

# The Day of the Lord

Pre- and Post-Tribulationists alike agree that the question of the Day of the Lord bears directly on the time of the Rapture. More specifically, the question is. When does the Day of the Lord begin? If it begins at the Second Coming of Christ, then the Rapture (which must precede the Day of the Lord) could be (but does not have to be) Post-Tribulationist. If the Day of the Lord begins at the middle of the Tribulation, then the Rapture would be at that point, as Mid-Tribulationism teaches. But if it begins at the beginning of the Tribulation, then the Rapture must be before the Tribulation begins.

As used in the Bible, the broad concept of the Day of the Lord always involves God's special intervention in the affairs of human history. The concept includes three facets: (1) a historical facet, which concerns God's intervention in the affairs of Israel -(Joel 1:15; Zephaniah 1:14-18) and in the affairs of heathen nations -(Isaiah 13:6; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 30:3); (2) an illustrative facet, in which a historical incident of God's intervention also illustrates a future intervention -(Isaiah 13:6-13; Joel 2:1-11); and (3) an eschatological facet, that is, God's intervention in human history in the future -(Isaiah 2:12-19; 4:1; 19:23-25; Jeremiah 30:7-9). Only this third, eschatological facet pertains to our discussion of the time of the Rapture.

All Pre-Millennialists agree that the Day of the Lord includes the events of the Second Coming and the literal thousand-year Millennium to follow. Pre-Millennialists do not debate when the Day of the Lord will end, only when it will begin.

The Post-Tribulationist scheme is this: the Day of the Lord will not begin until the judgments of Armageddon at the conclusion of the Tribulation are poured out. The Rapture, which precedes the Day of the Lord, will occur at the end of the Tribulation, just before Armageddon, rescuing the church from the wrath of God, which will come at Armageddon.

Two questions arise. (1) How can the Rapture precede Armageddon and yet be a single event with the Second Coming, which puts a stop to Armageddon? Armageddon is not a single, confined battle, but a war -(Revelation 16:14). For the church to miss Armageddon, the Rapture cannot be a single, continuous event with the Second Coming. It would have to be separated by at least a little time. And if it is separated by any time at all, then it is not Post-Tribulationist. (2) If the Day of the Lord will commence with the judgments at the end of the Tribulation, then how can it begin with a time of peace and safety -(1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:2-3)? Even a superficial knowledge of the Tribulation does not give the impression that there will be any time of peace and safety except at the very beginning; certainly not at the end.

To try to alleviate the tensions raised by these two questions, Post-Tribulationists (1) propose a certain chronology of the judgments described in the Revelation, and (2) suggest a most unusual interpretation of 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:2-3 ("peace and safety").

## The Judgments of Revelation

Three series of judgments described in the Revelation will take place during the Tribulation years. They are revealed under seven seals (chapter 6), seven trumpets (chapters 8-9), and seven bowls (chapter 16). Commentators differ on their understanding of the relation of these judgments to each other. Some believe that they are consecutive, that is, the trumpets follow the seals, and the bowls follow the trumpets. In other words, the first seal judgment will take place shortly after the beginning of the Tribulation, and the last bowl will occur at the end. However, that does not mean that all the judgments in between are evenly spaced throughout the seven years. The seven bowls, for example, will apparently follow each other in quick succession during the last year or months of the Tribulation period. But overall, the judgments are consecutive.

Others believe that the judgments will be somewhat concurrent; that is, the seventh seal describes the end of the Tribulation. So does the seventh trumpet, and the seven bowls are all at the end.

Pre-Tribulationists will be found holding to either chronology, but Post-Tribulationism is better served by holding to the second. The reason is this: the church, according to Post-Tribulationism, will escape the wrath of God; the wrath of God will come only at the very end of the Tribulation; the sixth seal and the sixth and seventh bowls predict wrath, so they must come at the very end. *"Thus, God's wrath will not stretch throughout the whole tribulation. Those passages in Revelation which speak of divine wrath deal, rather, with the close of the tribulation"* (Robert H. Gundry, *'The Church and the Tribulation'* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], pg. 77).

Post-Tribulationists not only limit the wrath of God to the very end of the Tribulation, but they also teach that it will be poured out only on the unregenerate.

Let us examine some of the necessary assumptions for such a view.

To say that God's wrath is directed only against the unregenerated is one thing; but also to imply that the regenerated are protected from any of its effects is to add something that may not be true. For example, there is not only this future outpouring of God's wrath, but there is also a present wrath -(Romans 1:18). It is directed against unbelievers and results in all kinds of perverse and corrupt activities, including false philosophies, homosexuality, murder, and so on. The wrath of God is on unbelievers, but does it follow that believers are now protected from the effects of these activities? Of course not. The unbeliever who commits murder may murder a believer, for example.

