

## The Post-Trib and Amillennial Use Of 2 Thessalonians 1

The letters of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians are frequently discussed in the debate between pretribulational rapturists and those of the post-trib persuasion.<sup>1</sup> Often appearing in eschatological discourse is the rapture passage of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 which is followed by the day of the Lord section in 5:1-11. Of special note also is 2 Thessalonians chapter two with its array of interpretive issues: the meaning of the “gathering together to Him” (v. 1), the nature and timing of the day of the Lord (v. 2ff), the nature of the apostasy that precedes the day of the Lord (v. 3), the identification of the lawless one who comes before the day of the Lord (v. 3-4), the identification of the restrainer (v. 6-7), and what it means for Christians to be delivered from the wrath to come (v.9). Many pre-trib apologists have written responses to the post-trib understanding of these important sections and have given the appropriate biblical exposition. Unfortunately, debates about these passages have overshadowed 2 Thessalonians 1 so that it has not received the attention it deserves.<sup>2</sup> The intention of this paper is to revisit the post-trib use of 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 and provide a solid pre-trib understanding of the issues raised. Along the way we will also look at one amillennial exposition of the same chapter. Due to the fact that both the post-trib view and amillennialism generally share the feature of a one-phase Second Coming as opposed to the two-phase approach, post-trib rapturists could make use of such amillennial arguments contra the pre-tribulational position.

Below is the passage in question from 2 Thessalonians 1. The discussion to follow will not be an exposition of the passage but will deal with some of the specific exegetical and theological arguments used in the debate against pretribulationalism.

<sup>3</sup> We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, <sup>4</sup> so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, <sup>5</sup> which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; <sup>6</sup> since *it is* a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, <sup>7</sup> and to *give* you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, <sup>8</sup> in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, <sup>10</sup> when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of *this* calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of *His* goodness and the work of faith with power, <sup>12</sup> that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (NKJV).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article the common shorthand notation of “pre-trib” for a pretribulational view of the rapture and “post-trib” for a posttribulational view of the rapture will be widely used.

<sup>2</sup> A typical presentation is Todd D. Still, “Eschatology in the Thessalonian Letters” *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 195-210. Still mentions in passing the eschatology of 2 Thessalonians 1 but reserves his valuable article space to the discussion of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 5:1-11, and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Even within articles produced by the Pre-Trib Study Group, little or no attention has been paid to 2 Thessalonians 1 (see Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, ed., *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995). My point is not to fault those who focus on the other important passages. These sections contain weighty matters and are arguably the most important in the Thessalonian correspondence. However, I want to raise the bar somewhat for discussion of the eschatology of 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12. D. Michael Martin notices the same disparity voiced in this paper (*1, 2 Thessalonians*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995], 208. Jouette M. Bassler likewise acknowledges the seeming neglect of the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians (“The Enigmatic Sign: 2 Thessalonians 1:5” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 [1984], 496).

The difficulty in interpretation of this passage is made clear by Dunham who has studied the variations among translations and commentaries as to the sentence structure of the passage.<sup>3</sup> He observed that in a study of eighteen different English translations (including some paraphrases), the passage was viewed as having anywhere from one to nine different sentences within it. Other commentators have also noticed that linguistically and structurally it is more difficult and certainly different than the rest of this little epistle.<sup>4</sup> What is inescapable, however, is that the passage is an extremely important one with respect to the timing of the rapture of the Church due to the way it is used by those who oppose a two-phase Second Coming. In the discussion below, we will describe the debate among various authors as well as highlight the major factors in the text which help to harmonize 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 with a pre-trib rapture position.

