

A BLESSED HOPE or a DEFERRED HOPE?

INTRODUCTION

The world today faces a hopeless future -- even as they, themselves, assess the situation. An exponential rise in population requires ever more and more land, water, and natural resources. The struggles for these necessities often break out into wars, which dramatically reduce the meager resources even further, or contaminate them beyond use. The only satisfying answer to over-population, depleted or ruined resources, and the wars, which so greatly magnify the problem, is the return of Christ to reign over the earth.¹ This solution is, of course, derided and rejected by the unbelieving world.

While we know Christ's coming is the world's only hope, the blessedness of it is dimmed by the agonizing seven years that must precede it. They will be years of trouble without precedent in all of history. It will be a time when, if God did not intervene to cut it short, life on earth would cease to exist (Jer. 30:7; Mk. 13:19, 20; Rev. chapters 1 - through 19).

Will the church go through this time of terrible tribulation?

Yes and no! It depends on which "church" is in view.

All those who are born of God, trusting in the work of Christ at Calvary, and in that alone, for their salvation -- those who have been justified by faith and saved by God's grace -- constitute God's true church, the "Church which is His [Christ's] Body." The church the world sees is Christendom, with all of its churches and cathedrals, its denominations and cults. True believers are more and more but a dwindling remnant in the churches of Christendom and stand distinct from it in God's eyes.

Before the Tribulation begins the Lord will call HIS church to meet Him in the air, a glorious event known as the Rapture. Sadly, at this time, many congregations will hardly know anything has happened. While the Body of Christ will have been taken home, not having been appointed to the wrath soon to be poured out (1 Thess. 5:9), the merely professing church will continue on its humanistic religious way into the Tribulation. The Body of Christ, every member of it, will miss the Tribulation. Their hope is a blessed hope indeed!

¹At the return of Christ to earth (among many other things):

-- Earth's population will be decimated by righteous judgments (Rev. 6:9, 10; 17:9; 19:17, 18, 21), and the multiplying of woman's conception (Gen. 3:16) will presumably be rescinded, greatly reducing the birthrate in the millennial earth.

-- Deserts will become productive, with an abundance of water (Isa. 35:1, 2, 4 - 7).

-- The economy will be largely agricultural, with a fair division of more abundant land (Micah 4:4; Zech. 3:10).

-- Crime will be suppressed (Rev. 2:27; 19:15).

-- There will be a satisfactory solution to the Arab/Israeli problem (Isa. 19:21 - 25).

-- Wars will cease (Isa. 2:4; Psa. 46:9; Hosea 2:18).

Tragically, just as it seems this "blessed hope" is nearing realization, and we ought to be eagerly anticipating it, we are being robbed of the joy that should be ours. Because believers have been waiting so long for the catching away to heaven, we tend to neglect or even forget this vital truth. Also, as the evidences multiply for the proximity of the Rapture, some teachers have yielded to the temptation to set dates for its accomplishment. When the dates prove to have been unfounded, the very event itself is discredited.

Perhaps the most serious cloud over the blessed hope, however, is the teaching, gaining more acceptance almost daily, that the Rapture will not take place until the Tribulation, or at least the first half of it (the mid-Tribulation view) has run its course. If this were true, the next event in eschatology would not be the Rapture, but the beginning of the Tribulation. Instead of waiting for God's Son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:10) we would be looking for the appearance of the Antichrist on the world's scene.

Is our joyous expectation, which we have treasured for so long, to be thus postponed three and a half to seven years? Let us go to the Scriptures to see if these things be so.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12 NASB)

Even though the Rapture may not come for a long time, it *could* come *today*. This has been, and still is, the blessed hope of millions of spiritual, Bible believing Christians. What a tragedy that, just as we are approaching the day when we will be caught up, many are being told, "It cannot happen for at least three and a half, or even as much as seven, years." The blessed hope then becomes the deferred hope, the postponed hope!

Some today are teaching very emphatically that the members of the Body of Christ, who are alive when the time popularly known as the "Tribulation" begins, will continue on earth during that seven year period. Most of these people, too, are spiritual, Bible believing Christians who sincerely see themselves as standing for the truth on this issue. Some of them, indeed, used to be Pre-Tribulationists, and have changed their views. The proofs for their position seem to be logical, Scriptural, and convincing. Can it be they are right and we are mistaken on this matter?

The Views Defined.

