

Faith Pulpit

Prewrath Rapturism and the Day of Lord in the New Testament

The previous Faith Pulpit surveyed and analyzed three key Old Testament passages that the Prewrath Rapture View uses to support its understanding for the starting time (*terminus a quo*) for the Day of the Lord. This article will survey the key New Testament passages that are used by the Prewrath advocates, primarily Marvin J. Rosenthal and Robert D. Van Kampen.[1](#)

Matthew 24:36-39

The Prewrath argument from this passage is that the event described is the rapture, which follows the shortened tribulation period mentioned in verses 22 and 29. Prewrath advocates explain that the “taking” in verses 39–40 refers to the rapture, and that this event takes place on the same day that the Day of the Lord begins. According to this view, the flood began on the same day that Noah entered the Ark, so the rapture and the Day of the Lord must begin on the same day as well.

This interpretation is flawed in a number of aspects. First, it claims that the great tribulation of verse 29 lasts for three and a half years (Dan 12:7; Rev 12:14, 13:5). This understanding makes the prewrath view posttribulational, at best. Second, those who were taken in Noah’s day were taken in the flood and drowned. In Matthew 24:36–39, those who are taken are also taken in judgment. Luke 17:34–37 parallels this passage. In Luke 17:37, Christ tells His disciples that those judged are taken where “eagles will be gathered together.” A better translation of “eagles” is “vultures.” In other words, the individuals are taken and killed. Finally, the prewrath argument misses the point of the analogy in Matthew 24:37–39. Christ is pointing out that in Noah’s day people were attempting to maintain their lives, and they ignored the warning of coming judgment. In the final days, people will manifest the same determined ignorance. When Christ comes to establish his millennial kingdom, the unregenerate will not be ready or “watchful,” they will be unprepared, and they will suffer judgment.

1 Thessalonians 5:3

Paul states that the Day of the Lord will come like “sudden destruction.” He then compares this destruction to birth pains. The prewrath assertion is that this comparison refers to the labor pains that come just before the moment of birth, not the ones that come in the early stages. In Matthew 24:8, Christ refers to the trials of the first half of the seventieth week as “the beginning of sorrows,” or the beginning labor pains. Since the hard labor pains cannot occur at the same time as the early pains, the Day of the Lord cannot occur early in the seventieth week.

The Prewrath view is problematic. In verse 3, Paul states that the Day of the Lord occurs when the earth’s inhabitants think they are living in peace and safety. However, by the second seal (Rev 6:3–4) peace is taken from the earth. Mankind will not be thinking that they live in peace after the second seal, which occurs early in the seventieth week. Another problem for the Prewrath view is that the word for “birth pain” is the same word in Matthew 24:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:3.² Christ and Paul used the same word for the labor pains. The expression sudden destruction continues the description of the Day of the Lord as an event that begins by surprise. This idea is illustrated in verse 2 by the comparison with a “thief in the night.” The unexpected nature of the beginning of the Day of the Lord fits better in the first half of the seventieth week than it does some time in the second half, as the prewrath view contends.

2 Thessalonians 2:3

Paul refers to two events that must precede the Day of the Lord: the “falling away” and the appearing of the “man of sin,” the Antichrist. The word for “falling away” is apostasia, and refers to a religious or political apostasy.³ The prewrath argument from this verse is that these two events must precede the beginning of the Day of the Lord. The apostasy occurs either at the beginning of the seventieth week or at its mid-point. However, the Antichrist is revealed at the mid-point of the week. Based on this timing, prewrath advocates assert that the Day of the Lord cannot begin before these two events and must take place some time in the second half of the week.

The prewrath charges are answerable. In verse 3, Paul states that these two precursors must come “first.” The word first can refer to “being first in a sequence” or “first of several” or “earliest.”⁴ The appearance of the Antichrist and the apostasy can be the first events in the sequence of the seventieth week. The apostasy may refer to Israel’s signing of the covenant with the Antichrist, described in Daniel 9:27. This act by Israel would be both a religious and political apostasy and would serve to identify the Antichrist.⁵ The signing of the covenant begins at the start of Daniel’s seventieth week, thereby lending support to the position that the Day of the Lord begins at that time.

