

Posttribulation Denial of Imminency and Wrath

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord critiques Robert Gundry's posttribulation denial of imminency and divine wrath, emphasizing the scriptural basis for pretribulationism and the nature of the great tribulation.

Scripture: Jeremiah 30:7, Matthew 24:21, Matthew 24:44, John 14:3, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 5:9, 2 Thessalonians 2:1, Revelation 6:9, Revelation 7:14, Revelation 12:12

Topics: "Eschatology", "Tribulation Theology"

Description

John F. Walvoord addresses Robert Gundry's attempt to deny the imminency of the rapture by redefining the term 'imminent,' emphasizing that the rapture could occur at any moment without necessary intervening events. Walvoord highlights the importance of understanding the concept of imminence in relation to the hope of the rapture before the tribulation, not survival through it, and refutes Gundry's redefinition of imminence to fit his posttribulation view. Additionally, Walvoord challenges Gundry's denial of divine wrath in the great tribulation, pointing out that the tribulation is a time of both satanic and divine wrath, and that the church cannot escape severe trials during this period. Lastly, Walvoord examines Gundry's exegetical premises of dispensational posttribulationism, focusing on key passages like the Olivet Discourse and the Upper Room Discourse to address the theological issues involved.

Transcript

Denial Of Imminency

Taking advantage of the fact that the word imminent is not a scriptural word, but an induction from scriptural facts, Robert Gundry attempts to deny the imminency of the rapture by redefining the term. The word imminent, of course, is not used in Scripture, but has normally been considered to represent the view that the rapture could occur at any time. Even some posttribulationists such as J. Barton Payne, although posttribulationist in their interpretation, agree that the Lord could come at any moment and that there are no necessary intervening events. This is the proper meaning of the concept of imminence.

Robert Gundry, however, in his support of posttribulationism, attempts to solve the problem by redefining the English word:

We should first of all note a lack of identity between belief in imminence on the one hand and pretribulationism on the other. By common consent imminence means that so far as we know no predicted event will necessarily precede the coming of Christ. The concept incorporates three essential elements: suddenness, unexpectedness or incalculability, and a possibility of occurrence at any moment. But these elements would require only that Christ might come before the tribulation, not that He must. Imminence would only raise the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism. It is singularly strange that the most popularly cherished argument for pretribulationism should suffer such an obvious and critical limitation.[1] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), p. 29. events,"[3] Ibid. it is a dogmatic statement not supported by facts. Gundry in effect admits that the concept of imminency tends to contradict posttribulationism. The doctrine of imminence is incompatible with the posttribulationist view, unless one holds, like Payne, that the tribulation should be spiritualized and considered as already fulfilled, rather than a future period.

The real issue, as pretribulationists state it, is that the hope offered them in the New Testament is the hope of the rapture before the tribulation, not the hope of survival through the tribulation. Accordingly, when the rapture is presented without any detailed events preceding it, the fulfillment of the hope of the rapture is properly regarded as an imminent event which necessarily must occur before the detailed prophecies that lead up to Christ's return to establish His kingdom. Gundry, in his support of posttribulationism, is attempting to solve the problem by redefinition of the word imminent in order to make it apply to his concept of the second coming, which in no sense is imminent but is preceded by very dramatic and specific world events.

In attempting to redefine imminence as simple expectation without regard to time, Gundry offers a study of various words used for expectation in the Bible. Not only is his study slanted in an attempt to support his doctrine of imminence, but also the argument as presented is quite irrelevant, even though to the unwary reader it may seem impressive. The doctrine of pretribulationism and its concept of imminence as applying to the rapture as occurring any day is not dependent on definition of words that are used, but on the context in which the words are used. Gundry confuses the whole issue and begs the question by putting together passages that are used for both the rapture and the second coming simply because the same word is used for both. This does not prove that they refer to the same event or to expectancy of the same event. Even Gundry admits at the conclusion of his word study, "Since the words for expectancy do not resolve the question of imminence one way or the other, their contexts become decisive." [4] Ibid., p. 33. One wonders why he goes to such great lengths to a word study when, as a matter of fact, it does not prove anything as he himself states.