## The Post-Trib Use of 2 Thessalonians 1

In this section, we will begin by using the approach of Douglas Moo to describe the handling of 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 by one holding the post-trib view.<sup>5</sup> Moo argues assertively that

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5-7 Paul appears to provide strong support for the view that believers will not be raptured until the Parousia of Christ at the end of the Tribulation. For there can be no doubt that in verses 7-8 Paul depicts this coming in glory, which he characterizes as “the revelation of the Lord Jesus from Heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels.” Yet it is *at* (ἐν) this time that the believers who are suffering tribulation are given “rest.” In other words, it is only at the posttribulation Advent that believers experience deliverance from the sufferings of this age.<sup>6</sup>

This argument stems from a simplistic but understandable reading of the verses. Later we will concede that the relief given in the passage occurs at the same time as the punishment of the wicked. However, there are a couple of assumptions brought to the text in this approach that must be analyzed. First, Moo seems to believe that the word for *relief* or *rest* only refers to the deliverance from or absence of suffering. There can really be nothing more involved in the passage. Later we will challenge this conclusion. Second, he actually assumes that it would be contradictory for there to be a rapture prior to the tribulation period since such a rapture would fulfill the giving of relief to the waiting Christians. What would be contradicted is the clear description of the time of the granting of their relief that coincides quite nicely with a description of the Second Advent itself and not a pre-trib rapture. Again, even if the pre-trib proponent agrees with the description here as Second Advent and not rapture (this writer is inclined to agree), Moo’s second assumption rests upon his prior simplistic understanding of the content of *relief*. If the absence of present persecution is all that is meant by Paul in his understanding of the word, Moo’s argument could be considered to carry more weight. However, if

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<sup>3</sup> Duane A. Dunham, “2 Thessalonians 1:3-10: A Study in Sentence Structure” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 24 (March 1981): 39-46.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Frank W. Hughes, “The Social Situations Implied by Rhetoric” in *The Thessalonians Debate: Methodological Discord or Methodological Synthesis* edited by Johannes Beutler and Karl P. Donfried (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 252.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Moo, “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position” in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984): 169-211.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

Moo is wrong on this point, the way is opened up for harmonizing the concept with a pre-trib rapture as will be shown below.

Other posttribulationists have generally followed the same approach to understanding the passage. Gundry concurs with Moo when he says “The resultant difficulty for pretribulationism is that Paul places the release of Christians from persecution at the posttribulation return of Christ to judge unbelievers, whereas according to pretribulationism this release will occur seven years earlier.”<sup>7</sup> William Bell, a longtime foe of the pre-trib rapture also argues in the same vein:

This passage would seem to be fatal to any view of a pretribulation rapture. Paul explicitly states that the hope of the Thessalonian believers is the glorious second advent of Christ, at which time they will receive rest from their afflictions. If the rapture, as a separate event, is indeed the “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13) of the Christian, rather than the second advent, this passage becomes inexplicable.<sup>8</sup>

Again, there is the assumption that the content of the relief is merely the removal of the sufferings that the Thessalonians were then going through and nothing more.

Moo senses this potential objection to some degree when he discusses the possible pre-trib strategy of noting the fact that the Thessalonians did not live to see even a post-trib rapture as fulfillment of the removal of their immediate persecution.<sup>9</sup> All of the Thessalonians obtained their relief through death. Therefore, a pre-trib rapturist might conclude reasonably that the post-trib fulfillment that is being talked about in the passage, i.e., the relief mentioned, is referring to the fact that “God in His own time will destroy their persecutors.”<sup>10</sup> Moo’s response is to assert that the pre-trib rapturist here is simply ignoring the teaching in 2 Thessalonians 1 that the timing of the relief of the saints and the punishment of the wicked coincide. However, the proponent of the pre-trib view need not disagree that both of these things mentioned in the passage are taken care of simultaneously. In fact, one might argue that the relief from the present persecution of the Thessalonians is seen in the larger context of God’s overall plan to begin the removal of all suffering starting at the Second Coming and continuing until the end of the millennium. In other words, the idea of relief is not simply the removal of their immediate persecution. This idea must be explored more fully as we go along. It is sufficient to say at this point that Moo in dealing with the potential objection here, at least for sake of argument, apparently assumes that the pre-trib rapturist must tie the relief, understood as the removal of persecution, to the pre-trib rapture. He has not demonstrated in any detail the contextual reason for limiting the concept of relief or the necessity for forcing the pre-trib adherent to associate the concept of this passage with his pre-trib rapture.

