

An Analysis of the Use of Cosmic-Sign Passages by Proponents of the Pre-Wrath Rapture Theory

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The pre-wrath rapture view, which teaches that Christ will rapture the Church about three-fourths of the way through the 70th week of Daniel, has been dealt with in many other forums and in a more complete way than I am able to deal with in this paper.¹ It is, for the most part, a variation of the mid-tribulational position as I have argued elsewhere.² The view, popularized by Robert Van Kampen and Marv Rosenthal, focuses much of its argumentation against the pre-tribulational rapture.³ However, along the way, this position makes many unwarranted assumptions about various texts, which cannot be substantiated by detailed attention to the actual words of the Bible.⁴ This article attempts to summarize in one place the wrong assumptions and misguided exegesis in one particular area, namely, the misuse of the cosmic-sign passages by the pre-wrath rapturists. By cosmic-sign passages I mean those verses that predict interstellar changes (involving the sun, moon, and stars, etc.) with respect to the end-time days.

Summary of the Pre-wrath Argument Using Cosmic Signs

Pre-wrath rapturists use the cosmic-sign passages to make both a positive and a negative case in developing their argument. First, on the positive side, they connect the cosmic disturbances mentioned in Joel 2:30-31, Matthew 24:29, and Revelation 6:12 (as well as some other passages). In Joel 2:30-31 cosmic changes are predicted to occur *before* the day-of-the-Lord wrath. Remember that in their view, the day-of-the-Lord wrath is not the full seven-year tribulation period, but the last one-fourth or so of the tribulation period.⁵ Thus, they believe they can associate the cosmic disturbances

¹ For two good responses to the pre-wrath rapture position, see Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001) and Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *A Review of the Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church by Marv Rosenthal* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1991). See also Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, “Is There a Pre-wrath Rapture?” in *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995): 381-411. All verses quoted in this article are from the NASV unless otherwise noted. Grammatical-historical interpretation is assumed throughout the article.

² Michael Stallard, “A Comparison of J. Oliver Buswell’s Mid-Trib Position with the Pre-Wrath Rapture View,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 3 (Spring 1999): 84-96. This article was originally delivered at the Pre-Trib Study Group on December 15, 1998.

³ Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990); Robert Van Kampen, *The Sign* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992); Robert Van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997).

⁴ In fact, in my opinion, the pre-wrath rapture position may make far more assumptions before coming to the text than any of the other rapture positions. This may be because it does attempt, by its own testimony, to draw upon features in each of the other major rapture views. See Charles Cooper, “Legs to Stand On,” *Parousia* 5 (Fall 1997): 1-6.

described by Joel with those described in the sixth seal of Revelation 6:12 long after the seven years has begun. Then they also map these cosmic disturbances to the pre-wrath rapture with its associated cosmic signs taught in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:29) according to their timeline. In this sequencing, the cosmic-sign passages serve as one of the signposts to help bring these various passages together for the pre-wrath view.

On the negative side, the pre-wrath rapturists use the verses about cosmic disturbances to attempt to show that the pre-tribulational view is untenable. The argument runs like this:

1. The cosmic signs of Joel 2:30-31 predict that certain cosmic signs come *before* the day-of-the-Lord wrath;
2. The pre-tribulation view teaches that the rapture begins the day of the Lord.
3. Therefore, these cosmic signs come before the rapture.
4. Thus, the rapture cannot be an imminent event, which contradicts a major teaching within the pre-tribulational view.⁶

Consequently, the pre-wrath rapturists use cosmic-sign passages both to argue for their own view and to argue against pre-tribulationalism.

The Main Passages Discussed in the Debate

As a background to an analysis of the assumptions of the pre-wrath argument from cosmic signs, it is important to review the major passages that have been discussed or listed in the debate. Some preliminary suppositions will also be surfaced as we discuss these passages.

Isaiah 13:10

Isaiah chapters 13 and 14 give prophecies about the future of Babylon. It is within this presentation by Isaiah that 13:10 predicts “For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light: the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light.” Verse 13 adds, “Therefore I shall make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the LORD of hosts in the day of His burning anger.” The general description of the predicted cosmic disturbances cannot be questioned although some assumptions about them by pre-wrath rapturists will be challenged later.