What is true of Gundry's treatment of the word study also applies to his discussion of the contexts. Here Gundry begs the question by assuming that if exhortations are given to watch in relation to both the rapture and the coming of Christ after the tribulation, this proves that the expectancy is the same. Obviously, the question in each case is the question as to whom the exhortation is given. While the church may be watching for the rapture, those in the great tribulation may be watching for the second coming. Gundry's argument seems very impressive, but it actually does not prove what he is attempting to prove.

It is true that in the first century the concept of imminency was qualified by certain predictions relating to individuals such as Peter and Paul. Peter was told that he would die before the rapture (John 21:18-19). Paul was informed that he had a great ministry ahead in Corinth (Acts 18:9-11), which actually continued for eighteen months. For a brief time Paul could conclude that the rapture would not occur. Later in Paul's life he was told he would die a martyr's death, but this occurred shortly before the event (2 Tim 4:6). As far

as the church at large was concerned, the information given to Paul and Peter did not deter their belief in imminency because on a given day few would know whether Paul or Peter were still alive, and most of them were not informed about the prediction of their death. No such problem exists today in the doctrine of imminency. There is no authoritative revelation of intervening events. To use these temporary problems in the first century to deny imminency today is without reasonable justification.

Much of Gundry's argument depends on assumptions which he does not prove, such as the premise that the Olivet Discourse is addressed to the church. This is sufficiently important to merit a special treatment later. In a word, however, there is an obvious difference in exhortations in the Olivet Discourse and those that are addressed to the church in the present age. This difference is that the Olivet Discourse is an exhortation to watch after the signs have been fulfilled, including the beginning of the great tribulation, whereas in the rapture passages believers in the present age are encouraged to look for the coming of the Lord without respect to any signs, and are not given any signs as far as the rapture itself is concerned. The situation is dramatically different. When Gundry gets through, while it is impressive to those who do not know the intricacies of this argument, he actually offers no proof in support of his major premise that the Bible puts end-time events before the rapture.

In the history of doctrinal statements as well as theological studies, the concept of imminency has been variously handled. Some posttribulationists actually hold to a literal imminency, that is, that Christ's second coming could occur at any time, as did Luther and Calvin in their latter years. This is accomplished by spiritualizing events leading up to the second coming, as Payne does.[5] J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962).

Gundry, however, has an entirely different point of view; he takes the events of the great tribulation literally and necessarily must interpose these before his posttribulation rapture. Accordingly, while Payne can properly refer to his view as an imminent return of Christ, Gundry cannot do so if the word is defined as it has been traditionally understood. Accordingly, Gundry's statement, "A tribulation interval no more destroys expectancy than the necessary delays during the Apostolic Age,"[6] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 43. is pure dogmatism which he does not even attempt to support by argument.

Gundry's presentation makes clear that if one believes in posttribulationism as he presents it, the hope of the Lord's return before the great tribulation is a vain illusion, and what we are looking for is not the Lord's coming but the great tribulation. Because this is hardly a "blessed hope," pretribulationists continue to insist that their point of view is quite different from the posttribulation view in its expectation. If there are well-defined events that must occur before the rapture of the church, as Gundry holds, then the concept of imminency can no longer be properly applied to the rapture.

Denial Of Divine Wrath In The Great Tribulation

In his chapter on "Wrath and Rapture" Gundry begins by accusing pretribulationists of wrongly appealing to fear of the coming great tribulation. He states, "Sometimes the argument is so stated as to be marred by an appeal of fear." [7] *Ibid.*, p. 44. In a similar way Oswald T. Allis in his refutation of pretribulationism puts all his arguments under one subpoint, "Pretribulationism Appeals to Unworthy Motives" (*italics in original*), and debates the entire pretribulation view on this basis.[8] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), p. 207.

Is it an unworthy motive to desire to escape the great tribulation? Actually, it is no more unworthy than the desire to escape hell. The point in either case is not our desire or wishes but what the Scriptures promise.

Pretribulationists hope to escape the great tribulation because it is expressly a time of divine judgment on a world which has rejected Christ. But the Scriptures also reveal the great tribulation as a time of satanic wrath against Israel and believers in Christ who are in the great tribulation. The great tribulation is both a time of divine wrath and of satanic wrath. Pretribulationists believe that the rapture passages promise a deliverance which occurs before this final period of trial overtakes a wicked world.