This leads to Moo’s anticipation of a second response by pre-trib proponents. He acknowledges that there are those among pretribulationists who insist that the rest or relief in the passage does not have to occur at the rapture of the Church. In other words, many hold that the rapture is not in 2 Thessalonians at all.<sup>11</sup> While appreciating this attempt, he responds by asserting once again that the timing of the relief of the saints and the punishment of the wicked (which occurs at the Second

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<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 113.

<sup>8</sup> William E. Bell, Jr., *A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1967), 275.

<sup>9</sup> Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 187.

<sup>10</sup> John Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation: A Biblical and Historical Study of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 123-24. Moo cites this remark of Walvoord (“Posttribulation Rapture,” 187).

<sup>11</sup> Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 187-88.

Advent) *must* happen together: “the clear temporal link between the rest and the “revelation” of Christ cannot be severed. The only satisfactory way of explaining this text is to assume that Paul addresses the Thessalonians as if they would be alive at the Parousia—and he states that they experience ‘rest’ only at the posttribulational revelation of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> The weary reader might again notice that the same assumption is brought in at this point. The relief in the passage must be defined only with respect to the removal of the temporal experience of persecution of the Thessalonians. If this is not true, then Moo’s argumentation on almost every point must be altered.

Paul Feinberg’s response to Moo presents two possible strategies for the pre-trib advocate.<sup>13</sup> The first one is to take the entire passage as a rapture passage. Since the word “revelation” is not a technical term, a pre-trib rapture could be in view rather than the return of Christ to earth. Furthermore, the mention of the angels does not have to relate to the Second Coming, since angels are associated with both the rapture and the Second Coming within a pre-trib scheme. Nevertheless, the nature of the language associated with the angels in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 (“shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know the God . . .”) seems to fit better with the event of the visible appearing of Christ rather than the secret rapture, although it could be argued that the language is describing the entire seven-year tribulation period and what it leads to. In that sense, the rapture begins a time of fiery judgment that does involve angelic beings (see Revelation).

However, a better approach may be Feinberg’s second offered strategy for the pre-trib supporter. He suggests that the idea of *revelation* in 2 Thessalonians 1:7 could refer to a complex of events, which encompasses the rapture, the tribulation, and the events associated with the Second Advent.<sup>14</sup> He notes that such prophetic associations or groupings are common in the Bible. He even cites Moo doing the same thing with regard to millennial issues. He then asks why he cannot do the same with respect to tribulation issues. While both strategies mentioned by Feinberg need to be considered, there may still be other more fruitful exegetical and theological options. His main point is that, if either of these views is correct, the post-trib advocate will not be able to make his case. For now, however, we will assert only that these two strategies prove that there are reasonable alternatives to the post-trib use of 2 Thessalonians 1.

## **The Amillennial Use of 2 Thessalonians 1**

The irenic amillennialist, Vern Poythress, argues that 2 Thessalonians 1 best supports the amillennial position.<sup>15</sup> In an interesting article, he attempts to show that there is irreconcilable tension between this chapter and pretribulational and midtribulational premillennialism (i.e., those who hold to a two-phase Second Coming), historical premillennialism, and postmillennialism.<sup>16</sup> To his credit he

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, “Response” in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984): 227.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> I refer to Poythress as irenic because he appears to be among the few covenant theologians (it seems) to take dispensationalists seriously even though he disagrees with them. See his older work *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), which should be required reading for all dispensationalists.

explores the full gamut of possibilities credibly even if his overall conclusion must be rejected. For the purposes of this discussion we will limit ourselves to his analysis of the view of a two-phase Second Coming with respect to the chapter under consideration. Interestingly, he uses some of the same arguments and assumptions as the posttribulational view of the chapter although he provides more detail and expansion for the debate.