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this article to address all of the problems with the pre-wrath rapture view. At this point, it is sufficient to suggest that it is a relatively easy task to show that the entire 70th week of Daniel as presented in Revelation 4-19 is the wrath of God. Four reasons present themselves: 1) it is the Lamb of God on the throne of God (Rev. 4-5) which removes the seals in Revelation 6 to unleash the entire sequence; 2) the angelic living creatures around the throne of God announce the judgments for the first four seals in Revelation 6; 3) the fourth seal judgment is described with language from Ezekiel, which clearly marks it as the wrath of God (Rev. 6:7-8; Ez. 14:13); and 4) men are already hiding from the wrath of God during the sixth seal and are not simply preparing to hide (Rev. 6:16-17).

⁶ Rosenthal, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 148-49.

However, there are some interesting questions about the timing of these cosmic signs. Isaiah 13:6 and 13:9 appear to warn that these things occur *during* the day of the Lord, which we normally associate with the tribulation period. There is the problematic statement in 13:17 that mentions the Medes, which may point to a near fulfillment toward the end of the Babylonian captivity in some measure in this passage. However, the frequent juxtaposition of passages in prophecies throughout the Bible dealing with near and far fulfillments shows that it is probably best not to question the future tribulation as what is in Isaiah's mind. Consequently, these cosmic signs occur, not before the day of the Lord, but *during* the day of the Lord.

Joel 2 & 3

There is probably no more important passage in this debate than Joel 2:30-31 which says "And I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire, and columns of smoke, the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes." The fact that these cosmic signs come before the day of the LORD distinguishes them from those mentioned in Isaiah 13:10. Even within the context of Joel itself there are other cosmic-sign passages.

Later in Joel 3:14-15, the prophet warns "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon grow dark, and the stars lose their brightness. And the LORD roars from Zion and utters His voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth tremble." Here the description is not quite as graphic as in 2:30-31. However, there is a similar diminishing of the light of the sun and moon. In addition, the implication seems to be that the cosmic disturbances that are mentioned happen just before the day of the LORD, which is said to be "near" in verse 14. In this way, the cosmic signs could be seen, at least on the surface, as the same ones referenced earlier in 2:30-31.

However, there appear to be some potential differences in the two passages. Stars are mentioned in 3:14-15 when they are not explicitly mentioned in 2:30-31. This observation by itself may not be meaningful. But note that in the Joel 3 passage the diminishing of the light of the sun, moon, and stars is set alongside of the judgment of the nations (v. 12) and not just a final war (v. 9-11). In addition, the signs are couched in the context of the LORD roaring from Jerusalem in kingdom restoration (v. 15-21). This may mean that the cosmic signs of this section refer to those at the visible, Second Coming of Christ to the earth to establish his kingdom and not an earlier time as the pre-wrath view seems to require. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to assume that the passage may be treating the entire range of events as a singular complex of events. If this is the case, the pre-wrath rapturist may be able to take these signs in 3:14-15 as preceding an event earlier than the visible appearing of Christ, which would allow him to fit the text more easily into his pre-wrath scheme where the cosmic signs precede the rapture and not the coming of Christ to earth.

An earlier passage in Joel, however, cannot be so easily dismissed. In a lengthy section describing the coming day of the Lord, the prophet says, "Before them the earth quakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars lose their brightness" (Joel 2:10). What is interesting is that this is one characteristic of the day of the Lord itself and not a description of an event that precedes the day of the Lord. The

next verse notes, “the day of the LORD is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it?” Consequently, even within the prophecy of Joel, not all cosmic-sign passages refer to events that must precede the coming wrath of God in the day of the LORD.

