

# Part 24: Pretribulationism (Continued)

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord explores the doctrine of pretribulationism, emphasizing the imminent return of Christ and the distinct hopes of the church and Israel.*

**Scripture:** John 14:3, Acts 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 4:17-18, 1 John 3:2

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Second Coming"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the imminency of the return of Christ, emphasizing the literalness of Christ's promise to come again to receive His disciples to Himself. The hope of the church is to be taken to heaven, contrasting with the hope of Israel for Christ to reign on earth. The doctrine of imminency is crucial, as the disciples are encouraged to not be troubled, awaiting Christ's return without signs or prerequisite events.

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## Transcript

Argument from imminency of the return of Christ. One of the precious promises left as a heritage to His disciples was the announcement of Christ in the Upper Room, "I come again." The literalness of this passage, though often assailed, is obvious. Christ said: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3). Just as literally as Christ went to heaven, so He will come again to receive His disciples to Himself and to take them to the Father's house.

It is rather strange that the literal interpretation of this passage should be even questioned. It is perfectly obvious that that Christ's departure from earth to heaven represented in the expression, "if I go," was a literal departure. He went bodily from earth to heaven. By the same token, "I come again" should be taken as a literal and bodily return. While the present tense is used in the expression, "I come again," its meaning is an emphatic future. The Authorized Version accordingly translates it, "I will come again." A. T. Robertson describes it, "Futuristic present middle, definite promise of the second coming of Christ." [1] A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, V, 249. As in English, a present tense is sometimes used in the Greek of a certain future event pictured as if already coming to pass. A similar instance is the word of Christ to Mary in John 20:17, "I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God." The present is used for an emphatic future action.

The revelation given in John 14 is to the point that the departure of Christ from earth to heaven is required in order to prepare a place for them in the Father's house, used here as an expression equivalent to

heaven. The promise to come again is connected with the return of Christ to heaven with the disciples. Christ is promising to take His disciples to the Father's house when He comes again.

It should be carefully determined just what takes place at the time of the event here described: Christ returns to the earthly scene to take the disciples from earth to heaven. This is in absolute contrast to what takes place when Christ returns to establish His kingdom on earth. On that occasion, no one goes from earth to heaven. The saints in the millennial kingdom are on earth with Christ. The only interpretation that fits the statements of John 14 is to refer it to the time of the translation of the church. Then, indeed, the disciples will go from earth to heaven, to the place prepared in the Father's house.

The idea of going to the Father's house in heaven was quite foreign to the thinking of the disciples. Their hope was that Christ would immediately establish His kingdom on earth and that they would remain in the earthly sphere to reign with Him. The thought of going to heaven first was a new revelation, and one that apparently was not comprehended. In Acts 1:6 they were still asking about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. In making the pronouncement in John 14, Christ is holding before His disciples an entirely different hope than that which was promised to Israel as a nation. It is the hope of the church in contrast to the hope of the Jewish nation. The hope of the church is to be taken to heaven; the hope of Israel is Christ returning to reign over the earth.

The passage so clearly teaches that the disciples will go from earth to heaven that those who deny the pretribulation translation of the church are forced to spiritualize this passage and make the expression "I come again" a coming of Christ for each Christian at the time of his death. Marcus Dods states, "The promise is fulfilled in the death of the Christian, and it has changed the aspect of death." [2] Marcus Dods, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, I, 822. It is certainly desperate exegesis to dream up not only a spiritualization of the term, "I come again," but to postulate a personal coming of Christ at the death of each saint, a teaching which is never found explicitly in the Scriptures. Dods himself admits this is strange doctrine when he adds weakly, "The personal second coming of Christ is not a frequent theme in this Gospel." [3] *Loc. cit.*

The point is that a coming of Christ to individuals at death is not found in John's Gospel at all, nor in any other Scripture. Here again is an illustration of the fact that spiritualization of Scripture goes hand in hand with denial of the pretribulation rapture. Certainly, the hope set before the disciples cannot be reduced to the formula, "When you die you will go to heaven." This would not have been new truth. Rather, Christ is promising that when He comes He would take them to heaven where they would be forever with Him, without reference to death.

The ultimate objective of the return of Christ is that the disciples may be with Christ forever, "that where I am, there ye may be also." It is true that saints who die are immediately taken to heaven as far as their immaterial nature is concerned. In Scripture, however, the hope of being with Christ is connected with the translation of the church as if the intermediate state is not a full realization of what it means to be with Christ. Hence in 1 Thessalonians both the living and the resurrected dead shall "be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:17-18). It is true, however, that the intermediate state is described as being "with Christ," (Phil 1:23), and as being "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8). Nevertheless, the full expression of fellowship with Christ and being with Him wherever He goes is conditioned on the resurrection of the body for the dead in Christ and the translation of the living saints.