Both the Pre-Tribulationist and the Post-Tribulationist hold that Christ will come again at the close of a seven year period prophesied in the Old Testament (Dan. 9:27) and described in the book of Revelation. ² Both maintain that this coming is to pour out vengeance on a world

²In addition to the Pre-Tribulation and Post-Tribulation views, there are two other major views as to the time of the Rapture. The Mid-Tribulationist sees it as happening in the middle of the Tribulation, three and a half years before Christ comes in glory. Another view, called the "Pre-wrath Rapture" view, has surfaced in the past few years and is promoted by Marvin Rosenthal in his book "The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church." This interpretation places the Rapture after the midpoint of the period and at least five months before the coming in glory. It takes place, according to brother Rosenthal, immediately before the beginning of the trumpet

which has joined with Satan against God, to bring Gentile world dominion to an end, bring about the salvation of all Israel, and usher in a political, theocratic, world-wide kingdom lasting a thousand years.

The Pre-Tribulationist believes that before the seven year period even begins Christ will appear in the air, raise the dead of the age of grace, change the living saints, catch them all away to be with Him, and take them home to heaven. The prophesied coming of Christ in glory will follow seven years later.

The Post-Tribulationist teaches that members of the Body of Christ living in the last days will continue on earth through the Tribulation. As Christ descends from heaven, on His way to pour out His judgments, He will raise all dead believers of all ages, change the living believers, and catch them up to meet Him in the air. They will then immediately accompany Christ back to earth and share in establishing and governing His millennial kingdom.

Is the Difference Important?

We believe the view adopted on this issue has serious implications:

-- It will affect our attitude toward His coming. If we understand He *could* come at any moment, there can be a constant joyous expectancy, which surely will not be present if we believe His coming for us is at least seven years in the future. Instead of waiting for God's Son from heaven, we would be looking for evidence that the Tribulation has begun. Instead of looking for Christ, we would be looking for Antichrist.

-- It affects other things we believe. If the Body of Christ is on earth all the way through Revelation chapter eighteen, then many distinctions are necessarily broken down. The distinctiveness of Paul's message and ministry is blurred, and the difference between the millennial kingdom and the kingdom of God (as Paul uses the term) is destroyed. Both the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God are seen as being preached by Paul in Acts, and by Body members during the Tribulation. The distinction between the Body church and the kingdom church vanishes. The hope of the believer today is seen as being revealed in the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the book of Revelation. The very concept of the age of grace as an unprophesied interruption of the kingdom program is lost.

-- To teach that the Body of Christ is destined to go through the Tribulation reads the church of this age into many non-Pauline passages. It also seeks to make the Pauline verses so long used for the "Pre-Trib" view, teach Post-Tribulationism.

Clearly -- no matter who is right and who is wrong -- the issue is an important one.

How Can Spiritual Christians See the Same Verses so Differently?

Those particularly addressed in this paper are pre-millennial and dispensational; they hold to

judgments -- in which the wrath of God is poured out, directly from heaven on a rebellious earth. Many of the arguments against the post-tribulation view hold good for these two also.

the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture; and are "fundamental" in their understanding of basic Bible doctrine. Yet even among these who have so much in common there is great variation of opinion regarding the Rapture. Why?

The mind as an interpreter.

Man's mind is so constructed that it seeks to interpret what is fed into it, whether visual information or ideas. It will go from one possibility to another until there are enough facts to suggest one interpretation over all others.

Gaze steadily at the figure below for a few seconds.

First it seems very clear that "A" is nearer to you than "B." Then, as you continue to look at it, a reversal takes place. It now seems equally clear that "B" is nearer than "A." How can we be sure which is the true interpretation of the picture?

It may occur to us that a right side up stairway is more likely to be portrayed than an upside down one, for this would make the steps serve a useful purpose. Thus logic would influence our understanding of what is being portrayed.

So a consideration of the purpose a verse or passage serves -- when considered in relation to both context and related Scripture -- can logically influence our understanding of it.

Also if more details are added to the picture, and a background supplied, the picture has a tendency to stabilize.

Similarly, attention to details will stabilize our understanding of Scripture. Observing (often superficial) similarities between verses from different contexts is important, but also we must carefully consider the differences. The background, too, is important. The passages on the Rapture can become an upside down illusion if we try to attach the stairway to the wrong house -- to Israel's program instead of to the program for the age of grace.

Methods of Bible Study.

At least one knowledgeable and godly proponent of the "Post-Trib" position spends considerable time explaining how the difference in interpretation of the verses on the Lord's coming takes place. He claims we use **DE**ductive reasoning while he depends on **IN**ductive reasoning.³ He cites Robert Traina on this point:

³Leaflet "Pre or Post" by Henry T. Hudson, pages 1, 2.

