

Faith Pulpit

Pre-wrath Rapture: A Pretrib Evaluation

(An evaluation of Dr. Robert D. Van Kampen's book, *The Rapture Question Answered*. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, a division of Baker Book House, 1997)

I. An Explanation of the Pre-wrath Rapture View

“Plainly stated, the core truth is this: the persecution by Antichrist during the great tribulation will be the wrath of Satan (Rev. 12:12), not the wrath of God. When the sign of the sun, moon, and stars is given in the heavens, the wrath of Satan against the elect of God will be terminated, the faithful to God will be raptured, and then the wrath of God will begin against the wicked who remain, ending with the battle of Armageddon. Thus, the Rapture of God's saints has to occur sometime during the second half of the tribulation period, during Antichrist's persecution of God's elect. Plain and simple! No more, no less,” (pages 47, 48. Unless otherwise noted, emphasis in the citations are by Dr. Van Kampen.)

II. An Evaluation of Key Issues

Hermeneutics. “The text must be understood at face value, in its most natural, normal, customary sense, making allowances for obvious figures of speech, its context, and all the other passages of Scripture dealing with the same issue. When in doubt, let Scripture interpret Scripture! Once the common denominator is found that harmonizes all the passages, without contradiction, then we have the truth, but not before. And once we have truth that truth stands in judgment of us; never do we dare stand in judgment of it!” (page 32).

Letting Scripture interpret Scripture is true enough as a principle but in practice it could become nothing more than our theology telling a biblical passage what it can or cannot mean. Trying to determine the meaning from the context of such a passage is a better procedure than going to other passages which may or may not be dealing with the same subject. Context is to be preferred over

prooftext. Why? One may think he has found the “common denominator that harmonizes all the passages” but may be wrong. In any case, whether the interpreter is right or wrong, once he has determined that he has found the correct view, if he follows Dr. Van Kampen’s advice, there is no way to convince him otherwise, since “never do we dare stand in judgment of it!” (page 32).

Straw Men. This reviewer found three matters that Dr. Van Kampen raised as important to be straw men in reality.

First is the matter of just how explicit the Bible is concerning the timing of the Rapture. In this book, Dr. Walvoord, former president of Dallas Theological Seminary and staunch pretribulationist, is quoted as saying, “neither posttribulationism nor pretribulationism is an explicit teaching of the Scriptures. The Bible does not, in so many words, state either” (page 44). On the other hand, referring to his own view, the pre-wrath Rapture, the author states, “The truth of the matter is, Scripture could not be clearer on this issue, not only as to the fact of Christ’s coming and the judgment that will occur when He comes, but also the timing of His coming as it relates to other end time events” (page 14).

Of course, if Dr. Van Kampen is correct, if “Scripture could not be clearer on this issue,” he could have produced a one-page list of Bible references where the Bible states in so many words the pre-wrath Rapture! Instead, he has given us a book of over 200 pages in which various biblical passages are interpreted but in which no explicit statement from Scripture is given. In fact, he states, “it is necessary to understand how four distinct biblical truths are interrelated if we are to gain a proper understanding of the whole of end time events. Each of these truths plays an important part in a complete and accurate biblical view of the return of Christ...” (page 51). Dr. Walvoord himself couldn’t have said it any better!

Second is the issue of whether there is one future coming [parousia] of Christ or two. Dr. Van Kampen maintains that pretribulationists must hold to two comings, while he argues the Bible teaches only one (see pages 94–101). If the author were posttribulationist [which he is not!] his distinction would be clear: Posttribulationism teaches Christ comes to rapture believers and immediately returns to set up His kingdom—one coming. But Dr. Van Kampen, like pretribulationists, believes there is a period of time between the Rapture and Christ’s return to set up His kingdom. But he argues for a single coming because he sees the coming as including “different activities... as was the case with His first coming” (pages 97, 98). In other words, he views Christ’s second coming in a comprehensive way, including the Rapture and the return to set up the millennial kingdom. This reviewer wonders why it is not possible to view Christ’s coming both ways without one of them being wrong! When I wrote to Dr. Van Kampen’s ministry about any real difference between these two ways of looking at Christ’s return, Rev. Charles Cooper replied: “The rapture of the church and Christ coming at Armageddon is one whole event composed of several parts.” In his evaluation of the difference between his understanding and the pretribulationist understanding of Christ’s return, Rev. Cooper said, “Fundamentally, we may

