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**Pre-Tribulationism-Criticisms Answered**

Let's review briefly the prophetic terms we've covered for both Israel and the Church because the challenge is taking these terms, most of which are developed in the OT with respect to Israel, and seeing how some of the new terms introduced in the NT with the Church. How do the new terms fit with the old terms? What's the scheme? The first term we covered is very early in the OT and that's Deut 4:30, the tribulation, the word there refers to a time of distress for Israel, a time of great affliction; it's a very important reference because that's where the concept of "tribulation" first occurs in an eschatological context. The passage paints the picture that Joshua is going to take the nation into the land, they are going to act corruptly and make idols and when they do God is going to get angry and He's going to send them into exile among the nations where they will serve idols. And from there, when they enter a period of tribulation, a time of extreme difficulty, then they will return to the Lord and the Lord will return to rescue them on the basis of the Covenant, the Lord will remember the Abrahamic Covenant and so the tribulation is the time when He's working in the life of the nation to bring them back to Himself.

But it takes tremendous horror to do that, this is not just your run of the mill tribulation people face. All people face hard times, some harder than others. And sometimes critics of the pre-trib rapture position will say you just want to get out easy, you want an escape hatch from the tribulations of this world. Excuse me! That is not the way the word is being used here. The word is being used here of the most difficult period in human history. So it's not that we're trying to avoid the normal suffering that other believers have faced. Other believers have faced some pretty intense persecution. What do you do with the Christians thrown to the lions in the Roman coliseum for sport? What do you do with the Protestant Reformers burned at the stake for

printing the word of God? What was that all about? It was tribulation, it was suffering to mature the Church, to stimulate the Church to grow doctrinally. But the tribulation Deuteronomy is talking about is not to mature the Church, it's not to stimulate the Church to grow, it's to purge Israel from all her idols, all her gimmicks of security, to faith in Jesus, her Messiah. That's the purpose of this future time of tribulation, so let's not confuse the tribulation we have in this world with the tribulation that is coming upon Israel.

Another term we summarized was the day of the Lord. That is an OT expression that is used several ways, you can't just say it means x and then go into every passage and import meaning x. Each context gives the meaning of this word and it's used in three ways in the OT, it's also used in the NT, but the meaning in the NT is coming from the OT. First of all, it's used broadly for a period of terrible wrath involving God's supernatural judgment as well as nature catastrophes and human armies. That meaning obviously overlaps with the prior term, tribulation, both are periods of intense judgment. Secondly, the day of the Lord is used of the day of the Second Coming of the Messiah. And you know that usage because two adjectives are used, the great and terrible day of the Lord, so it's the most concentrated day of wrath. Finally, it can also refer to the time of blessing which follows known as the millennial kingdom. So understand that expression relates to what Israel must go through and what the nations must go through in order to punish unbelievers so that the believing element of Israel can get brought over to the blessing of the kingdom and the believing element of the nations can get taken over into the blessing of the kingdom. That's the day of the Lord.

Then we looked at the metaphor of birth pangs. This was the metaphor from pregnancy used to depict the difficult times the world must go through before the kingdom can be born; so it also overlaps with the terms tribulation and day of the Lord but it adds the idea that the difficulties will start intensely but will get increasingly more so until the kingdom is born into the world. You see Jesus pick that one up in Matt 24:8. These are merely the beginning of birth pangs, meaning, that the judgments start off comparatively small and then very rapidly they increase until the kingdom is born and then the world is overflowing with joy. That's when we get to the joy, after the world has faced the birth pangs, not before, just like a woman giving birth; she

experiences the joy after intense pain. So the birth pangs refer to the time of increasing distress of the tribulation and day of the Lord judgments.