Poythress' argument that the pretribulational view of the rapture cannot be harmonized with 2 Thessalonians 1 can be structured with the following premises and final conclusion:

1. Relief comes at the revelation of Christ (v. 6-7).
2. Relief is *clearly* from the trouble the Thessalonians were then experiencing (v. 6-7).
3. Relief comes for believers at the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18).
4. The time of the relief is the open appearing of Christ, i.e., the "revelation" is the visible Second Coming.
5. Verses 9-10 indicate "when" He comes there will be both relief for saints and hell for opponents.
6. Therefore, the two events, rapture and revelation are the same.

Pre-trib advocates can handle the first premise in one of three ways based upon various understandings of the text. Two approaches were mentioned by Feinberg, that is, either the possibility that the pre-trib rapture is in view by the term *revelation* or that there is a complex of events implied by the term that covers the entire two-phase Second Coming and associated events. Thus, either of these two pre-trib positions with their own definitions of the word *revelation* would agree with premise # 1, but would deny premise # 4, which equates the revelation with the visible Second Coming. The third and perhaps better alternative is to agree with Poythress that the revelation, understood as the visible post-trib appearing, is when the relief mentioned in the passage comes to Christian believers thereby accepting both the first and fourth premises that Poythress makes. In addition, we will concede the truth of premise # 5. The Second Advent is a time when, according to verses 9-10, there will be both punishment for the wicked and a measure of relief for the saints.

However, the second premise is a point of contention for the pre-trib position held in this article. Poythress simplistically says that relief is "clearly" from the trouble the Thessalonians were then experiencing. This is in harmony with Moo's assertion that the best way to take the passage is to assume the possibility that the Thessalonians would live to see the rapture, which is when their persecutors would be destroyed. While there is no necessary quarrel here with the possibility that the Thessalonians could have lived to see the rapture, the context of the passage suggests that there is much more to the time of relief and all that it entails. The positive presentation of this evidence will be given below when we discuss Charles Ryrie's position on the passage. For now, we can point to a few counter-examples, even among those who do not hold the pre-trib position, to show that there is not such an easy consensus on the nature of the relief.

No one denies that relief from persecution is in view in the passage. After all, relief is given to those (the Thessalonians) who are currently afflicted (v. 7). That is not the issue. However, there is a larger context, which suggests that even if the Thessalonians did not live until the rapture, there is a *special* relief for them awaiting the Second Coming of Christ (even within a pre-trib scheme). Martin begins to capture the essence of this in his commentary on the meaning of relief.

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<sup>16</sup> Vern S. Poythress, "2 Thessalonians 1 Supports Amillennialism" *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (December 1994): 529-538. The discussion to follow will trace and interact with the arguments he presents on pages 529-32.

The exact implications of “rest” (*anesis*) are uncertain since it is used of eschatological reward only here in Paul’s writings. But clearly it involves more than just the cessation of persecution. “And to us as well” indicates that this “rest” is a state that both the Thessalonians and the evangelists would share. Linked temporally to the parousia (v. 7b) it connotes the ultimate reward, the promised rest that represents the goodness of the realized kingdom of God .  
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Thus, Martin understands the larger eschatological significance of the passage as opposed to Poythress’ simplistic reading of the temporal sufferings of the Thessalonians. This is true because of the eschatological context of the passage and the inclusion of more than the Thessalonians into the statement itself.

F. F. Bruce hints of this broader context for relief when he acknowledges that the word itself simply refers to “the lifting of the pressure caused by their persecution,” but that it is attached to the “positive blessing” of God’s kingdom.<sup>18</sup> God’s kingdom is a time of role reversals. Bassler, partly on the basis of parallels to extra-biblical rabbinical materials, more strongly argues that “the eschatological future will see an inversion of the present circumstances, and God’s justice is revealed first in the afflictions of the elect, but also, and most importantly, in their ultimate reward (1:7,10) as well as in the ultimate punishment of the godless (1:6,8-9), who are presently free from any obvious affliction.”<sup>19</sup> These statements by Bruce and Bassler are not necessarily contrary to the theology of Poythress.