be talking about a subtle variation in meaning” (letter to this reviewer from Rev. Charles Cooper, Director of Field Ministries for THE SIGN MINISTRIES, October 8, 1997). I agree: the variation in meaning is very subtle!

Third is the matter of whether or not the flood began on the same day Noah entered the ark. Dr. Van Kampen, using Matthew 24, believes the Rapture and God’s wrath occur on the same day because Genesis 7:11–13 says Noah entered the ark on the same day the flood began. This destroys the idea that the Rapture was imminent throughout church history, because the Tribulation begins by Antichrist making a covenant with Israel, and Israel did not exist as a nation until 1948 (pages 58–65). However, pretribulationists do not need to defend an interval between the beginning of the flood and the day in which Noah entered the ark. The pretribulational view does not see the Rapture of the Church but rather Christ’s return at the end of the Tribulation being discussed in Matthew 24. In the Olivet Discourse, Christ’s return as it relates to the future of Israel rather than the future of the Church is in view. The people “taken” at Christ’s return (Matthew 24:40, 41) are described in Matthew 13:49–50 as the wicked who are separated from the righteous at the end of the age and thrown into the Lake of Fire. So there is no problem with the imminency of the Rapture. Paul included himself among those who might not die but still be alive at Christ’s return (“we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed...” 1 Corinthians 15:51).

The Seal Judgments. On pages 139–152, Dr. Van Kampen relates the events described in Matthew 24 with the seal judgments of Revelation 6. I believe some of the details of his interpretation are flawed. For example, when the fourth seal is broken, the rider on a pale horse is given authority to kill 1/4 of the world with sword, famine, death (or pestilence) and by wild beasts. Dr. Van Kampen does not take these forms of tribulation at face value but argues they are part of Antichrist’s persecution. Nevertheless, this reviewer believes Dr. Van Kampen’s identification of the seal judgments beginning at the start of the seven-year Tribulation is correct! The difference in our views concerns whether or not the wrath of God is responsible for all of the seal judgments or only the last. Throughout his book, Dr. Van Kampen distinguishes between the wrath of Satan (and the Antichrist) on the one hand, and the wrath of God on the other. On page 56 this distinction is considered crucial. But there are times when both God and evil are responsible for events. In Acts 2:23 Peter tells us that responsibility for Christ’s death includes both God’s determined counsel and the wicked hands of men. In 2 Corinthians 12:7 we learn that Paul’s thorn in the flesh came from God (who gave it so Paul would not become exalted above measure because of the many revelations he had received) and from (a messenger of) Satan. Thus the persecution by Antichrist may be used by God to prepare Israel to recognize her Savior.

In any case, Dr. Van Kampen does not see God’s wrath revealed until after the sixth seal (see chart on page 164). He quotes Revelation 6:17 where, when the sixth seal is broken, the world leaders cry for the rocks to hide them from the One who sits on the throne and from the Lamb because, “the great day

of their wrath has come.” If one took this text at face value, he would say that with the breaking of the sixth seal, the world leaders recognize that the great day of God’s wrath has come. But since Dr. Van Kampen doesn’t believe God’s wrath is poured out until the seventh seal, he argues “the aorist tense is, generally speaking, timeless” (page 153) and thus probably means here that the day of God’s wrath is about to come (pages 153,154). In response, it should be noted that when the aorist tense is used in the indicative (as it is here) it is not timeless but usually indicates past time. Dana and Mantey state, “It has no essential temporal significance, its time relations being found only in the indicative, where it is used as past” (A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament by H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey [NY: The Macmillan Company, 1927], page 193) while Wallace says, “In the indicative, the aorist usually indicates past time” (Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics by Daniel B. Wallace [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996], page 555).