And then we looked at the Seventieth Week of Daniel, this one is very specific and it follows very closely calendar time, seven years; the years are 360 days each and split into two halves of 3 ½ years, each half is 1,260 days. The seven years begin with the Roman prince called Antichrist making a treaty with the national leadership of Israel to give them peace for seven years. He will protect them for 3 ½ years and then He will break the treaty by stopping sacrifice and committing the abomination. So the Jews are able to offer sacrifices during the first half of the 70<sup>th</sup> week, much to the chagrin of PETA and other animal rights activists. Antichrist will stop it at the mid-point. Somewhere in here he'll be killed but God will raise him from the dead at that time. Satan can't raise the dead, but God will, then the whole world will worship Him, Satan is kicked out of heaven, he comes down and through the Antichrist starts his final attempt to exterminate Israel. That's when Israel needs to run to the hills, get out of town because the most intense period of struggle for Israel has come.

That's another term related to Israel, the time of Jacob's trouble, that's the last 3 ½ years of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel and Jeremiah says that there is no time of judgment like that, but, at the end Israel will be saved from it, they will be rescued. Jesus described this period as the great tribulation. And we know it's the same as the time of Jacob's trouble because it is also described by Jesus in Matt 24 to be an unparalleled period of destruction. So we have the great tribulation or the time of Jacob's trouble, the last half of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel.

Those are Israel's prophetic terms and so when you see these terms in the NT know they are related to Israel's destiny. Now we come to the Church and the Church has its own prophetic terminology. We developed six themes but I'm just going to refer to two or three terms used uniquely of the Church. Then we'll try to put it all together.

The first idea unique to the church is the union of believers with the risen, ascended, seated Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. We are positionally seated in heaven in Christ, though experientially we are on earth. That was never stated of Israel and couldn't be stated of Israel because Christ wasn't risen,

ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father. So the union of believers to the risen, ascended, seated Lord Jesus Christ occurred for the first time on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2. As the Church took in Samaritans and Gentiles the revelation came to Paul that God was forming a new body composed of Jewish and Gentile believers in one new man, not Israel, a body called one new man, that is, the Church. So the body has been forming one by one as believers enter through faith in Christ and are baptized by the Spirit.

Second, the church is immune from the wrath to come. When we looked at Israel did we see that Israel was immune from the wrath to come? Quite the opposite, she's destined to go through a time of wrath before her kingdom. It's that wrath that stimulates her to repent. So this theme is the opposite of Israel's theme. It's the thing the Thessalonian believers were confused about in 2 Thess 2 which we'll detail in a couple of weeks. Paul insists that we are exempt from the wrath to come, 1 Thess 1:10, we are "to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." And the word "rescues" means "to keep away from" something, not to let us enter into it and keep us safe through it, but to keep us away from it altogether. And why should the Church face the wrath of God anyway? We're the body of Christ. We are in union with Christ in heaven. So that would mean executing wrath on Christ in heaven as well because He's the head of the body, He's the one in whom we are in union. So it doesn't make any sense at all for the Father to execute wrath on Christ? And those who think so have a very poor understanding of the nature of the Church.

Finally, the Church is waiting expectantly for the imminent return of the Lord Jesus for His bride so He can sweep her up, get her ready for the marriage supper, etc... Turn to 1 Thess 4:15. So we have imminency and this means the rapture can occur at any moment, there is no prophesied event that is blocking the rapture from occurring. It could have occurred in the first century, it could occur in this century. Before we look at the imminency issue, let's say a few words about the rapture. What is the rapture? What people have done is trivialized the rapture by saying it's the yanking of believers off the earth. No it's not, that sounds like it's an escape hatch and that is one of the criticisms we'll deal with here in a few weeks. That caricature of the rapture is not quite accurate. The theological significance of the rapture is that it's the experiential realization of our position of being in union with