However, they do point out something Poythress seems to overlook in his presentation of premise two. That is, the concept of relief in 2 Thessalonians 1 probably carries with it some theological connections that take it beyond the mere removal of persecution from the afflicted parties. It is not at all inconsistent for the pre-trib rapturist to assert that the ultimate role reversal implied in this chapter happens at the post-trib Second Advent and not at the pre-trib rapture of the Church. While the rapture of the Church is the blessed hope of the believer, there is much more to come, including the ultimate eschatological release from all oppression, which will be manifested in God’s destruction of the believer’s enemies beginning at the Second Coming. After all, it is only at the end of the millennium itself when God will wipe away all tears from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). Why should it be surprising to believe that the rapture (as in a pre-trib scheme) is not the ultimate removal of negative pressure for the believer?

This discussion leads naturally to an evaluation of premise # 3: Relief comes for believers at the rapture. Even though the pre-trib rapture is the blessed hope when the Lord will provide comfort and His forever presence to Christians, it is also a time when Christian believers will stand before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. During this judgment there is the real chance of meaningful loss (1 Cor. 3:12-15). Furthermore, there is a potential negative element for the believer if he enters the kingdom with a diminished administrative role due to lack of achievement for the Lord during his earthly life (Lk. 19:11-27). However, in comparison to unbelievers, many who have persecuted the Church, the Second Advent will be a time of earthly manifestation of all those who are indeed the genuine sons of God as the role reversal takes place with God punishing the wicked. Poythress has not done justice to this biblical sophistication of the pre-trib position. This larger context, which surrounds the meaning of relief in 2 Thessalonians 1, does not unravel the pre-trib position. If the above analysis is correct, then both premise # 2 and # 3 cannot be held in the way that Poythress seems to suggest. Consequently, the conclusion that he draws, namely that the rapture and visible appearing are the same

<sup>17</sup> Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 208. It appears that Martin holds to a post-trib view of the rapture (154).

<sup>18</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, World Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 150.

<sup>19</sup> Bassler, “The Enigmatic Sign,” 505.

event is not required by the evidence. He has at best given partial truths, which in the end do not leave the pre-trib advocate devoid of any way to harmonize his position with 2 Thessalonians 1.

Two other issues are raised by Poythress in his analysis of the pre-trib position. First, he reacts to Feinberg's proposed strategy that the word "revelation" implies a complex of events from rapture to visible Second Coming by remarking that it is the best answer to the pre-trib dilemma in the passage. However, he continues to note that the view is an admission that the passage weaves all of the events together, something that more easily fits into a post-trib combination.<sup>20</sup> Since we have not challenged Poythress on this point, his criticism does not address the position of this paper that the events in view in the passage all take place at the Second Advent and that they are in harmony with a pre-trib view. The only other pre-trib position he seems to be aware of is the pre-trib view that the events of 2 Thessalonians 1 all take place at the pre-trib rapture. Most of his argumentation goes in that direction. This means that he is probably unaware of Charles Ryrie's position, which we will defend below.

Second, Poythress interacts extensively with the problem that the Thessalonians themselves did not live to get their relief at the Second Advent.<sup>21</sup> He responds by saying "death is but a partial and ambiguous 'relief.' The real relief comes with the resurrection of the body."<sup>22</sup> As an amillennialist, he sees all resurrections occurring at the Second Advent. This meshes well with his interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 1. However, this approach seems to go against his constant insistence elsewhere that the relief is "clearly" from the persecution.<sup>23</sup> At best he can only say that the relief from persecution for the Thessalonians came in stages (phase one at death, phase two at resurrection). If he can do this, why not a two-phase Second Coming accommodating these end time events as well? Poythress' handling of this issue seems to draw an unnecessary box around "relief" as "resurrection." Is resurrection all there is to relief? While not wanting to diminish the great miracle of resurrection and the role it plays, one must say that God is doing more than the resurrection of individuals at the Second Advent. The restoration that takes place at the Second Advent includes many ramifications including earthly ones Poythress might reject. If he is willing to see a larger context of relief as resurrection, he needs to examine the passage more carefully to see the positive kingdom elements that speak of other experiences for believers, which we will explore later. Going this route he may actually dismiss premise # 2, one of his earlier statements. It may be that resurrection is not a broad enough category to cover the concept of relief.