Ezekiel 32:7-8

Cosmic disturbances are also mentioned in Ezekiel 32:7-8 in a prophecy about God’s future judgment of Pharaoh and Egypt: “And when I extinguish you, I will cover the heavens, and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you and will set darkness on your land,’ declares the Lord God.” The context indicates that this is during a time in the middle of some future time of judgment upon the earth. This judgment upon Egypt appears to be brought about by God using the king of Babylon (32:11ff). Rosenthal relates this passage to the sixth seal of Revelation 6:12-17. There is nothing specifically mentioned about Egypt in the sixth seal, although there would be no major theological problems for the pre-tribulational rapturist if such were the case and one could identify the two passages. The most that could be said was that God provided some cosmic signs associated with Egypt sometime during the middle of the tribulation. However, some pre-tribulationalists do not see the passage as looking down the corridor of time to the tribulation.⁷ At any rate, this particular passage does not seem to contribute any substantive information to help resolve the debate over the pre-wrath use of cosmic signs.

Matthew 24:29-30

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus predicted the following: “But immediately *after* the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and *then* the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:29-30). Clearly the description of the cosmic disturbances in this passage mirrors that of Isaiah 13:10, Joel 2:10, Joel 3:14-15, and Ezekiel 32:7-8.

The pre-wrath rapturist interprets Matthew 24:29 in the following way. The word *tribulation* is distinct from the day-of-the-Lord wrath. Thus, the cosmic signs happen *after* the tribulation (understood here to be the “great tribulation” that covers the first half of the last three and one-half years of the 70th week of Daniel) but before the coming day-of-the-Lord wrath of God, which constitutes the last half of that same period. The sign of the Son of Man coming on the clouds is understood to be the rapture of the Church, which follows right after the cosmic signs.⁸

⁷ Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 182-84. Notice H. A. Ironside’s non-literal understanding of the words in this section of Ezekiel (*Ezekiel the Prophet*, [New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1949], 216).

⁸ Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath Rapture*, 149-53.

Pre-tribulation rapturists are divided on how to take this section in the Olivet Discourse. Some pre-trib rapturists would agree with the pre-wrath position that the rapture is in view here. They would emphasize the watchful language in the context such as the call to alertness (v. 42), the thief in the night (v. 43), and the unexpectedness of the coming in general that characterizes this section (v. 36-50). To them such language conveys images of imminency, which can only apply to the rapture of the Church and not the visible coming to earth of Christ.⁹

Other pre-tribulation rapturists agree with post-tribulationalists that the rapture is not in the Olivet Discourse. They would see Matthew 24:29-30 as referring to the visible coming of Christ to earth at the end of the seven-year tribulation and cite several reasons for their view: 1) the presence of judgment language in the context that is more suitable to the visible Second Coming (24:28, 39), 2) the judgment answer to the disciples' question of the destination of those taken when the Lord comes found in the parallel passage in Luke 17:31-37, 3) the fact that watchful language is used in some Bible passages where only events later than the rapture are in view (e.g., Rev. 16:15-16), and 4) the fact that the phrase "Son of Man coming on clouds of the sky," which hearkens back to Daniel 7:13-14, better fits the time when the Messiah receives the kingdom, that is, at the Second Coming.¹⁰

However, in spite of the disagreements among pre-tribulationalists over the interpretation of this section of the Olivet Discourse, they all reject the pre-wrath identification of the word *tribulation* in Matthew 24:29. The pre-wrath position teaches that this refers to a time shorter than a possible three and a half years that starts at the midpoint of the tribulation as Jesus notes in Matthew 24:15 with the mention of the abomination of desolation (cp. Dan. 9:24-27). The reason they argue this way is the words of Jesus: "unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short" (v. 22). So, in their view, Jesus cuts short the time of the tribulation for church believers of the last half of the 70th week of Daniel and makes it less than three and one-half years. However, the passage in question says that "no life" would be saved unless God shortened this time. Yet, it is clear that life continues on after the rapture in a pre-wrath scheme until the Second Coming itself. The verse does not limit itself to "Christian life" in the first part of that verse. Such an assumption is arbitrary. It is much more natural to interpret the statement of Jesus to mean that, if the tribulation lasts longer than seven years, everyone on earth would die.

Revelation 6:12-14

Revelation 6:12-14 begins the presentation of the sixth seal: "And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black

⁹ Recent defenses of this position have been made at the Pre-Trib Study Group by Jim Combs ("Why the Church IS Referenced in the Olivet Discourse," 1996) and Dave Hunt ("Is the Rapture in the Olivet Discourse," 1998).