"There are two main approaches open to the Bible student. One is deduction, which begins with the generalizations and moves for their support to the particulars. By its very nature deduction tends to be subjective and prejudicial. It produces those who dictate to the Scriptures rather than those who listen to the Scriptures. In view of the objective character of Scriptural literature, such an approach is not suited to the Bible and is therefore unmethodical. On the other hand, its opposite, induction, is objective and impartial; for it demands that one first examine the particulars of the Scriptures and that one's conclusions be based on those particulars. Such an approach is sound because, being objective, it corresponds to the objective nature of the Scriptures. It produces hearers rather than speakers, and the nature of the Scriptures requires hearers. Methodical Bible study, then, is inductive Bible study, because in this instance induction is methodical."⁴

Mr. Hudson says, "If they [the Pre-Tribulationists] dare to make a simple straightforward induction, they will discover that Scripture does not even contain one passage to support their theory ... It is therefore apparent that the theory could only come through the deductive method."⁵

Quite clearly he is saying we decide what we are going to believe and then go to the Bible to find proof texts, reading into them what we want them to teach.

Let us make some observations about these two methods of study:

-- It is very difficult, if not impossible, to be completely inductive. As soon as you have enough verses to give you a theory, the theory influences you in the selection and interpretation of the other verses -- and reasoning becomes deductive. On the very next page of the book quoted above, Mr. Traina makes the following observation:

"... There is *no such thing as pure induction*. When one talks about an inductive approach, one means an approach that is relatively inductive ... Because there is no pure induction, there is no absolute objectivity. Gamaliel Bradford wisely observed, 'There are simply those who think they are impartial and those who *know* they are *not*.' However an approach which stresses induction *insofar as is possible is more likely* to produce impartial and accurate interpreters than any other approach." (Emphasis mine)⁶

-- Once a position has been reached "inductively" (whether valid or not) further investigation becomes largely deductive, though it may not be recognized that this shift has taken place.

-- Neither method is fool proof. Neither one is exempt from bias or misinterpretation of facts. The inductive method may even foster an overconfidence in results, due to confidence in the *method*, which fails to admit the possibility of error, and does not properly evaluate the evidence obtained "deductively."

-- If we try to make our Bible study purely inductive we must ignore all of the written and oral ministry of Bible teachers who have gone before us, lest we base our study on their

⁴"Methodical Bible Study" by Robert A. Traina, page 7.

⁵Op. cit. Henry T. Hudson, page 2.

⁶Op cit. Robert Traina, page 8.

conclusions. Instead of rejoicing in justification by faith alone, as that truth emerges from Luther's study, we will have to duplicate his long and heroic investigation for ourselves so we can come to that truth inductively. Should we, perhaps, even refrain from making our own conclusions known to others lest we influence them toward deductive thinking?

Whether inductive or deductive, the final truth must rest on the validity of the verses, not the merits of the method.

Brother Hudson makes it clear that he holds us guilty of totally deductive reasoning in regard to the Rapture. He even knows where we obtained the idea upon which we base our deductions. "Where then did the Pre-Trib doctrine originate? ... It was first taught by a young Scottish girl named Margaret McDonald in the spring of 1830. What is more, it sprang from a personal revelation in the midst of a 'charismatic neo-Pentecostal' revival." Later he adds, "It [the idea of a Pre-Trib Rapture] was then picked up by the heretical Irvingites and by John Nelson Darby."⁷

The source for this accusation was probably one of the books written by Dave MacPherson. Concerning MacPherson's remarks in "The Incredible Cover-up." John F. Walvoord says, "... the allegation of MacPherson and many others that Darby derived his views either from Irving or MacDonald is not supported by any factual evidence." He offers proof that neither Edward Irving nor Margaret MacDonald held a Pre-Trib Rapture view and notes: "Obviously, if they were not Pre-Tribulationists how could Darby get his views from them? Even if they were Pre-Tribulationists, there is no proof linking the two, except that they both lived about the same time."⁸ Darby is the one usually credited with founding the group known as the "Plymouth Brethren."

Mr. Hudson continues, "No doubt the greatest single cause for the widespread popularity of the theory is its presentation in the *Scofield Reference Bible*" (Emphasis his).⁹ The Scofield notes are largely a condensation of a generation of Bible study by the scholars emerging from the "brethren" movement. It has been called -- perhaps in derision -- The Plymouth Brethren Bible."

Anyone well acquainted with the ministry of John Darby will find it difficult to believe he followed the revelations coming out of a charismatic meeting. He stood head and shoulders above his peers as a man of the Book. In a day when traditions of men ruled supreme in much of the religious world, he went in singleness of heart to "thus saith the Lord." As the founder of a movement which emphasizes (perhaps over emphasizes) the place of the men over the women in the assembly and in teaching, it would be against some of his strongest principles to allow a Pentecostal woman to guide him in his theology. To imagine his brethren would follow him in any such move as this, and still stand fearlessly -- as they do to this day -- on the word of God alone, is also very difficult to believe. His views concerning the spiritual gifts would strongly

⁷Leaflet, "Does Holy Scripture teach that Christ will return before the Great Tribulation?" by Henry T. Hudson.