What may drive Poythress to some of his conclusions may be the amillennial penchant for oversimplification. Amillennialism certainly has the simplest eschatology chart of all possible views! Amillennialists no doubt look with a certain amount of consternation and bewilderment at dispensationalists with all of the diversity and the detailed charts and chronologies. However, the amillennial approach simply does not do justice to the sweeping nature of the sequences that the Scriptures spell out. For example, one sequence that could be highlighted is the following: church age, rapture of the church, tribulation period, Second Coming, restoration of Israel, judgment of the nations, the millennial kingdom, great white throne judgment of the lost, and the eternal state. While pre-trib advocates debate the details of the sequence, all would agree that there are changes that take place throughout. The ultimate fulfillment of the Christian believer's hope is not the rapture of the Church and the resurrection of church saints (I Thess. 4:13-18). *That is only a beginning.* The role of the

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<sup>20</sup> Poythress, "2 Thessalonians 1," 532.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 530.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 529.

church saint in the coming kingdom expands upon the joyous and rewarding experience, which comes later at the Second Coming. Such eschatological details could be worked out in detail such as the various judgments and resurrections. Amillennialists fail to handle such details within their oversimplified system. This is especially true when passages touch upon Israel. Craig Blaising is right when he asserts that supersessionism, the view that Israel has been replaced by the Church, “lives only in Christian theology today purely on the momentum of its own tradition.”<sup>24</sup> It may be that one reason there is any debate at all in 2 Thessalonians 1 is that there is a distinction between Israel and the Church.

## A Harmonization of 2 Thessalonians 1 with the Pre-Trib View

In this section, we will try to make a positive case for harmonizing 2 Thessalonians 1 with the pre-trib view. We will use for this analysis primarily the presentation of Charles Ryrie although others will be consulted. In addition, we will investigate the structure of the passage itself to validate some of the issues that Ryrie raises.<sup>25</sup> Ryrie maintains three major points relative to 2 Thessalonians 1:

1. The post-trib position on the chapter, especially its focus on release from persecution as the main point, limits the scope of the people who will experience relief to a very small group of people in comparison to all the saints.<sup>26</sup>
2. The rapture is not in 2 Thessalonians 1.<sup>27</sup>
3. The subject of the passage is not release for Christians from persecution but the vindication of Christians who have suffered.<sup>28</sup>

We will examine each of these points in turn.

First, Ryrie makes the point that according to the usual post-trib handling of *relief* in the passage, there are only a relative handful of believers who will actually experience this release directly. Those would be the church saints living at the end of the tribulation who are released from their tribulation persecution (according to the post-trib view). All other church saints would not participate in this so-called release. We have already alluded to Poythress’ attempt to deal with the partial relief at the death of the Thessalonians (and other Christians) with the full relief for them coming at the resurrection associated with the Second Advent. What is certain in the passage is the universal flavor of what is being discussed. Paul uses the expression in verse 10 “when He comes to be glorified *in His*

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<sup>24</sup> Craig Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001): 436.

<sup>25</sup> It is remarkable that there has been little or no response to Charles Ryrie’s presentation of the 2 Thessalonians 1 as far as I can tell. Poythress certainly does not interact with him at all.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Come Quickly Lord Jesus: What You Need to Know About the Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 56-57. This work was originally published under the title *What You Should Know About the Rapture* (Chicago: Moody, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58. See also Arno C. Gaebelein, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York: Our Hope Publication Office, n.d.), p. 130-31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-62.



saints on that day.” Such a statement encompasses at least all Christians and cannot be limited to the Thessalonians or a smaller group. To Ryrie this helps the Bible student to see that the passage is about something larger than release from persecution. If this is the case, then harmonization of the section with the pre-trib position is on sound footing.<sup>29</sup>