Christ. Right now, today, all believers on earth are positionally seated in Christ in the heavenlies. So what the rapture is, is the experiential realization of the position we already hold, it's not an escape, it's a completion of the body of Christ in all its glory in Christ. So don't trivialize the momentous. It is one of the greatest events in world history yet to come. And this we say is imminent, 1 Thess 4:15, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep." Notice the two pronouns, "we" and "those," obviously Paul is including himself in the "we," and what does he say of the "we?" We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord." Now did Paul think that he may be among those who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord? Sure he did. And yet there are no signs. The rapture is a mystery, that's the 1 Cor 15:52 passage, behold, I tell you a mystery, we shall not all die but we shall all be changed. The rapture was a mystery in the OT meaning there's nothing in the OT about it. It's totally unheard of. Now resurrection, that was well known - Job knew about it, Isaiah knew about it, Daniel knew about it, everybody knew about resurrection. What nobody knew about was the rapture. So this is something totally new and Paul lived with the expectation that he may be among those who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord. That's imminence. Paul saw nothing in the way of Christ's return for the Church to bring about the experiential realization of the position we now hold in Christ.

So those are the three terms or ideas, our union with Christ in the heavenlies, our immunity from the wrath to come and the imminence of the rapture. Those are distinct terms used of the Church. And now that we've reviewed the terms, how do all these terms relate? Basically the nation Israel was going along and the Messiah came. He offered the nation the kingdom if they would repent, the kingdom is contingent on Israel's repentance, they didn't repent, they rejected their Messiah, they crucified Him, He rose, He ascended, He sat down at the right hand of the Father, then all the new stuff comes, strange things, a pouring out of the Spirit on Jewish believers, on Samaritan believers on Gentile believers, we get the new terms or ideas; union with Christ, immunity from wrath and imminent rapture, the Holy Spirit builds the Church one by one, believers from all tribes, tongues, peoples and nations and He will do this until the body of Christ is complete, then boom, the rapture will occur so that the church's union with Christ is realized, we are immune from the wrath to come, so it follows that the wrath

in the day of the Lord begins shortly thereafter, and all the OT terms discuss trouble, destruction, judgment, terrifying distress. The 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel begins when the Antichrist signs a covenant with the nation Israel, the tribulation period works to bring Israel to repentance, the birth pangs of the Messiah are going on, intensification of judgment, the abomination of desolation is committed and the Great Tribulation begins, the time of Jacob's trouble, then the Messiah returns with His bride, the Church, we descend with Him on white horses, He rescues Israel, just like He predicted He would in Deut 4:30, He gathers Israel from the four corners of the earth, just like He predicted He would in Deut 30 and Isa 27, He takes the unbelieving Jews to judgment in the wilderness, He takes the nations to the Sheep-Goats judgment and separates the sheep from the goats, the believers go in to repopulate the kingdom. It all fits very nicely, this is what we call pre-tribulational pre-millennialism. The rapture occurs before the tribulation, the return occurs before the millennium.

Now that we've sketched the pre-trib position I want to start dealing with four counter-arguments. Surely you know there is criticism against our view. The number one criticism is that it's a recent development, never before seen by anyone in Church History until 1830 when John Nelson Darby got it from a little Scottish lassie named Margaret McDonald who had a vision. That's historically false and I want to address the details because you will hear this over and over and over if you get into following these things, if you talk to Christians outside of here they'll bring up Margaret McDonald.

Here's the story, and this has been documented very closely by a personal friend of mine, Thomas Ice. John Nelson Darby is the guy of interest. Darby was born in England where he studied but also went to Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland where he took courses in theology. This guy was no dummy; the guy knew six languages fluently, so we're not talking about some kook. We're talking about a very brilliant man. One of the things Darby picked up in his theology courses was the literal interpretation of prophecy. That's very important because once you start down the literal approach you know where that ultimately leads. He later studied law and sometime while he was studying law he was converted to Christianity, sometime around 1820-21. Shortly thereafter he sensed the call to the ministry. His father was upset about it and disinherited him. That's how it works a lot of the time.