¹⁰ One representative of this position is Arno C. Gaebelein who noted that the "synoptic Gospels know of no other coming of the Lord than His visible return to Jerusalem" (*The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* [reprint ed., Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961], 474). See also John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1974): 189-95. I favor this approach that does not see the rapture in the Olivet Discourse.

as sackcloth made of hair and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. And the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places." The language that is used parallels Joel 2:30-31. In Revelation 6:12, the sun is black as sackcloth; in Joel 2:31 it is turned into darkness. In both passages the moon appears like blood.

One can easily see how the pre-wrath view would connect the two passages. However, there is the assumption that God could not do the same thing twice (something we will come back to). For now, in the immediate context of the sixth seal of Revelation 6:12-17, it must be said that there is nothing in the text about the rapture. Most pre-trib rapturists believe that the sixth seal happens somewhere in the first half of the tribulation, with some placing it at the mid-point of the seven years. The pre-wrath view sees the rapture happening immediately after the sixth seal with its cosmic signs, basing its argument partly upon the assumption that there is a dramatic aorist in Revelation 6:17 when the text informs us "that the great day of their wrath *has come*." The phrase is taken by the pre-wrath view to mean that the wrath of God has not yet come but is at the door, about to happen.

However, contrary to this thinking, it is a relatively easy task to show that the entire 70th week of Daniel as presented in Revelation 4-19 is the wrath of God. Four reasons present themselves. First, it is the Lamb of God on the throne of God (Rev. 4-5), which removes the seals in Revelation 6 to unleash the entire sequence of judgments. Second, the angelic living creatures around the throne of God announce the judgments for the first four seals in Revelation 6. Third, the fourth seal judgment is described with language from Ezekiel, which clearly marks it as the wrath of God (Rev. 6:7-8; Ez. 14:13). Finally, men are already hiding from the wrath of God during the sixth seal and are not simply preparing to hide (Rev. 6:16-17). Consequently, the pre-tribulationalist agrees with the pre-wrath rapture position that these cosmic signs happen somewhere within the 70th week of Daniel. However, they disagree over the nature of the events surrounding these cosmic signs. The major remaining issue that divides them is the insistence by the pre-wrath proponents that the cosmic signs of this passage precede the rapture. The assumptions involved are that the cosmic signs of Joel 2:30-31 are identical to the ones in Revelation 6:12 and that the rapture must begin the day of the Lord. These assumptions locate the rapture somewhere within the 70th week of Daniel and will be examined below.

2 Peter 3:10-12

The cosmic disturbances described in 2 Peter 3:10-12 vary somewhat from the preceding passages we have discussed: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its work will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!" There exists finality to these words that the other passages above do not express.

Many pre-trib rapturists see this destruction of the heavens and earth as occurring at the end of the millennium.¹¹ The reason for this placement is partly the mention of the new heavens and a new earth in verse 13. This correlates well with the new heavens and new earth in Revelation 21:1-4 after the end of the millennium of Revelation 20. In this understanding, the day of the Lord as mentioned in 2 Peter 3:10-12 does not refer to the seven-year tribulation period as a whole or any specific event within the 70th week of Daniel, but to an event one thousand years after the Second Coming of Christ to earth. In this view, the terms *new heavens* and *new earth* in verse 13 are taken in a somewhat technical way since they are equated to the same terms in Revelation 21.

Other pre-trib rapturists understand the destruction on a cosmic scale described in 2 Peter 3:10-12 as occurring at the Second Coming of Christ and the start of the millennium. Those who hold this view sometimes do so because of a technical understanding of the term *day of the Lord* in verse 10. It must refer to something associated with the 70th week of Daniel and not some later event. The overall context of the entire chapter appears to be the Second Coming of Christ (see 2 Pet. 3:3-9). There is also some concern over the fact that similar language for the change of the earth is used in Isaiah 65:17-20 in a context when death is still a reality, which would not be true of the eternal state. Therefore, this must refer to the millennium. Hence, 2 Peter 3:10-12 is associated with Isaiah 65 but not Revelation 21. In this view, the terms *new heavens* and *new earth* in 2 Peter 3:13 are not taken in a technical sense but speak generally of the new world that begins at the start of the millennium. In doing this, proponents do not necessarily rule out the later changes to be made at the end of the millennium and the start of the eternal state.¹²