⁸"The Rapture Question (revised and enlarged)" by John F. Walvoord. Zondervan Pub. House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, page 154.

⁹Op. cit. Henry T. Hudson, page 19.

prejudice him against teaching something he received from the exercise of the gift of prophecy long after, as he believed, God had withdrawn the gift from the church.

To attribute the Pre-Trib Rapture to a source other than Paul's writings is to beg the question. The issue is not how the doctrine was handled in church history, but whether or not it is found in Scripture.

Inductive or Deductive? -- An illustration.

Suppose Albert is introduced to John and begins to see him from time to time, without further opportunity to actually speak to him. He is soon faced with a problem. Sometimes John waves to him and sometimes he ignores him. Also sometimes he will be gracious and mannerly and at other times ungracious and rude. On one occasion he will seem very happy and on another he will appear quite nasty in disposition. He doesn't really know anything about John, so he is thinking inductively as he seeks to find an answer to the problem. He soon becomes convinced he is either a split personality or an exceedingly moody and unstable person.

With this conclusion in the back of his mind he notices other things which back up his judgment. He does not realize he has shifted to deductive thinking to reinforce the position he arrived at inductively. When he speaks to his friend Henry about it, Henry replies, "I think there are two men, not just one." With this in mind he goes over the incidents that have been related to him and demonstrates that there must be twins.

"Such nonsense!" Replies Albert. "That can't be true. First of all, no one said anything about even a brother, let alone twins. Secondly, you are thinking deductively, working from the idea of twins back to the evidence. You have decided what you want to believe and then you are looking for something to prove it."

"Once you got the idea that a split personality was involved you, too, began thinking deductively -- with your conclusion coloring your interpretation of all you saw" responds Henry. "The main difference between us is that you have been focussing on the things which are alike, assuming so many similarities prove identity, while I am carefully considering the differences."

As they are talking, two men, as alike as two peas in a pod, approach them.

"Albert, I want you to meet my twin brother, James. He says he has seen you but has not been introduced" says John.

Henry is smiling broadly at Albert.

Without the introduction of the twin by his brother the argument could have continued "hot and heavy" between the two men.

As Bible students in the past read ALL of the passages about the coming of the Lord, there were many problems. A listing of the seeming discrepancies and inconsistencies led to a search for possible solutions.

Some concluded Paul was merely adding details to what the others had written, leaving out things others included because they did not need to be repeated. The problem passages were deemed complementary or supplementary views of the same thing.

Some noticed there seemed often to be a difference between Paul on the one hand and all of the other writers of scripture on the other. The other writers were mostly in agreement among themselves. That is, as they considered the total ministry of Paul, they noticed he appeared to be off by himself in many areas of doctrine. So much so that some ignored Paul -- or even doubted that he was an inspired writer - speaking derisively of "Paul's religion."

Paul himself suggests that the distinctions should be carefully considered, not ignored nor explained away. "We are to test the things, and having found them to differ, must not join them together, but rightly divide them (Note on Phil. 1:10 in the Companion Bible. Compare 2 Tim. 2:15).

As they began to see that Paul had been given the responsibility to introduce a new dispensation (Eph. 3:2), with a new Apostle (Rom. 11:13), a new message (Acts 20:24; Rom. 16:25), and a new program, they became convinced there was also a new hope which, like the other "new" things, had not been revealed before. Up to now they had been thinking inductively, working from the problems back to a solution. This is as truly inductive, negative though it may be, as working from positive statements to a formulation of doctrine.

Working now deductively, from the idea of a new and different hope, they found the problems beginning to disappear. In their place was a new appreciation for the unity in complexity of the word of God, and a clear recognition of the distinctiveness of the age of grace.

Was it a wise decision to look into the possibility that there were two appearances of Christ before the millennial kingdom, not just one? There were reasons to *expect* such a solution:

-- The use of the word "mystery" in 1 Cor. 15:51 and the contrast between 1 Thessalonians four, which Paul needed to teach, and 1 Thessalonians five, which they already "knew perfectly," suggests the Rapture is a new revelation.

-- The introduction of a new spiritual entity -- the "Body of Christ," and a new "dispensation of the grace of God," would raise some questions. How will the new dispensation end? What will become of those in the Body when it does? Would it not be strange to have the very existence of this age, its beginning, its message, and its program a secret, yet have its termination a prophesied event?

-- With the eschatology of the rest of the word of God tied in so tightly with Israel -- AS SUCH -- but including Gentiles -- AS SUCH -- would one expect these non Pauline passages to be speaking, at the same time, of a Body where there was NO DIFFERENCE between Jew and Gentile?

Surely we have a right to expect there are indeed "twins."