Furthermore, Revelation 6:17 gives the perspective of the world leaders. God’s view is different: the sealed book contains divine judgment upon the world, and the breaking of the seals unleashes God’s wrath. In Revelation 5:1 the sealed book is in the right hand of the One sitting upon the throne, and only the Lord Jesus is found worthy to take it and break the seals to pronounce God’s judgment (Revelation 5:2–7). As Dr. Van Kampen himself states, “The biblical teaching concerning end times primarily has to do with the judgment and wrath of God against the unrighteous world. In fact, the book of Revelation is almost entirely about God’s wrath. When the angel asks, ‘Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?’ (Rev. 5:2), the answer is, ‘the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah’ (v. 5), whom John describes to his readers as ‘a Lamb’ (v. 6), a reference to Jesus Christ” (page 51). If the seal judgments begin at the start of the Tribulation (as Dr. Van Kampen and I both believe is true) and if God’s wrath begins to be poured with the first seal (as Revelation 5 teaches) and if the Rapture occurs before God’s wrath is poured out (as Dr. Van Kampen and I both believe is true) then the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation begins.

The “Church” and The “Elect.” In the Olivet Discourse [which Dr. Van Kampen uses as the model by which to evaluate all other New Testament eschatological passages] the word “church” is not used. In pondering that fact he concludes: “It will be the church in general that will fall away into apostasy in the last days. It is the elect of God (the saints) who will endure Antichrist’s persecution. That is precisely why terms such as ‘the elect’ and ‘the saints’ are used instead of the word church to describe the faithful who will choose death over compromise!” (page 81). In contrast to this understanding of “church,” the New Testament uses “church” in a Christian sense to describe true believers in Christ. But “church” is not used in Matthew 24 because it is not part of our Lord’s teaching here. Daniel 9:24–27 says “70 weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city.” Daniel’s “holy city” is Jerusalem and his “people” are Israel! The 70th “week” is the seven-year tribulation period, divided in the middle by the breaking of the covenant (v 27). This is the same period described in Matthew 24. The “end” half of this period begins when one can see “the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place” (Matthew 24:14, 15).

“Church” is used in Revelation, chapters 1–3 and 22, but not in chapters 4–21. Dr. Van Kampen gives the same explanation as previously stated (pages 133-137). One has only to read carefully the letters our Lord wrote to these seven churches (Revelation 2 and 3) to realize that this explanation is not acceptable here, either. “Church” is not found in Revelation 4–18 because these chapters describe events on earth during the seven-year Tribulation, and the Church is not present. In Revelation 19, when Christ returns, the Church is seen as the wife of the Lamb (v 7 cf. Ephesians 5:22–32). In Revelation 20, the doom of the devil (vv 1-10) and the destiny of the lost (vv 11–15) are described. In Revelation 21, the redeemed of all the ages are classified in their distinct groupings. Proof: (1) in verse 3 “people” is literally “peoples;” (2) in verse 12, the gates of the New Jerusalem have the names of the 12 tribes of Israel written on them whereas in verse 14 the foundations of that city have the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb written on them; and (3) in verses 24 and 26, believing nations retain their ethnic glory.

In fact, if you were to look up every verse in the New Testament where “church” is found you would discover it refers either to the Church which is Christ’s Body (Ephesians 1:22,23) or to local congregations composed of “saints” (even when described as “carnal”—1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:1ff). Thus the “church” of the Thessalonians is “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:1) and their “election” is known by Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:4), while the congregation at Ephesus is said to be acquired (or purchased) by Christ’s blood (Acts 20:28).