The pre-wrath rapturists appear to agree with the second group of pre-tribulationalists described above. Rosenthal argues strongly that the destruction of the earth and the cosmic changes of 2 Peter 3:10-12 occur before the millennium begins.¹³ Van Kampen likewise lumps 2 Peter 3 with Isaiah 65. However, he also appears to argue that the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21 occur at the start of the millennium as well.¹⁴ At any rate, the earth will be refurbished at the beginning of the millennium in his view. In light of the disagreement of pre-tribulationalists on this particular passage, it is fortunate that it does not seem to figure prominently in the

¹¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 231.

¹² For a presentation of this view, see Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 75.

¹³ Rosenthal, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 127-34.

¹⁴ See Van Kampen, *The Sign*, 407. This teaching is in spite of the many discontinuities that could be mentioned between the millennium and the eternal state of Revelation 21-22. Two prominent discontinuities are the absence of a temple in the eternal state while one clearly exists in the millennium based upon Ezekiel 40-48 and the absence of death (Rev. 21:4), which cannot be said of the Isaiah 65 passage. Thus, in my opinion, Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 cannot be talking about the same refurbishing of the earth. The only question is which of these two passages is a better fit for 2 Peter 3:10-12, if any at all. I tend to agree with the first group of pre-tribulationalists who see the passage as referring to an event at the end of the millennium. There is no problem with the change from Second Coming in 2 Peter 3:3-9 since prophecies in Scripture commonly skip time periods as they list events that will happen.

debate over the timing of the rapture, something that Rosenthal freely admits.¹⁵ The pre-wrath proponents do not try to map the cosmic changes of this passage to the rapture of the Church.

The Assumptions of the Pre-wrath View in the “Cosmic Sign” Texts

Some assumptions of the pre-wrath view have already been surfaced in the survey of the major texts in the discussion. Now, the major assumptions will be explored more completely. The first assumption involving the pre-wrath use of cosmic disturbance texts is that many of the texts are talking about the same thing.¹⁶ One problem with this approach is that it confuses similarity with identity. Usually, the pre-wrath view pulls the three passages, Joel 2:30-31, Matthew 24:29, and Revelation 6:12 together and makes them refer to the same cosmic events. While it is easier to make such a move for Joel 2:30-31 and Revelation 6:12, it is not so easy to support the inclusion of Matthew 24:29 into this mix. In that passage the cosmic disturbances are a blackened sun, a moon that will not give its light, and stars falling from the sky, etc. Of special interest is the idea that the moon will not give its light. While some may consider it splitting hairs, it seems to me that a description saying that the moon gives no light (as in Matt. 24:29) is patently different from the moon giving off a red light (as in Joel 2:30-31 and Rev. 6:12). One must at least be open to the possibility that the differences in detail can lead to the reasonable conclusion that the events described are not the same.

Pre-wrath rapturists try to gloss over this difference in detail by referring to all the passages as speaking of "diminished light." Note Van Kampen's comments: "I have carefully studied every passage in which the diminished light of the sun, moon, and stars is mentioned in conjunction with one another. In every case it refers to the same thing: the sign that God has promised to give prior to unleashing His wrath upon the unrighteous."¹⁷ But "diminished light" is not a precise term to describe all of the passages in question. Such a concept is a broad one covering a lot of territory. Its use to describe all of the passages in question runs the risk of turning similarity into identity.

This problem is accentuated by the realization that there are several cosmic-sign passages that are mostly ignored by the pre-wrath rapturists in this regard. Within the context of Joel itself, we have already seen that the diminished light of Joel 2:10 occurs within the day of the Lord itself rather than before the day of the Lord as the pre-wrath view requires. Thus, within one book, there is the possibility of multiple cosmic signs as separate events, which have the so-called diminished light and which the pre-wrath view has trouble handling. Moreover, there are three other passages later in the book of Revelation which describe cosmic signs giving diminished light:

¹⁵ Rosenthal, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 126.