The hope of the return of Christ to take the saints to heaven is presented in John 14 as an imminent hope. There is no teaching of any intervening event. The prospect of being taken to heaven at the coming of Christ is not qualified by description of any signs or prerequisite events. Here, as in other passages dealing with the coming of Christ for the church, the hope is presented as an imminent event. On this basis, the disciples are exhorted not to be troubled. If the teaching of Christ had been to the intent that His coming for them was after the great tribulation, it is difficult to see how this message would have been a source of solace to their troubled hearts. Contrast the message of Christ to those living in the tribulation to flee their persecutors (Matt 24:15-22).

Other exhortations in relation to the return of Christ for the church also lose much of their meaning if the doctrine of imminency is destroyed. It should be obvious that only flagrant spiritualization of the tribulation passages which predict the program of events during the tribulation period can possibly save the doctrine of imminency for the posttribulationist. If there are definite events of horrible suffering and persecution yet ahead before the return of Christ to establish His kingdom, in no sense can this coming be declared imminent. When Calvin anticipated the imminent coming of Christ, it was on the ground that the tribulation was already largely past--a deduction which depended upon spiritualization of the tribulation passages. Most posttribulationists today oppose the doctrine of imminency and regard the coming of Christ as approaching, but not immediate. For the most part, Scriptural evidence for imminency today is equivalent to proof of the pretribulation viewpoint.

In addition to the exhortation, "Let not your heart be troubled," there is coupled with the doctrine of the coming of the Lord in John 14:1 the charge, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess 4:18). The doctrine of the coming of the Lord was a comfort or encouragement to the Thessalonian Christians. This comfort was not merely that their loved ones would be raised from the dead, a doctrine with which they no doubt were already familiar, but the larger truth that they would be raised in the same event as Christians would be translated. This they had been taught as an imminent hope. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, they are described as those who "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come." Their hope was the coming of Christ and they had been delivered from all wrath to come, including the wrath of the future tribulation period. At the end of chapter 2 and chapter 3, there are renewed assurances of the hope of Christ's return.

Most of the immediate significance of this hope would be lost if, as a matter of fact, the coming of Christ was impossible until they had passed through the tribulation period. In 1 Thessalonians 5:6, they are exhorted to "watch and be sober," hardly a realistic command if the coming of Christ was greatly removed from their expectation. In 1 Corinthians 1:7, Paul speaks of the Corinthians as "waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ," which is another mention of the coming of the Lord when He will be revealed in His glory to the church. In Titus 2:13, our future hope is described as "looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." While the appearing of the glory of Christ to the world and to Israel will not be fulfilled until the second coming to establish the kingdom on earth, the church will see the glory of Christ when she meets Him in the air. This is the express teaching of 1 John 3:2: "but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (AV) Again, it is difficult to make realistic a command to "look" for the glory of Christ if, as a matter of fact, the event is separated from us by great trials and persecutions which in all probability would cause our destruction.

The passage in 1 John 3:1-3 adds the exhortation: "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:3, AV). The hope of seeing Christ as He is and being like Him is a

purifying hope. Again, the hope is realistic in proportion to its imminency. Housewives engage in special efforts of preparation when guests are expected momentarily, while the tendency would be unconcern if visitors were far removed. The teaching of the coming of the Lord for the church is always presented as an imminent event which should occupy the Christian's thought and life to a large extent.

By contrast, the exhortation to those living in the tribulation is to look for signs first and then, after the signs, to look for the return of Christ to establish His kingdom. Accordingly, in the Olivet Discourse, describing the tribulation, they are exhorted to look for the sign of the abomination of desolation (Matt 24:15), and to anticipate the announcement of false Christs. Then, the exhortation to them is to "watch," that is, after the signs have all appeared (Matt 24:42; 25:13 ). Watching for the return of the Lord to establish the kingdom is related to the preceding signs, while the exhortation to the church is without this context, and the coming of the Lord is regarded as an imminent event. The only concept which does justice to this attitude of expectation of the church is that of the imminent return of Christ. For all practical purposes, abandonment of the pretribulation return of Christ is tantamount to abandonment of the hope of His imminent return. If the Scriptures present the coming of the Lord for His church as imminent, by so much they also declare it as occurring before the predicted period of tribulation.