The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians. First, contrary to Dr. Van Kampen (pp 117,118), the order in 2 Thessalonians 1:4–8 is not persecution [in the Tribulation] followed by the Rapture. The persecution and afflictions the Thessalonians experienced must not be identified with the events of the Tribulation.

Second, contrary to Dr. Van Kampen (p 120, footnote # 3) the Greek construction does not show the apostasy and the revealing of the Antichrist to be a single event. While Moffat (Expositor’s Greek Testament, IV:48) thinks they “form a single phenomenon,” Hiebert rejects this suggestion, saying, “The two verbs, emphatic by position, serve to distinguish the events” (The Thessalonian Epistles, Moody Press, p 305). My point is the Greek construction does not require Dr. Van Kampen’s interpretation.

Third, and finally, contrary to Dr. Van Kampen (p 125), the restrainer is not Michael the Archangel. He will accompany Christ in His descent at the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:16). The one restraining “that wicked [one]” (v 8) must be more powerful than he, yet the wicked one’s coming is “after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders” (v 9). Only a member of the Godhead has that kind of power. Michael doesn’t. When disputing with the devil, Michael respected Satan’s authority—contrary to the false teachers Jude writes against, who had no respect for anyone’s authority (Jude 8–10).

All three Persons of the Godhead are omnipresent. In this sense they cannot “come” or “leave.” But in terms of residency, the Father is “in heaven,” (Matthew 6:9) and Christ is at the Father’s right hand (Hebrews 1:3). But the Holy Spirit “came” to reside in the bodies of church age believers on the Day of Pentecost (John 7:37–39; 14:16, 17). He “came” to create the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). And if this is the sense in which He “came,” it is also the sense in which He is “taken out of the way” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). The Holy Spirit came to create the Church which is Christ’s Body and to indwell those believers who compose that Body (Ephesians 1:13, 14, 22, 23), and He leaves when the Church He indwells is caught away! Then, and only then, is the wicked, lawless one revealed by the making of a seven-year covenant (v 8). Even Dr. Van Kampen recognizes that “the seven-year tribulation period will begin when this man who becomes Antichrist makes a seven-year treaty with Israel” (p 38). That man cannot be revealed until the Holy Spirit is removed in the Rapture of the Church. This makes the Rapture both pre-wrath and pretribulational!

Appendix

I. Greek words

On page 116 Dr. Van Kampen recognizes some have used their knowledge of Greek as a technique to convince the listener or reader of something not found in the English text, and he vows he will not do this. On the same page he describes his “authorities” who checked everything he says about Greek words to guarantee accuracy.

A. “I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation”—Revelation 3:10

1. “keep ... from” (tereo ... ek).

Dr. Van Kampen says the Greek word translated “keep” (tereo) means, “guard, watch over or keep” (169). When coupled with “from” (ek) in this passage, he says “it carries the idea of protecting someone while he is within a sphere of danger, not that of keeping him away from the danger altogether” (175,176).

My reply: (a) In the only other place in the Greek NT where tereo and ek are used together (John 17:15), Christ prays that believers would be kept (tereo) out of or guarded from the evil (or evil one). This means protection from evil. (b) In Revelation 3:10 the promise is not to be kept merely from the testing itself but from the very hour of testing, i.e., the time when the testing occurs.

2. “Hour of temptation” (peirasmos and related forms).

Dr. Van Kampen says temptation (peirasmos) is not from God (James 1:13), therefore this “hour of temptation” cannot refer to the wrath of God (173f).

My reply: Peirasmos can mean either testing or temptation. There is no separate word in the Greek New Testament for “tempt.” The context lets the reader know which idea is meant. In James 1:13 the word clearly means “tempt.” But in Hebrews 11:17 the participle form of peirasmos is used of Abraham being tested to offer up Isaac. In Genesis 22:1 we discover God is the One who was testing Abraham. Evidently peirasmos can refer to divine activity! In Revelation 3:10, this word is used to describe the testing God causes to come upon the wicked inhabitants of the earth.