Gundry's approach to the subject of wrath and the rapture is an attempt to make the great tribulation a time of satanic wrath, but not a time of divine wrath, with a view to relieving the severity of the period in relation to believers. Here his argument is quite confused. His first heading is "The Exemption of All Saints from Divine Wrath." [9] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 44. This common argument by posttribulationists is built on the false assumption that if the tribulation is not a time of divine wrath, then Christians will escape the severity of the period. Gundry is wrong on both counts. Not only do saints suffer severely in the great tribulation, but it is also a time of divine wrath. Gundry's whole approach does not do justice to the facts and is faulty in its logic.

Even if the great tribulation were purely a time of satanic wrath, why would this assure that Christians would escape? Job certainly did not escape satanic wrath once God permitted Satan to afflict him. It should be clear to any reader that saints in the great tribulation suffer severely as the objects of satanic wrath, and that the world as a whole suffers severely because it is the object of divine wrath.

Most conservative expositors agree that the great tribulation in Scripture is definitely revealed to be a time of satanic wrath. This is expressly stated in Revelation 12:12, where Satan's wrath is seen in the persecution of saints--clear evidence that saints in the tribulation do not escape. Many martyrs are seen in Revelation 6:9-11, and most conservative interpreters regard Revelation 7:9-17 as also referring to those who die as martyrs.

It is typical of posttribulationism that it attempts to water down and weaken in every possible way the extent of the sufferings of the great tribulation as they relate to the saints. Gundry arbitrarily moves Revelation 7:9-17 out of the tribulation and into the eternal state without any contextual support whatever. This point of view is somewhat necessary to posttribulationists because they contend that the church goes through the tribulation, and if the great majority is martyred they will, of course, not go through the tribulation.

Accordingly, even a relatively literal posttribulationist like Gundry has to avoid the full force of prophecy as it relates to the trials of the saints in the great tribulation. Whatever trials do eventuate, however, both posttribulationists and pretribulationists agree, result from satanic wrath rather than from divine wrath. Gundry, however, attempts to support the idea that all the trials of the tribulation are simply satanic in their origin and not a matter of divine wrath on a wicked world.

Gundry's thinking here, however, is cloudy, because if the world is the object of satanic wrath, it is clear that if the church goes through it, it will experience satanic wrath. Gundry's position does not assure the church of any relief from martyrdom if they have to go through the tribulation.

The fact that the great tribulation is a time of divine wrath is also expressly stated in Scripture, and Gundry is wrong when he denies it. It is true that the sixth seal introduces, according to Revelation 6:17, "the great day of his wrath," but it is also clear that the preceding seals record devastating divine judgments. War, famine, death, and martyrdom occur in the first five seals of Revelation 6. Many expositors also hold that the sixth and seventh seals are part of the great tribulation and that the seventh seal includes the trumpet

judgments and the vial judgments. Gundry claims that the sixth seal occurs at the end of the tribulation, and the seventh seal deals with the second coming itself. Accordingly, he concludes. "God's wrath will not stretch throughout the whole tribulation." [10] Ibid., p. 77. This rather dogmatic statement does not take into account what has already been described in the preceding seal judgments. While the climax of the wrath of God may very well be introduced by the sixth seal, it is by no means the beginning of the wrath of God on the world.

The facts are that Christ Himself declared the entire great tribulation a time of unprecedented trouble. In Matthew 24:15-22 the great tribulation begins with the breaking of the Jewish covenant. This occurs at the beginning of the last three and one-half years preceding the second coming of Christ and is described as "the time of Jacob's trouble" in Jeremiah 30:7. The same period is described in Revelation 13:5 as the last forty-two months preceding the second coming of Christ.

Many conservative expositors who take this literally recognize that it is a period of satanic wrath beginning with Satan being cast out of heaven, according to Revelation 12:9. Chronologically, this begins the last three and one-half years before the second advent. It is clear, however, from the nature of the judgments poured out that these last three and one-half years are also a time of divine wrath on the earth. This is made evident by the disturbances in heaven, great earthquakes, and the catastrophes described under the trumpet judgments and the vial judgments. All of this cannot be compacted to be fulfilled on a given day such as Armageddon, but rather it describes the entire process of the forty-two months leading up to Armageddon. Armageddon is the climax immediately preceding the second coming of Christ.