By 1825 he was ordained in the Anglican Church and was sent out to a rural parish that was a very poor region. Darby says, “As soon as I was ordained, I went amongst the poor Irish mountaineers, in a wild and uncultivated district, where I remained two years and three months, working as best I could.”<sup>i</sup> Notice how his ministry went. Thomas Ice says, “During Darby’s ministry in 1826–27, it is estimated that about 600 to 800 people a week “were converting to Protestantism through the vigorous efforts of the evangelical clergy.”<sup>ii</sup> This guy was extremely active. Look at this, 600-800 a week were converting from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism, that’s amazing. “However, the conversion rate would soon drop to almost zero, as a result of Archbishop Magee’s issuance of a petition...“imposing the oaths of allegiance [to the British Crown] and supremacy [acknowledging the King as the Supreme Head of the Church] on all converts from Romanism within his diocese.”<sup>iii</sup> So here we go again with the state-church problem. This has been a nuisance down through church history. Darby began to see there was a problem with ecclesiology, there was a problem trying to say that the Church is to have its head located in the King or the State. The state and king Darby saw as ruling a nation, and so it confused the Church with the nation. Now Israel is a nation but is the Church a nation? That’s what he began to investigate. And it was this action by Archbishop Magee requiring members of the church to take oaths of allegiance to the British crown and the King as the supreme head of the church that set Darby off on a journey into the Scriptures to sort this out. “This act by Magee retarded the evangelistic momentum and deeply discouraged Darby. It seemed to reinforce all of the negative aspects of the state church that Darby had already developed, and now they were driven home hard by the archbishop’s actions.”

Darby’s problem was that if believers have to acknowledge the King of Britain as the Supreme Head of the Church what about Jesus Christ. Darby believed that neither the Roman Catholic nor the Church of Ireland was the true church because their head was not Christ but either the state or a Bishop of Rome who he saw as beholden to the state. This, coupled with his exposure to the literal method of interpreting prophecy came to a head in 1827 when due to a riding accident, Darby entered three month convalescence at his sister’s home. It was during this time that Darby years later said, “I am daily more struck with the connection of the great principles on which my mind was exercised by and with God, when I found salvation and peace, and the questions agitated and agitating the world at the present

day: the absolute, divine authority and certainty of the Word, as a divine link between us and God, if everything (church and world) went; personal assurance of salvation in a new condition by being in Christ;” notice “in Christ,” he’s starting to see that as a critical piece of the distinction of the Church from Israel, he goes on “the church as His body;” clearly he’s seeing the connection of the church to Christ, and “Christ coming to receive us to Himself;” what’s that? The rapture. “...all this was when laid aside at E. P.’s in 1827;”<sup>iv</sup> So this was all in 1827, three years before he met Margaret McDonald. In another place in his letter he wrote, “I believe at my deliverance from bondage in 1827–8, God opened up certain truths needed for the church.”<sup>v</sup> What truths is he talking about? The rapture. What was so strong for Darby was his realization that the Church was in Christ in heaven, that was our standing, we were in the Beloved, united to Him in heaven. He believed this positional truth had to have an experiential corollary. Darby said, “At the same time, I saw that the Christian, having his place in Christ in heaven, *has nothing to wait for save the coming of the Saviour*, in order to be set, in fact, in the glory which is already his portion ‘in Christ.’”<sup>vi</sup> Notice the italics, nothing to wait for save the coming of the Saviour. Do you see imminence in there? Of course you do, nothing has to happen before the Saviour comes. This was all arrived at during Darby’s convalescence in 1827. It wasn’t until 1830 that the Scottish lassie Margaret McDonald came into contact with Darby. So it’s a little hard to say that Darby got the pre-trib rapture from her. Further, through close study of her visions scholars have recognized that she wasn’t even a pre-tribulationist. So it’s a little hard to see how Darby could have gotten pre-tribulationism from a girl who wasn’t even pre-tribulationist and who he never met until 2-3 years later. So historically, Darby has been credited as spawning this thing and spreading it throughout the Plymouth Brethren and into American revivalism. The central idea is that the Church is not Israel, Israel is a nation, the Church is a body. Walvoord says, “It is safe to say that pretribulationism depends on a particular definition of the church, and any consideration of pretribulationism that does not take this major factor into consideration will be largely beside the point.” Ice concludes, “Darby’s pretribulationism appeared as a seminal idea from his own Bible study during a convalescence period of December 1827 through January 1828 while staying at his sister’s house in Dublin. Darby was in distress about issues relating to the true nature and purpose of the Church during his convalescence, which led to his ideas of the rapture of the Church, an ecclesiastical and eschatological issue.