Likewise, in connection with the future wrath of God, it does not follow that when God pours out the judgments of His wrath, believers will escape the effects of those judgments, even though they will be directed against unbelievers. Although Post-Tribulationism tries to throw a mantle of safety over believers to protect them from the effects of the coming wrath of God, that does not accord with what is true of the wrath of God and its effects today.

But believers will be rescued, says the Post-Tribulationist, because they will be raptured before that wrath is poured out on unbelievers. "Not until the final crisis at Armageddon, when Jesus descends [and the Church is caught up, if Post-Tribulationism be correct], will God pour out His wrath upon the unregenerated" (Gundry, pg. 48). However, Armageddon is not a single battle but the climax of a war. So to miss the wrath of God, believers would have to be raptured some time before the actual descent of Christ to end the campaign of Armageddon.

Notice, too, that an aorist tense is used in Revelation 6:17 to announce that the wrath "has come." That seems to indicate that the wrath already has been poured out, that it did not just begin with the sixth seal. Therefore the verse seems to say that the wrath will start some time before the end of the Tribulation. To counter the force of this statement, Post-Tribulationists have to understand the aorist as meaning that the wrath is on the verge of breaking forth that is, it will not have started before the very end (Gundry, pg. 76). Now this is a possible use of the aorist, but highly unlikely in this verse. As Alford indicates, the "virtually perfect sense of the aor. *elthen* here can hardly be questioned" (Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, 4 vols.[London: Rivingtons, 1875], 4:622). He explains this sense of the aorist as "alluding to the result of the whole series of events past, and not to be expressed in English except by a perfect" (4:665). Thus, supported by reputable scholarship, the meaning of this verse is *not* that the wrath of God is on the verge of being poured out (as Post-Tribulationism *must* understand it or spoil the system), but that the wrath has already been poured out with continuing results.

The question of whether the three series of judgments in Revelation are successive or recapitulating (or a combination) may never be decided with finality, but if one sees much succession, then the Post-Tribulational picture is blurred by that much. The more the judgments can be clustered at the very end, the clearer the Post-Tribulational picture.

At best, however, the picture is confused. The Day of the Lord, according to Post-Tribulationism, includes the final judgment of Armageddon (Gundry, pg. 92), and yet, "clearly, the day of the Lord will not begin with the tribulation or any part of it" (Gundry, pg. 95). At the same time, "those passages in Revelation which speak of divine wrath deal ... with the close of the tribulation" (Gundry, pg. 77).

To sum up the Post-Tribulationist's answer to the first question: the Rapture can precede Armageddon, when the wrath of God will be poured out and when the Day of the Lord will begin, *if* many of the judgments of the Revelation are bunched together at the end, as simultaneous as possible, *and if* the aorist in Revelation 6:17 has a special meaning, *and if* the effects of the outpouring of God's wrath do not have any fallout on believers, *and if* the final conflict is a single battle, not a war with multiple battles.

### **When is the Peace and Safety?**

A second question Post-Tribulationists must answer satisfactorily is, How can the Day of the Lord begin with a time of peace and safety if it begins with the wrath of God poured out at Armageddon?

Paul wrote, ***"For yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape"*** -(1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:2-3). The coming, or beginning, of the Day of the Lord will be during a time of peace. It may be a secure or insecure peace, but not a time of war and conflict. The description scarcely seems to fit the end of the Tribulation when "all nations" will converge on Palestine - (Zechariah 12:3; 14:2; Revelation 16:14). How then can the Post-Tribulational scheme be correct?

The chronology in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:2-3 is clear: peace at the beginning of the Day of the Lord, followed by sudden destruction. But Post-Tribulationism has already declared that the Day of the Lord will not begin with the Tribulation or any part of it. Does that mean that it will begin with the establishment of Christ's Kingdom? That period will certainly be one of peace and safety, but if the chronology is followed, then the Millennium will have to experience some catastrophic destruction shortly after it begins!

Actually we are to understand that the Day of the Lord will begin just before Armageddon, according to Post-Tribulationism, when the wrath of God will be poured out. How will it be preceded by a time of peace? Two answers have been suggested.

1. "Perhaps just before Armageddon there will be a lull, a seeming end of world upheavals, which will excite men's hopes for the peace which has so long eluded them ..." (Gundry, pg. 92). Of course such a "lull" is nowhere indicated or even hinted at in the text. Even if one could imagine a lull in the military conflicts of the concluding months of the Tribulation, how could it be said that people will experience safety when so many physical upheavals will be literally reshaping the earth?