The entire period of three and one-half years is so awful that Christ Himself predicted that if it were not terminated by His second coming, the whole human race would be destroyed (Matt 24:22). Gundry's attempt to soften the force of these divine judgments prior to Armageddon in order to relieve it of the character of being a period of divine wrath is motivated by his interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 5 in which the church is promised deliverance from the time of wrath, a view which will be discussed in full later. His point of view, however, is simply not supported by the facts given in the Book of Revelation, which plainly indicate that the wrath of God is poured out in the world throughout the entire period of the great tribulation, even though it is also clear that it becomes increasingly severe as it approaches the second advent.

The fact that these end-time judgments extend over a period of time is brought out by the fact that Christ Himself says the great tribulation will begin with the abomination of desolation, which occurs three and one-half years before His second coming (Matt 24:15). It is also supported by Revelation 9:15, in which the duration of the fifth trumpet alone is said to be five months. The catastrophes pictured in the seals, trumpets, and vials extend over the entire three-and-one-half-year period leading up to the second coming. Some expositors even extend it over the entire seven-year period preceding the second advent.

Gundry is forced to an extreme and untenable position by trying to bring the church through the great tribulation without experiencing great tribulation. His position is further complicated by the fact that satanic wrath is expressly against believers and the people of Israel, while divine wrath is against the world as a whole. In some sense, Gundry is arguing against himself, because if it is a period of satanic wrath and the church is its object, then one cannot conclude that the church is delivered from tribulation while passing through it. going triumphantly through the great tribulation relatively untouched is not supported in the prophecies of the Book of Revelation, as indicated by the martyrs in Revelation 6 and 7 .

The content of Revelation 7:9-17, which Gundry attempts to place after the second advent without any supporting evidence at all, is another plain indication of the extent of the martyrdom of the saints in the tribulation. These passages clearly give a picture of heaven and not of the millennial earth, as indicated in Revelation 7:11 compared with Revelation 5:8. These tribulation saints are not in their natural bodies as those who have survived the tribulation; instead, they are presented as those who have died in the tribulation and who "came out of great tribulation." To project this scene into the period after the second coming to either the millennium or the eternal state has no exegetical support in the context.

Even though the Book of Revelation is not written in strict chronological order, Revelation 7:9-17 does have some relevance to the context. In chapter 7 the contrast is between the 144,000 of Israel, who are sealed and protected through the great tribulation, and the multitude of the saved, which no man can number, who do not survive the tribulation and who are not sealed. It would seem that the burden of proof is on Gundry to prove that this is not a tribulation situation as the implication is that it belongs to this period even though chapter 7 is a parenthesis. Most significant is the fact that the term church is not used at all, and the tribulation saints are described simply as those who have been saved by the blood of the Lamb and who have come out of great trials.

Gundry's conclusion that the great tribulation is not a time of divine wrath rests only on his dogmatic statements, not on evidence which he produces. If the church must go through this period, probably the majority would not be delivered, but martyred. His attempt to support the idea that this is a period of satanic persecution but not of divine judgment, is shattered by the evidence of what occurs in the seals, trumpets, and vials. Inasmuch as his thesis, that the great tribulation is only a time of satanic wrath, is unsupported, to the same extent his whole argument is unsupported.

One of the major problems with posttribulationism is that adherents of that view must get the church through the tribulation relatively unscathed, but the only way they can do this is either to deny or to ignore the plain teachings of the Book of Revelation on this subject. The martyrs of Revelation 6 and 7 are eloquent in their testimony. It is especially significant that there is no evidence that these martyrs are related to the church as such. The only way Gundry can support his position on this point is to be selective in his material and to ignore the major prophecies relating to the great tribulation. If his argument here is faulty and unsupported, his conclusions are also unsupported.

Exegetical Premises Of Dispensational Posttribulationism

Most of Gundry's important arguments for posttribulationism are based on exegesis of key passages, such as the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25 ; the Upper Room Discourse in John 13-17 (and particularly John 14:1-3); 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11 ; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; and the argument of the entire Book of Revelation. While Gundry weaves the facts of these passages into his various arguments throughout his book, probably the most direct way of dealing with the theological issues involved is to turn to these passages and consider them exegetically. Central to his argument is that the Olivet Discourse concerns the church primarily, not Israel, and this concept will be considered next.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/posttribulation-denial-of-imminency-and-wrath/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net