 by observing that the flight of those from Judea to the mountains (Matthew 24:16) will take place on the Sabbath (Matt. 24:20). This flight will transpire when the Antichrist desecrates the Temple midway through the Tribulation period in fulfillment of Daniel's Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (Matt. 24:15), which is a prophecy that concerns national Israel specifically (Dan. 9:24). This Sabbath background indicates an exclusively Jewish context. Although Israel recognized its Sabbath as the last day of the week (Exod. 20:8-11; 31:15-17), the Church enjoys its day of rest

⁴⁵ Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come!: A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Isrel, 1995), 182-83.

on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2) in harmony with Christ rising on a Sunday rather than a Saturday (John 20:1, 19). All of this to say, reading Church Age, or Rapture truth, into Matthew 24, as is done by Pre-Wrath Rapturists, is unwarranted.

Matthew 24:40-41

Van Kampen is similarly confident that the rapture is found in Matthew 24:40-41. He notes the change of the verbs (from *airō* to *paralambanō*) as the reader transitions to these verses (40-41) from verse 39. These verses say:

³⁹ and they did not understand until the flood came and took (*airō*) them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. ⁴⁰ Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken (*paralambanō*) and one will be left. ⁴¹ “Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken (*paralambanō*) and one will be left.

To Van Kampen, this verbal transition is significant since *paralambanō* links Christ’s depiction of His coming with another reference to His coming, which clearly refers to the rapture (John 14:1-3). Van Kampen thinks that this linkage is justified on the grounds that Christ also uses the word *paralambanō* to depict His coming in John 14:3. These verses say:

¹ “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. ² “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³ “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you (*paralambanō*) to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

Van Kampen explains this alleged connectivity between the passages:

But is that what the text really teaches? The Greek answers, ‘No!’ The Greek word behind ‘took’ that is used in connection with Noah—‘the flood came and took them all away’—is from the Greek word *airō*. But when Christ describes how it will be at ‘the coming of the Son of Man,’ when ‘one will be taken and one will be left,’ the Greek word for taken is entirely different. Here the Greek verb is *paralambánō*. That difference is both important and exciting! *Paralambánō* does not mean ‘to be taken away,’ as does the Greek verb *airō*; it means ‘to embrace or to receive intimately, to or for oneself.’...Christ uses this word...in John 14:3...the most quoted of all Rapture passages in the New Testament...‘Receive’ translates *paralambánō*. Rather than picturing someone who is being taken away to judgment, this Greek verb conveys quite the opposite. *Paralambánō* means to intimately receive someone to oneself, as in the passage above. It would be more than a little confusing, then, if Christ used the word *paralambánō* five times to refer to the wicked being taken away to judgment—which is absolutely contrary to the real intent of the Greek

verb—and then the last time used it to refer to the righteous being received in an intimate manner by Himself at the rapture of His saints!”⁴⁶

However, for *three* reasons, Van Kampen has read far too much into the distinction between these verbs than what is exegetically warranted. *First*, *paralambanō* is a non-technical term. It is not a word that has the same definition everywhere it is used. While *paralambanō* can refer to the Lord taking believers to Himself (John 14:3), it also can refer to a taking away in a negative sense. For example, it is used to describe Satan taking Jesus to a venue for purposes of temptation (Matt. 4:5, 8), a demon taking along other demons for the purpose of indwelling a man (Matt. 12:45), and Christ being taken away to be abused (Matt 27:27) and eventually crucified (John 19:16). Thus, whenever *paralambanō* is used, its meaning must be determined from its context. The context of Matthew 24:40-41 involves judgment rather than deliverance.⁴⁷

Second, it is possible for two different words for "taking" to describe the same event rather than different events. For example, Second Kings 2:1, 3, 5 uses two different Hebrew words to describe Elijah being taken to heaven. Second Kgs 2:1 uses *alah* to describe this taking. Second Kgs 2:3, 5 uses *laqach* to describe the same event. Interestingly, John 19:15-16 uses both *airō* (vs. 15) and *paralambanō* (vs. 16) to denote the singular event of Christ being taken away for crucifixion. Why cannot Matthew 24:39-41 also use the same two words to allude to the singular event of Christ's return in judgment?

Third, there is a logical reason for the use of two different Greek words in Matt 24:39-41. When God took the unbelievers away into judgment in Noah's day, he used an impersonal agency to do so: the floodwaters. However, when He takes the unbelievers away into judgment following His return, He will use a personal agency to do so: angelic beings. Although angelic beings are not specifically mentioned in Matthew 24:40-41, they are mentioned in the Matthean parallel passages describing the future judgment awaiting unbelievers at Christ's

⁴⁶ Van Kampen, *The Rapture Questioned Answered: Plain and Simple*, 181-82.

⁴⁷ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2005), 281.; John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 193-94.; Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 476-77.

Second Advent (Matt. 13:39, 49). Thus, the switch in Greek words in Matt 24:39-41 may simply signal the different agencies that the Lord uses in judgment rather than a switch in a judgment-coming (Matt 24:39) to a rapture-coming (Matt 24:40-41). Thus, Toussaint summarizes, "The differences in verbs can be accounted for on the basis of accuracy of description."⁴⁸ In essence, the mere switch in verbs in Matthew 24:39-41 furnish Van Kampen with no basis for locating the rapture in Matthew 24:40-41.

Summary

Several miscellaneous arguments significantly weaken the Pre-Wrath Rapture case. These are: the imposition of an unnatural tripartite structure upon biblical prophecy rather than following its natural two-part structure, the placing of the time of unequaled distress (Matt. 24:21) before God's wrath, and the flawed attempt at locating the rapture either in the Apocalypse (Rev. 7:9, 13-14) or the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:31, 40-41).

Conclusion

This paper has offered a brief critique of the Pre-Wrath Rapture position. It has done so by *first* offering a description of the Pre-Wrath Rapture view. *Second*, it has noted the *six* traditional arguments typically relied upon by Pre-Tribulationists and scrutinized Pre-Wrath Rapturism according to each of these *six* arguments. *Finally*, this critique has noted *four* remaining miscellaneous issues that continue to be problematic for the Pre-Wrath Rapture position. In sum, Pre-wrath Rapturism is fraught with problems. Through this analysis it has been demonstrated that Pre-Wrath Rapturism represents an exegetically indefensible eschatological system that should be frankly and explicitly abandoned by all serious students of God's prophetic word.

⁴⁸ Toussaint, 281.

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