¹⁶ Remember that the pre-wrath rapturists do not equate the cosmic signs of 2 Peter 3:10-12 with the other texts that to them lead to the timing of the rapture. It is only certain texts with clear similarity that they have conjoined.

¹⁷ Van Kampen, *Rapture Question*, 56.

- Rev. 8:12 (4th Trumpet) -- "And the fourth angel sounded, and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were smitten, so that a third of them might be darkened and the day might not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way."
- Rev. 9:1-2 (5th Trumpet) -- "And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven which had fallen to the earth; and the key of the bottomless pit was given to him. And he opened the bottomless pit; and smoke went up out of the pit, like the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit."
- Rev. 16:8 (4th Bowl) -- "And the fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun; and it was given to it to scorch men with fire."

Now, I am not arguing that all of these cosmic signs are the same. They definitely are not the same. But that's the point. The first two clearly have a form of diminished light while the last one is also followed by the fifth bowl judgment with its darkness in the kingdom of the beast, although the sun is not specifically mentioned. What all of these examples prove is that there are several cosmic-sign events with diminished light scattered throughout the end time scenario. It is quite arbitrary to tie all of these together (and quite wrong). The same is true even if one limits the associations to the three passages Joel 2:30-31, Matthew 24:29, and Revelation 6:12. The sheer number of cosmic-sign events associated with the tribulation also highlights the question that must be raised. What keeps God from doing the same thing more than once? To assume that God could provide diminished light on more than one occasion is no more arbitrary than associating similar passages when the exact details are slightly different.

The second major assumption involving the pre-wrath use of cosmic disturbance texts involves the use of a technical definition for the phrase *day of the Lord* with respect to end time events. Of course, this is an assumption that goes beyond the cosmic sign texts, but it affects especially passages like Joel 2:30-31. The day of the Lord in the pre-wrath scheme is strictly the time period starting with the seventh seal and ending shortly after the Second Coming of Christ. It is the period of God's wrath. The cosmic signs come before this day of the Lord according to Joel 2:30-31.¹⁸ Within this scheme there is no room for seeing multiple uses of the term *day of the Lord*, elements of blessing associated with it, or a distinction between a broad or narrow application of the terminology.¹⁹ However, such an approach does not do justice to the complexity of the issue of the use of this term and other tribulation terms in the Bible.²⁰

Even in pre-trib circles, there is no consensus on the meaning and application of the term *day of the Lord* as it refers to the end time scenario. I have found the following various identifications of the day of the Lord advocated by different pre-tribulationalists throughout history:

¹⁸ Rosenthal, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 149.

¹⁹ Ibid., 126-34.

²⁰ See Randall Price, "Old Testament Tribulation Terms" in *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 57-83.

- The seven-year tribulation period
- The last half of the tribulation, called the Great Tribulation (3 1/2 years)
- The events associated with the Second Coming of Christ to earth
- The millennium
- The cosmic events at the end of the millennium and before the eternal state
- The last half of the tribulation plus the millennium
- The entire seven-year period plus the millennium (including its ending events)

Perhaps more could be documented. When I see this kind of disagreement over such interpretations by those who have the same basic theology, I usually come to believe that the term in question is not a technical term that means the same thing everywhere it occurs in the Bible, or in this case, everywhere it occurs in end-time texts. This is what makes Renald Showers' presentation of two uses of the day-of-the-Lord terminology attractive.²¹ He argues for both a broad use of the term and a narrow use of the term with respect to the end-time outline.²² In the broad sense, the term covers the time of judgment associated with God's judgments upon Israel and upon His enemies among the Gentiles, as well as the blessings associated with Israel's restoration in the millennium (i.e., tribulation plus millennium).

In the narrow sense, it refers to the Second Coming of Christ. It may be that theoretically any event within the tribulation and millennium could be called "a day of the Lord." However, it is the Second Coming that can biblically receive that label in a narrow sense because it is the Second Coming of Jesus that will destroy the armies that gather at the end of the tribulation. Both Zechariah 14:1-5 and Joel 3:9-16 hint in this direction with the Joel 3 passage actually using the phrase *day of the Lord* (Zechariah only speaks of a day when God will defeat the enemies of Israel one last time and restore Jerusalem and the nation).