Here's another thing, not only did Darby not get it from this teenage girl who had a vision but I want to give you at least three pre-Darby rapture statements that scholars have discovered. The first one is Morgan Edwards, look at his dates, 1722-95. So he's slightly before Darby and we have no indication that Darby was dependent on Edwards. Now before we look at the first of these understand that earlier in church history they thought of the tribulation as just 3 ½ years, they didn't see two periods of 3 ½ years, they just saw one, so understand this is not highly developed, we've only been working on this intensely the last 150 years. So a pre-trib rapture statement would be a rapture before the 3 ½ years when Antichrist reigns, it may sound like mid-trib but it's not, these are pre-trib. In 1742 Edwards wrote "...the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's "appearing in the air" (I Thes. iv. 17); and **this will be about three years and a half before the millennium**, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many "mansions in the father's house" (John xiv. 2), and **disappear during the foresaid period of time**. The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for "now the time is come that judgment must begin," and that will be "at the house of God" (I Pet. iv. 17)."vii That's clearly separates rapture from return by 3 ½ years, that's a pre-trib rapture.

The second one I'll share with you is Brother Dolcino, he died in 1307, so that's way before Darby. In *The History of Brother Dolcino*, a treatise on his life and beliefs it says, "Again, [Dolcino believed and preached and taught] that within those three years Dolcino himself and his followers will preach the coming of the Antichrist. And that the Antichrist was coming into this world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; then *he [Dolcino] and his followers would be transferred into Paradise*, in which are Enoch and Elijah. And in this way they will be *preserved unharmed from the persecution of Antichrist*. And that then Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist." So Dolcino in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century saw the Antichrist coming, he and his followers would preach against him and then be raptured to safety, at the same time Enoch and Elijah would descend and do battle with Antichrist. That sounds pre-tribulational to me. There are some other interesting things in his ideas but the main idea is removal from earth before the Antichrist reigns.

Finally Pseudo-Ephraem, and this comes from a sermon sometime between AD373 and 627, so this is very early on. We call him pseudo because we don't think this was a sermon originally written by the more well-known Ephraem. But it was a well-liked sermon. It says, "We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, what is imminent or overhanging. . . . Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms all the world? . . . For all the saints and elect of God are gathered together before the tribulation, which is to come, and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins."<sup>viii</sup>

My point in going through all this is to answer the criticism of pre-tribulationism that it's a late development created by Darby in 1830 who got it from a demon inspired Scottish lassie named Margaret McDonald. Not only is that impossible to maintain from historical documents but earlier pre-trib rapture statements have been discovered far before Darby, I mentioned Morgan Edwards, Brother Dolcino and the Pseudo-Ephraem sermon and I have it on good authority that among the British in the 1700's there are a lot of statements that are being discovered and soon to be published. We'll pick up next time with criticisms two, three and four and our answer to them. The key to it is if you stay literal you recognize Israel and the Church are distinct and the rest follows.

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<sup>i</sup> J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), III, 297.

<sup>ii</sup> Weremchuk, *Darby*, 45. Stunt notes that this conversion rate was documented in the monthly issues of the *Christian Examiner* from November 1826 to August 1827 in Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-35* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 167.

<sup>iii</sup> Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 169.

<sup>iv</sup> Darby, *Letters*, I, 344-5.

<sup>v</sup> Darby, *Letters*, I, 185.

<sup>vi</sup> (Italics added) Darby, *Letters*, III, 298.

<sup>vii</sup> Emphasis added. Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises*, 7.

<sup>viii</sup> An English translation of the entire sermon can be found on the Internet at the following:  
[www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=169](http://www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=169).

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