Just consider the last judgments of each of the series in Revelation and you have killing of martyrs (6:9), a meteor shower (6:13), earthquakes (6:14), torment like the sting of a scorpion (9:10), one-third of the population killed (9:18), people gnawing their tongues because of pain (16:10), armies converging on Armageddon (16:14), and widespread destruction (16:20-21). And remember that according to Post-Tribulationism some if not all of these judgments will occur toward the end of the Tribulation. And yet somewhere during this time when these events will be taking place, there will be lull that will enable people to feel that they are in a time of peace and safety.

2. An alternate suggestion offers a novel interpretation of 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:2. "However, Paul did not write, 'When there shall *be* peace and safety,' but rather, 'While they are *saying...*' The very form of the statement suggests that peace and safety will not be the actual condition of

the world preceding the Day of the Lord, but the expressed *wish* and/or *expectation* of men, which God will answer with a blow of judgment" (Gundry, pg. 92).

This is novel since the passage contrasts peace and safety with destruction. Now if peace and safety means a wish in the midst of a time of war and danger, then any contrast with destruction that will follow disappears.

### **A Logjam for Post-Tribulationism**

Post-Tribulationism has a veritable logjam at the second coming of Christ. A number of the judgments have to occur then, the Rapture will occur then as a part of the Second Coming, the wrath of God must be held off until then, there has to be a time of peace and safety, and the Day of the Lord will begin with those judgments and yet not include any part of the Tribulation!

Is there any way to unravel this confusion? Certainly, and it is simply by having time between the rapture and the second coming. How much time? More time than the Post-Tribulationists allow for, which is none. More time than the Mid-Tribulationist allows, unless the first half of the Tribulation contains no judgments. As much time as Pre-Tribulationism has.

We know when peace will cease. Peace will be taken from the earth when the second seal judgment occurs (Revelation 6:4). No Post-Tribulationist scheme that I know places this at the end of the Tribulation. This must occur near the beginning of that awful period. And likewise, the Day of the Lord must begin by that time as well.

The Lord taught this same sequence of events in the Olivet Discourse. He predicted that wars, famines, and earthquakes will occur before He told about Antichrist's setting himself up in the Temple, demanding to be worshiped. That event will occur at the midpoint of the Tribulation, but wars will characterize the entire time. Again we arrive at the same conclusion: the Day of the Lord will begin at the beginning of the Tribulation just after a time of peace and safety.

Paul set down the same chronology in 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2:1-3. He assured the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord was not yet upon them because two things would have to occur first: apostasy and the revelation of the man of sin. Of course, both those events will take place before the Day of the Lord begins according to the Post-Tribulationist teaching that the Day of the Lord does not begin until the end of the Tribulation. But the two events also fit the Pre-Tribulationist understanding of the future. The apostasy is age-long and will climax even before the church is removed from the world. The man of sin will be revealed when he signs the treaty with Israel (Daniel 9:27). The signing of that treaty signals the beginning of the Day of the Lord, and that is at the beginning of the seventieth week, at the beginning of the Tribulation. The treaty will add to the general feeling that peace has been achieved. But the peace will be short-lived.

Furthermore, Paul taught that the man of sin cannot be revealed until a certain restraint is removed. Without getting involved in the discussion of the identity of the restrainer, let us simply ask two questions of the Post-Tribulationist's understanding of this passage.

First, if the church is to go through the Tribulation, and if during that time multitudes are converted, added to the church, and protected until the rapture, will not the church be a mightier force in this world than ever before? Wouldn't such a church, empowered, and preserved during the Tribulation, be such a restraint on the man of sin so that he could hardly be as unrestrained as the Scriptures picture him to be?

Second, if the Thessalonians were agitated because they thought the Day of the Lord had come and they were already in it, then how could Paul comfort them by assuring them that they were not in it yet but would be as soon as the man of sin came on the scene? What comfort is there in assuring people that they will live through the career of the man of sin before they will be raptured?

So we arrive at the same conclusion: the Day of the Lord will begin as soon as the man of sin is revealed, and that will happen at the beginning of the Tribulation, not at the end.

### **The Relation between 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5**

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul tried to allay the fear of some at Thessalonica that deceased believers might not share in the coming kingdom. He assured them that the dead will be raised and the living changed at the catching away of the church. That was something about which they were uninformed (vs. 13), even though he had taught them about future things during his short ministry among them (2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2:5).