What does this mean for the debate between the pre-wrath view and pre-trib position concerning the cosmic-sign passages? If the narrow sense of the day of the Lord is meant in Joel 3, it might also be meant in Joel 2:30-31. But if this is the case, then the prophet's prediction that certain cosmic signs precede the day of the Lord only require that the signs precede the Second Coming and not the rapture of the Church. All variations of the pre-trib view would easily be able to answer this charge from the pre-wrath rapturists.

The third major assumption involving the pre-wrath use of cosmic disturbance texts is that there can be no gap between the rapture and the 70th week of Daniel. A corollary assumption is that the day of the Lord is the entire seven years in the pre-trib scheme. It is important for the pre-wrath view that both of these assumptions are held. It enables them to argue against the doctrine of imminency, which will be discussed later. On this particular point, pre-wrath rapturists generally put up a straw man and do not want to admit the variety of plausible positions within the pre-trib camp.

²¹ Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 152-71.

²² Of course, the phrase *day of the Lord* is used in contexts not involving the end time scenario. In general, the day of the Lord seems to be a time when God breaks through in history for judgment and blessing.

Rosenthal clearly argues that the rapture must happen the very day that the tribulation begins: "Deliverance of the righteous immediately precedes judgment of the wicked. To postulate a period of time between rapture (deliverance) and wrath (judgment) is to contradict the Scriptures."²³ He bases his argument mostly upon a sequence of statements in Luke 17:24-30. For example, notice the following sample verses in a section that compares the coming of Christ with other past events:

Luke 17:26-27 -- "And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it shall be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until *the day* that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all."

Luke 17:28-30 -- "Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; But the *same day* that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed" (KJV).

Rosenthal and other pre-wrath rapturists focus on the singular word *day* in the passage to make the case that the rapture happens on the very day that the judgments of the day of the Lord come. One problem with Rosenthal's approach is that the singular word *day* may fit the way he wants it for Lot leaving Sodom, but it does not fit the start of Noah's Flood. The floodwaters did not begin until Noah and his family were in the ark for a full week according to Genesis 7:10.²⁴

Another problem with this viewpoint is that it is hardly an assured result that the rapture is actually in view in this passage. Those pre-tribulationalists who believe the rapture is in the Olivet Discourse will perhaps have a more difficult time responding to this particular part of the pre-wrath argument. However, those who see the passage as dealing with the Second Coming remove the problem immediately from consideration. Pre-trib rapturists of all stripes would be glad, however, to point out that there is no Scripture, which teaches that the rapture kicks off the tribulation period. It is the treaty between Antichrist and Israel that is the key event that begins the seven years of tribulation (Dan. 9:24-27).

Why is this important for a discussion of cosmic signs? Earlier we had mentioned that in the minds of the pre-wrath adherents, the pre-trib position has a fatal flaw. If the day of the Lord is all seven years of the tribulation and if the rapture happens on the very day that the tribulation begins, then the cosmic signs must occur before the rapture. This is a deduction from Joel 2:30-31. But if the cosmic signs happen before the rapture, it cannot be an imminent event. However, the discussion above has shown that, even if we accept the assumption that the day of the Lord in Joel 2:30-31 is the full seven years of the tribulation, no biblical teaching rules out the possibility of a gap between the rapture and the 70th week of Daniel. Thus, imminency is not necessarily damaged. There is the possibility that the cosmic signs could happen between the rapture and the start of the tribulation period. Even if the cosmic signs were to happen

²³ Rosenthal, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 140.

²⁴ See Arnold Fruchtenbaum, "Review," 17.

before the rapture, imminency would not necessarily be eliminated. Remember that imminency only means that no events *must* occur before the event in question. The event could happen at any moment. I am not sure that the pre-wrath rapturists fully understand the significance of this concept. If there are two events, which are imminent (in this case the cosmic signs and the rapture), it does not matter which one comes first for imminency to be maintained as a doctrine.²⁵ However, if the narrow definition of the day of the Lord, that is, the Second Coming, is meant in the Joel 2:30-31 passage, then the entire pre-wrath argument from cosmic signs fails and this entire discussion becomes unnecessary.

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²⁵ Ibid., 23.