B. “...the one shall be taken...” (paralambano)—Matthew 24:40–41

Dr. Van Kampen says (comparing two Greek words translated “taken”), “Paralambano does not mean ‘to be taken away,’ as does the Greek word airo; it means ‘to embrace or to receive intimately, to or for oneself.’” (181).

My reply: Paralambano is used of the soldiers taking Jesus into the common hall after He had been scourged (Matthew 27:27). Also, this word is used of the devil taking Jesus up to Jerusalem (Matthew 4:5) and up to a high mountain (Matthew 4:8).

C. “..then we who are alive and remain...” (perileipomenoi)—1 Thessalonians 4:17

Dr. Van Kampen says “the word means ‘to leave all around, i.e., survive.’ ... [and here refers to] those who have survived Antichrist’s persecution!” (182,183).

My reply: This Greek word is found only twice in the Greek New Testament, and both times are in 1 Thessalonians 4, first in verse 15 and then in verse 17. In neither instance does it refer to those who have survived Antichrist’s persecution. Rather it refers to those living believers who have been left on earth in contrast with those who have already died and gone to be with Christ.

D. “He will send forth His angels...and they will gather together His elect..” (episunago)—Matthew 24:31

Dr. Van Kampen says “Therefore, episunago means a gathering together in an upward direction, or ‘a taking up and bringing together.’” (184). His point is that this word refers to the Rapture because of the upward direction.

My reply: In Matthew 23:37 Jesus told Jerusalem, “how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings...”. In Mark 1:33, a crowd “was gathered together at the door” of the place where Jesus was healing people. The “upward” idea is not a necessary part of this word’s meaning.

II. Miscellaneous matters

A. I believe “the word of the Lord” in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 refers to divine revelation rather than to the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) as Dr. Van Kampen thinks (112).

B. Dr. Van Kampen believes the great multitude of Revelation 7:9ff have just arrived in heaven and are in bodies, meaning they have been resurrected. He says, “But I have kept the best argument for last. Notice that when this great multitude arrives in heaven, they are seen ‘standing before the throne ... clothed in white robes...palm branches in their hands’ (verse 9). You may wonder, ‘So what?’ to which I respond, ‘They have bodies and the elect will not receive resurrected bodies until the Rapture!’ Even the fifth-seal martyrs don’t receive their resurrected bodies until the first day of the millennium” (158).

My reply: (a) The text does not say this multitude “just arrived” in heaven; it says John looked and saw them standing before God’s throne. (b) On what basis can it be said that this multitude has bodies? Is it because they are standing? Is it because they are wearing white robes? Is it because they have palm branches in their hands and cry out in praise to God? The fifth-seal martyrs who are located under the altar also are given white robes to wear, and they, too, cry out to God with loud voices (Revelation 6:9–11). But we all recognize that they do not yet possess resurrected bodies.

C. Historical references, whether to Spurgeon (201, 202) or the early church fathers (189f) do not point to a pre-wrath Rapture view but to a posttribulation Rapture view. The burden of proof to show otherwise rests on Dr. Van Kampen.

D. Misunderstanding Mayhue (45). Mayhue does not say that the pretribulation Rapture view is logically invalid or at least unconvincing. What he does say is that at times proof given in support of this doctrine has been logically invalid or at least unconvincing.

E. Dr. Van Kampen’s attitude.

(1) Dr. Van Kampen is often combative to the point of badgering (35, 45, 49).

(2) Furthermore, he takes disagreement with the pre-wrath view personally, noting the 1991 resolution against Marvin Rosenthal’s *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* came on his [Dr. Van Kampen’s] 31st wedding anniversary (200) and ridiculing it (201, 202).

(3) Finally, he applies Paul’s admonition to separate from disorderly brothers to those who believe in a pretribulation Rapture (130).

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.