

Refuting the Post-Tribulation 2nd Thessalonians 1

Some Post-Tribulationists (not all) find an important argument for their position in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10:

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed.

Post-Tribulationists understand the passage to say that "Paul places the release of Christians from persecution at the Post-Tribulational return of Christ to judge unbelievers, whereas according to Pre-Tribulationism this release will occur seven years earlier" (Robert M Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], pg. 113). In other words, since release comes at the Second Coming and release is connected with the Rapture, the rapture must be at the same time as the second coming.

Three Questions to be Asked

Let us examine the Post-Tribulationist's answers to three questions about this passage. What is the subject of Paul's discussion in these verses? The Post-Tribulational answer is: release for Christians from persecution.

When will this release occur? At the Post-Tribulational return of Christ. What group of people will experience this release? Obviously, just those Christians who survive the Tribulation and are alive at the Post-Tribulational Rapture.

First of all, observe the Post-Tribulational answer to question 3. The passage only addresses the release of Christians living at the conclusion of the Tribulation. If that is true, why does Paul seemingly ignore the Thessalonians, who had suffered persecution and who had already died? Death was the means of release for them. Indeed, why does he not mention that avenue of release, which some of those to whom he was writing might yet experience? To be sure, the Rapture of the living will bring release from persecution, but only a relatively small percentage of believers will ever experience that means of release, since most will have died prior to the Rapture. If release is Paul's chief concern here, and if that release will come at the Post-Tribulational Rapture, then Paul is offering that hope of release to a very small group of believers.

Viewing this passage further from a Post-Tribulational slant, one must conclude that the release for Christians is connected with flaming judgment on unbelievers. It is not described in terms of meeting the Lord and forever being with Him, nor in terms of a resurrection for those who have died, as other Rapture passages describe it. Obviously if one's enemies are punished, then there will be release from their persecution. But the point is this: where is the Rapture described in this passage at all? The judgmental aspect of the second coming is given the prominence, and although, according to Post-Tribulationism, the Rapture is the initial part of the Second Coming, that initial part is entirely absent from this discussion.

If Paul so clearly believed in a Post-Tribulational Rapture, then why did he not at least mention that Rapture in passing, since it is the moment of Rapture that brings release, not the following judgment on the enemies of God. Christians who live through the Tribulation (if Post-Tribulationism be correct) will be released from persecution the instant they are raptured, whether or not Christ judges their enemies at that same time.

Notice some of the words in this passage that emphasize God's judging of His enemies: "**righteous judgment**" (vs. 5), "**just**" (vs. 6), "**repay**" (vs. 6), "**affliction**" (vs. 6), "**flaming fire**" (vs. 7), and "**retribution**" (vs. 8). This vocabulary is strangely absent from the Rapture passages of John 14:1-3, 1st Corinthians 15:51-58, and 1st Thessalonians 4:13-18. Actually the Rapture can be found in this passage only if one's eschatological scheme superimposes it there. Exegesis does not produce the Rapture from this passage.

Why is the Post-Tribulationist's use of this passage so jumbled? Simply because he has answered the first question wrongly. That question was, What is the subject of Paul's discussion here? And the answer is not, as Post-Tribulationists say, the release of Christians from persecution.

The subject of the passage is not release but vindication. Paul does not focus on when or how the persecuted Thessalonians will be relieved of persecution; rather, he assures them that God will judge His enemies and thereby vindicate those who have suffered.

One of the most spectacular displays of God's judging will occur at the Second Coming of Christ when the armies of the world arrayed at Armageddon are defeated by Him and when all living people will have to appear before Him -(Ezekiel 20:33-44; Matthew 25:31-46). It is on those people living at that time that vengeance will fall. Dead rejecters of Christ will not be judged until after the Millennium at the great white throne. Looking back, we know for a fact that none of the unsaved who actually persecuted the Thessalonians will be judged at the Second Coming but at the great white throne.

Since vindication is the subject, that explains why Paul did not mention the Rapture in this passage, for the Rapture is not a time of vindication of God's righteousness by judging the world. It is a time of release, of hope, of meeting the Lord. Some Thessalonians had found release through death even before Paul wrote. Eventually all of them found it that way. Since the first century many persecuted Christians have found the same release through death. Some

will find it at the Pre-Tribulational rapture. But only those believers living at the end of the Tribulation will find it then, not because a Rapture takes place then, but because they successfully pass the judgments and see their enemies condemned.

But if vindication at the Second Coming falls on a relatively small group of Christ's enemies (think, by comparison, of the many who have opposed Him through the centuries), why should this particular time of vindication be given such prominence? Simply, because the end of the Tribulation brings to a climax the long rebellion of mankind; a rebellion that will be halted by the personal intervention of the Lord. Not all of the Lord's enemies will be judged then but those who will be the epitome of rebellion. Awful as the persecution of the Thessalonians may have been, horrible as subsequent persecutions of believers have been and are, those in the past or present do not compare with that which will transpire during the Tribulation period.

Think of an analogy. Antichrists were present in the first century -(1st John 2:18). Antichrists have come and gone throughout the centuries. But one great Antichrist is yet to appear on the scene of history, and he will be the epitome of opposition to God. Other antichrists are now in hades awaiting the judgment at the end of the Millennium that will cast them into the lake of fire forever. But the coming great Antichrist will be judged at the Second Coming, and when he is, God will be vindicated over all antichrists, though their particular judgment will occur much later.

All persecutors of believers will be judged later, as well. The judgment of those living at the Second Coming will vindicate God's righteousness with respect to them and to all persecutors who died before them.

If death or the Rapture brings release from personal persecution, why should believers be concerned with this future vindication? Because the case against persecutors cannot be closed until Christ is vindicated and righteousness prevails. Persecution may cease when death occurs, but the case against the persecutors is not closed until they are judged. And believers are concerned not only about relief but about vindication.

Notice a biblical example of that principle. Hear the Tribulation martyrs in heaven, before the end of the Tribulation, crying out to God for vindication -(Revelation 6:9-11). When will You settle the score against those who killed us? they ask. Of course, they have already obtained release through physical death and are in heaven; yet they are concerned about vindication. And the Lord replies that they will have to wait a little longer for that vindication until others are also martyred on earth.

In 1st Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9 Paul extended the hope and assurance of escape from wrath by means of a Pre-Tribulational Rapture. In 2nd Thessalonians 1 he assured his readers that the enemies of the Lord will be judged.

In summary, 2nd Thessalonians 1 does not teach that release from persecution will necessarily occur at the same time as the Second Coming. It does not picture the Rapture at all but focuses on the judgment on the wicked and the vindication of Christ that will occur at the Second Coming. That vindication gives assurance to saints of all ages that righteousness will prevail.

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