Revelation 6:9–17

Advocates of the prewrath position place a great deal of theological weight on the fifth and sixth seal judgment. They have two main arguments from the fifth seal judgment (vv. 9–11). First, if the Day of the Lord begins earlier in the seventieth week, then these martyred saints are in the Day of the Lord. However, 1 Thessalonians 5:9 exempts Christians from that period. Second, if God's wrath has begun before or during this time, then God is killing the very ones who are attempting to live for Him. To the Prewrath advocate, this idea does not make sense.

The fact that these saints are living during the Day of the Lord is only a problem if one denies the distinction between Israel and the church. If the church is not destined for the seventieth week and is raptured before that week, then the saints of Revelation 6:9-11 must have been saved during that week. There is a difference between church saints and tribulation saints. Furthermore, the Prewrath argument is extremely problematic for itself. If the Day of the Lord extends to the end of the seventieth week, and if no saints can endure that time, then the prewrath advocate must answer the question, "Who is alive and saved to enter the millennial kingdom?" Advocates of prewrath rapturism must believe that some saints are alive during the Day of the Lord, or their premillennial belief is jettisoned. If there can be saved individuals who live through the Day of the Lord at the end of the seventieth week, there can be individuals who are living and martyred in the Day of the Lord at the beginning of the week. The second problem with the prewrath argument is that it misinterprets the answer to the prayer of these saints. God does not judge them; they are already killed during the seventieth week.⁶ The answer to their prayer is to wait for God's judgment on their killers (v. 11). In other words, these martyrs are calling for the execution of their murderers. The answer to their cry is for them to wait a while. The cry itself does not mean that God's wrath is not in progress at this time. The cry does mean that these murderers have survived so far the various manifestations of that wrath.

The final substantial argument for the Prewrath view comes from the sixth seal. The Prewrath advocate believes that the sixth seal parallels the events described in Joel 2:30–32 and Isaiah 2. He understands the expression has come (Rev 6:17), to refer to wrath that is about to begin. In other words, he believes that God's wrath has not begun at this point, but that it is about to commence. In response, the connection between Revelation 6:12–17, Joel 2:30–32, and Isaiah 2 is correct. However, the reference in Joel describes events which initiate the second half of Daniel's seventieth week. This timing places the sixth seal at the middle of the week and not some time in the second half. Isaiah 2 discusses events that occur during the Day of the Lord, and not some time after it. The parallel between Isaiah 2 and Revelation 6:12–17 indicates that the sixth seal occurs during the Day of the Lord and not just before it. The entire seventieth week is the Day of the Lord and the second half which is referred to as the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord. These three references describe the opening event of that second half.⁷ The expression in verse 17, has come, refers to the events of the sixth seal. Mankind recognizes that he has entered into the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord and declares this truth in fear. The events of verses 12–13 indicate this truth to the population of the world. The Day of the Lord begins with the opening of the first seal. When the events of the sixth seal occur at the mid-point of the week,

mankind recognizes that he is entering the second half of the week known as the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord.

The prewrath view believes that the Day of the Lord begins in the second half of the seventieth week. However, this timing is an incorrect interpretation of the New Testament data. The Day of God's wrath begins with the opening of the first seal judgment. The mid-point of the seventieth week begins with the breaking of the sixth seal. When this understanding is applied to the timing of the rapture and exemption of 1 Thessalonians 5:9, it leads the interpreter to conclude that the rapture is pretribulational.

Works Cited

1. Marvin J. Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990); Robert D. Van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1997); Robert D. Van Kampen, *The Sign*, 2d ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999).
2. Paul Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is it Biblical?*, (Langhorne: BF Press, 1991), 56.
3. For an alternative view that "apostasia" refers to the rapture, see Myron J. Houghton, "The Rapture in II Thessalonians 2:1-10," *Faith Pulpit* (April 2002): 1-2.
4. W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 892.
5. Rolland D. McCune, "An Investigation and Criticism of 'Historic' Premillennialism from the Viewpoint of Dispensationalism," (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1972), 147, note 2.
6. Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 74.
7. See Roy E. Beacham, "Joel 2, Eschatology of," *Dictionary of Premillennialism*, edited by Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 216-19.

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