In 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:1-11 Paul wrote concerning the beginning of the Day of the Lord. In a time of peace and safety it will come unexpectedly and terrifyingly, with pain (vs. 3) and wrath (vs. 9). In the meantime, believers are to live with alertness and sobriety. The exhortations of verses 6, 8, 9, and 10 are not to watch for signs during the Tribulation in preparation for the Day of the Lord at the end, but to godly living presently in view of the coming Tribulation, which believers will escape -(cf. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:58). Of this teaching Paul said they were fully aware (vs. 1). How could that be? Partly from his own teaching, but more from their knowledge of the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord is referred to by that phrase about twenty times, often with eschatological implications. In addition, a parallel term, "the last days," occurs fourteen times, always eschatological. Further, the phrase "in that day" occurs over one hundred times and is generally eschatological. In Isaiah 2:2, 11-12 (KJV) the three phrases appear, referring to the same eschatological time. So there was ample reason for Paul to say that his readers knew about the Day of the Lord from the Old Testament itself.

But concerning the rapture there is no Old Testament revelation. This omission from over a hundred passages seems hard to understand if the Rapture is the first event of the Day of the Lord, as Post-Tribulationism teaches. But if the Rapture is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament, and if it precedes the actual beginning of the Day of the Lord, as Pre-Tribulationism teaches, then it is not strange that Paul had to inform them about the rapture but needed only to remind them what they already knew about the Day of the Lord.

Post-Tribulationists, then, want to make a very close connection between 4:13-18 and 5:1-11, whereas Pre-Tribulationists are better served by seeing a contrast of subjects between the two paragraphs.

Thus the Post-Tribulational scenario runs like this: Paul moves with ease from his discussion of the rapture in 4:13-18 to the discussion of the parousia in 5:1-11 because he is talking about events that occur at the same time and not events separated by seven years. Paul's choice of *de* (the first Greek word in 5:1), a simple connective with only a slight contrastive sense, indicates this close connection. And since the Day of the Lord will not begin until the second coming, the rapture will occur then also.

Pre-Tribulationists point out that the contrast between the subjects of the two chapters is sharpened by the fact that Paul did not simply use a *de* to begin 5:1 but a phrase, *peri de*. This is very significant, because elsewhere in his writings Paul uses *peri de* to denote a new and contrasting subject. Notice 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12; and 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4:9 and 5:1. Granted, the Post-Tribulationists' contention that the same subject is being discussed in 4:13-18 and 5:1-11 might be supported by the use of *de* alone, but it is completely nullified by the use of *peri de*. So the Pre-Tribulationist's use of the passage is strongly supported exegetically. The Rapture is not a part of the Day of the Lord and therefore cannot be Post-Tribulational.

To summarize, the question of the beginning of the Day of the Lord is a watershed between pre-and Post-Tribulationism. Pre-Tribulationism sees the Day of the Lord beginning at the start of the Tribulation for the following reasons:

1. The very first judgments (by whatever chronology one uses) include war, famine, and the death of one-fourth of the population of the earth.
2. The one time the Scriptures mention peace and safety during the Tribulation period, that peace and safety is at its very beginning. This time will be followed immediately by war, destruction, and upheavals that will continue unabated until Christ comes. Thus the Day of the Lord must begin at the beginning of the Tribulation, and the Rapture must be before.
3. The revelation of the man of sin will occur at the beginning of the Tribulation when he makes a pact with the Jewish people.

4. The much more normal understanding of the verb in Revelation 6:17 convey the idea that the wrath has already come and continues.

5. Paul's use of *peri de*, not simply *de*, in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:1 indicates contrasting subjects.

6. The removal of peace from the earth just after the Tribulation begins fits only Pre-Tribulationism.

If Post-Tribulationism be correct, then it must provide much more satisfactory answers than it has to the following questions:

1. How can the Day of the Lord not begin with the Tribulation or any part of it and yet begin with the judgments of Armageddon?

2. How can the final conflict at the end of the Tribulation be shrunk into a single battle of short enough duration so that the church can be raptured before it starts (in order to escape the wrath) and yet turn right around and accompany Christ on His return to earth at the conclusion of what would have to be a very brief battle?

3. Does protection from wrath poured out on unbelievers really include exemption from the fallout effects of the actions of those unbelievers on whom the wrath is poured? It does not today. Why should it in the future?

4. How does bunching the wrath judgments at the end of the Tribulation take care of the problem that equally severe judgments seem to take place earlier in the Tribulation and fall on believers as well as unbelievers?

5. What is the more normal interpretation of the aorist tense in Revelation 6:17?

6. Does not the use of the phrase *peri de* in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:1 indicate that the rapture is really not a part of the Day of the Lord at the end of the Tribulation?

Only Pre-Tribulationism fits harmoniously with all the Scriptural evidence and answers those questions satisfactorily.

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