

The Pretribulation Rapture -- Truth or Trap?

None of us can claim to have escaped all of the many doctrinal traps which Satan lays for the unwary or uninstructed. The writer was for many years a "sincere" believer in the Trinity, but prolonged study changed everything. He was also a "sincere" Sabbath-keeper until he realized that Paul taught otherwise (Col. 2:16, 17).

Many a sincere preacher has been trapped by the remarkable notion, now being widely canvassed in America, that seven years before Jesus comes to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, He will arrive silently and secretly to snatch away the faithful to heaven. This event will leave airplanes pilotless and cause driverless cars to lurch off the highway.

Few know that leading theologians, amongst them leading exponents of pre-millennialism, have felt the need to write whole books in refutation of the fantastic theory of a second and third coming of Jesus. George Ladd's *The Blessed Hope*, Alexander Reese's *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, and Robert Gundry's *The Church and the Tribulation* are classics in the field of eschatology and should be examined by those seeking the Truth of the Bible.

There is no text in the New Testament to support the idea that Jesus will come back in two stages separated by seven years. This teaching is unknown in theology before the 1830s, where it was launched by members of a small denomination called the Brethren, in England. Note carefully, however, that many leading Brethren disagreed with the new discovery and denounced the doctrine as unbiblical.

The verdict of Campbell Morgan, a leading London evangelical preacher, is significant. He had been taught to believe in a double second coming, once for the church and then with the church, but later examination of the theory changed his mind. A letter published in *Christianity Today* (Aug. 31st, 1959) tells the story:

"During a Boston pastorate, I was privileged to attend a course of lectures given by Dr. Morgan at Gordon College. At the end of one session, I ventured to ask him, 'After your long study and extensive exposition of the Bible, Dr. Morgan, do you find any warrant for the distinction which many Bible teachers draw between the second coming of the Lord for His own (the Rapture) and the coming of the Lord with His own (the Revelation) with a time period of 3½ or 7 years between these two events?'

"'Emphatically not!' Dr. Morgan replied. 'I know that view very well, for in the earlier years of my ministry I taught it and incorporated it in one of my books entitled *God's Method with Man*. But further study so convinced me of the error of this teaching that I actually went to the expense of buying the plates of that book from my own publisher and destroying them. The idea of a

separate and secret coming of Christ to remove the church prior to his coming in power and glory is a vagary of prophetic interpretation without any biblical basis whatever."

Preachers of Campbell Morgan's reputation are not prone to making such forceful statements unless there is massive evidence for doing so. The convictions of Alexander Reese in *The Approaching Advent of Christ* are no less clear. Both men felt the need to speak out against what they saw as a trick being played with the Bible, by which the resurrection of the dead and their transformation to immortality along with the living Christians was being moved to a point of time separate and distinct from the coming of Jesus in glory. Such a radical interference with the biblical program should not be allowed to gain ground amongst Bible students without a strong protest.

The carelessness of popular handling of the Bible is shown by the fact that many will quote the verse in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 about the "thief in the night" almost as if they have never bothered to look it up in its context. Inspection of the context will reveal immediately that this text says nothing about a secret coming of Jesus seven years before His public manifestation. The verse carries in fact the very opposite sense from the one given it by the pre-trib theory: The coming like a thief is supposed, according to pretribulationism, to affect the Church only and not the unbelieving world. But let us see what 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 actually says:

"Now brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you for you know very well that *the Day of the Lord will come like a thief* in the night. For while people are saying 'Peace and safety' *destruction will come upon them* suddenly . . . and they will not escape."

The coming of Christ like a thief, Paul says, will take *the unbelieving world* by surprise. It will not be a secret event affecting the church only: "But you, brethren, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief" (1 Thess. 5:4).

It is all perfectly straightforward. The thief-like coming will affect the non-Christians adversely because they will be unprepared. It is almost beyond belief that these simple verses should have been used to invent a prior event -- a secret coming seven years earlier.

Equally remarkable is the fact that Paul had just previously described the catching up of the saints to meet Jesus in the sky, an event accompanied by a "loud command, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God" (1 Thess. 4:16). It is in connection with this event that Paul goes on to explain that the world will be overtaken as by a thief. One has only to read the biblical text as one unit from 1 Thessalonians 4:13 to 5:6 to grasp Paul's message. One coming new to the Scriptures has no difficulty understanding it. Tragically, those who should be more experienced isolate verses to support the two-stage coming.

Pre-tribs are fond of quoting 1 Thessalonians 4:14 as a text to support a prior coming for the church. The text however says that "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep." Jesus, in other words, is seen here coming with the church, having raised the dead and assembled them with the surviving Christians.

Pre-tribs have invented the theory which divides the second coming (as well as churches). They speak of the rapture as an event not to be confused with the Revelation. The latter, they say, is the public revelation of Jesus, but they expect to be raptured seven years earlier. What they are waiting for in hopeful anticipation is the rapture, not the revelation. But the New Testament Church was expecting the Revelation. Once again the theory puts its adherents on a collision course with the Bible: "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for the Revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7).

The theory proposes that Christians will find relief from the tribulations of this life when Jesus comes secretly to take away His church seven years before His arrival to punish the world. Paul taught nothing of the sort. He tells us when the church will be relieved from the tribulation:

"God will give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his holy angels, taking vengeance on those who do not know God. . ." (2 Thess. 1:7, 8).

Just as Paul described the gathering of the faithful and associated this event with the glorious public arrival of Jesus (2 Thess. 2:1-2) so Jesus also gives us a simple outline of God's program for the end of the present age:

"When you see in the holy place the abomination which causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel -- let the reader understand -- then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains...for then will be great distress unequaled from the beginning of the world until now -- and never to be equaled again...Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened...and the heavenly bodies will be shaken...At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory, and He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call [cp. the Lord will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God -- 1 Thess. 4:16] and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matt. 24:15, 16, 21, 29-31).

Perhaps the most daring of all attempts to divide the Second Coming into two events separated by seven years is the use of Matthew 24:40: "Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left."

But when is this? The previous verse (39) explains: it is when the Son of Man comes to a heedless world just as the flood overwhelmed the unbelieving civilization in Noah's day. It is when Jesus comes to punish the world that "one is taken and one left."

The separate "second coming" seven years early is revealed as an illusion. As Campbell Morgan said: "It is without any biblical basis whatever."

What else have you accepted as truth from the Bible without examining it carefully? The Scriptures warn us that belief in what is false will lead to our ruin (2 Thess. 2:11). Make Bible study your first priority. You cannot afford not to.

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