Argument from the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in this age. In the Upper Room Discourse, our Lord predicted, among other important prophecies, the coming of the Holy Spirit. While the Holy Spirit had been immanent in the world and active in creation, providence, inspiration, and salvation, a new order of the Spirit was foretold. This truth is gathered up in the momentous declaration recorded in John 14:16-17: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth: whom the world cannot receive; for it beholdeth him not, neither knoweth him: ye know him; for he abideth with you, and shall be in you." In the distinction made in the last phrase, "abideth with you, and shall be in you," there is predicted the tremendous change to be effected at Pentecost. While formerly the Spirit was "with you," thereafter He would be "in you." The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit was to be one of the outstanding dispensational changes effected at Pentecost. While formerly the Spirit was with the saints and only in extraordinary cases indwelt them, now His indwelling all believers was to mark the wider extent of grace in the new age. The present age is the dispensation of the Spirit.

Just as Christ was omnipresent in the Old Testament, incarnate and present in the world in the Gospels, and returned to heaven in the Acts, so the Holy Spirit, after His period of ministry on the earth in the present age, will return to heaven. The chief proof text concerning the return of the Holy Spirit to heaven is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8, in connection with the revelation of the coming lawless one, described as "the man of sin," and "the son of perdition." This character is usually identified with the coming Antichrist or world-ruler of the tribulation period. The passage of Scripture dealing with this subject states that the man of sin cannot be revealed until the restrainer is "taken out of the way." But who is the restrainer?

Expositors of all classes have had a field day in attempting to identify this restrainer. Ellicott cites Schott as suggesting Paul himself.[4] Charles C. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians with a Revised Translation*, 122. As another suggestion, Ellicott refers to Wieseler who identifies it as a collection of the saints at Jerusalem.[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 122-23. Still more "plausible," according to Ellicott, is that it refers to "the successor of Roman emperors," which he traces to Wordsworth.[6] *Ibid.*, p. 123. His final suggestion, which he thinks is best, is that it is merely a "personification" of "what was previously expressed by the abstract to katecon." [7] *Loc. cit.* that restraineth." This is, however, easily explained. It may be the difference between the power of God in

general as a restraining force in contrast with the person of the restrainer. Another possible explanation is that the change in gender is a recognition of the fact that *pneuma*, the word spirit in Greek, is grammatically neuter but is sometimes regarded as a masculine in recognition of the fact that it refers to the person of the Holy Spirit. Hence in John 15:26 and 16:13-14 the masculine is deliberately used in reference to the Spirit. In Ephesians 1:13-14 the relative pronouns are used in the masculine.

The ultimate decision on the reference to the restrainer goes back to the larger question of who after all is capable of restraining sin to such an extent that the man of sin cannot be revealed until the restraint is removed. The doctrine of divine providence, the evidence of Scripture that the Spirit characteristically restrains and strives against sin (Gen 6:3), and the teaching of Scripture that the Spirit is resident in the world and indwelling the church in a special sense in this age combine to point to the Spirit of God as the only adequate answer to the problem of identification of the restrainer. The failure to identify the restrainer as the Holy Spirit is another indication of the inadequate understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in general and His work in relation to the larger providential movements of God in human history.

If the Spirit be identified as the restrainer, a chronology is set up which unmistakably places the translation of the church before the tribulation. The passage teaches that the order of events is as follows: (1) the restrainer is now engaged in restraining sin; (2) the restrainer, will be taken away at a future point of time; (3) then the man of sin can be revealed. Inasmuch as the man of sin is identified with the world ruler, the "prince that shall come" of Daniel 9:26, it should be clear to students of prophecy that the restrainer must be taken away before the beginning of the last seven years of Daniel's prophecy.

The very fact that the covenant will be made with the head of the revived Roman Empire will be an unmistakable token. A covenant involving the regathering of Israel to the land of Palestine and their protection from their foes could not be a secret covenant. Its very nature is a public matter requiring public declaration. A believer in Scripture would be able to identify the man of sin at once when this covenant is made. The chronology, therefore, requires the removal of the restrainer before the manifestation of the man of sin by the very act of forming the covenant with Israel.

It should also be evident that, if the Spirit of God characteristically indwells the church as well as the individual saint in this age, the removal of the Spirit would involve a dispensational change and the removal of the church as well. While the Spirit will work in the tribulation period, He will follow the pattern of the period before Pentecost rather than this present age of grace. The Spirit of God will return to heaven after accomplishing His earthly work much as the Lord Jesus Christ returned to heaven after completing His earthly work. In both cases, the work of the Second Person and the Third Person continues, but in a different setting and in a different way.

If, therefore, the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2 be identified as the Holy Spirit, another evidence is produced to indicate the translation of the church before the final tribulation period will begin on earth. While in the realm of debatable conclusions if left unsupported by other Scriptural evidence, it constitutes a confirmation of the teaching that the church will be translated before the tribulation.

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