Second, Ryrie agrees with post-trib advocates that a pre-trib rapture is not in 2 Thessalonians 1. Of course, all post-trib adherents would agree that there is no pre-trib rapture in the passage!<sup>30</sup> However, they believe there is a post-trib rapture expressed. This is where Ryrie turns the agreement on the unity of the passage into a problem for the theology of the post-trib advocate. He highlights the terminology that exists in the passage: righteous judgment (v. 5), just (v. 6), repay (v. 6), affliction (v. 6), flaming fire (v. 7), and retribution (v. 8). These are all words related to the judgment of God upon His enemies. Nowhere in the passage is a rapture described. Ryrie claims that the mention of rest or relief in the passage is not enough to compare it to the descriptions of meeting the Lord, forever being with Him, or of resurrection for those who have died. The description of the passage is inconsistent with the language of other known rapture passages (John 14:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:51-58; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). Thus, Ryrie comes to the conclusion that the pre-trib view harmonizes better with the idea that a rapture is not found in the passage than does the post-trib view which must have one.<sup>31</sup> The post-trib proponent might argue that this is an argument from silence and that Ryrie assumes too much when he says that the language of rest and relief is not enough to justify the presence of a rapture. However, the pre-trib advocate can respond by noting that this is no different in kind than the post-trib assumption, which limits the concept of relief to release from persecution.

The first two points above can be debated. However, on the face of it, they seem to indicate that there is at least a plausible way of harmonizing 2 Thessalonians 1 with the pre-trib position. This is all that the pre-trib advocate needs to show. If post-trib or amillennial adherents can also make a plausible case, the ultimate proof of the various positions must be dealt with in other passages.

However, the third point that Ryrie raises may be the Achilles’ heel for the post-trib viewpoint in this passage. It is a point that has surfaced in this article a number of times already. Now is the time to make a positive case for it. The idea is simply that the subject in view in the passage is the vindication of the Thessalonians and all other believers at the Second Advent and not merely the

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<sup>29</sup> As a corollary to the distinction being discussed between the Thessalonians and other Christians and tribulation saints (who are also Christians according to the post-trib model), J. Dwight Pentecost raises an interesting question. He wonders why several epistolary passages, like 2 Thessalonians 1:4-10, make no distinction between everyday persecutions and the terrible time of the tribulation period. The latter is fully described in Old Testament and New Testament texts alike as the worst time to come upon the world (e.g., Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21). This silence according to Pentecost argues for a pre-trib rapture: “Evidently the writers of the epistles had no knowledge that the church would endure the seventieth week, for they certainly would have given help and guidance to meet the most severe persecution men will ever have known, since they were concerned with giving help for the persecutions common to all and neglect the outpouring of wrath in which the believer would need special help and assistance. . . . Inasmuch as persecutions of this age and the wrath of the seventieth week vary in kind and character, not just in intensity, it is not sufficient to say that if one is prepared for the lesser he will be also for the greater. The silence in the Epistles which would leave the church unprepared for the tribulation argues for her absence from that period altogether” (*Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958], 211). While not wanting to engage fully the prospect of Pentecost’s argument, it is valuable in reminding us that there is quite a distinction between the tribulations of the Thessalonians and those of the formal tribulation period. The post-trib position does not easily take into account this qualitative difference.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see Gundry, “Church and Tribulation,” 112-13.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Stanton follows Ryrie in this argumentation (reprint ed., *Kept From the Hour* [Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1991], 352.

removal of persecution. In Ryrie’s words, “the posttrib view has the passage jumbled because it gets the apostle’s subject wrong.”<sup>32</sup>

The discussion begins in verse seven with the meaning of the word relief (ἄνεσις). The word generally carries the idea of *rest, relaxation, freedom, liberty, or relief*.<sup>33</sup> Hiebert notes “the word carries the picture of the loosening or relaxing of a taut bowstring, hence suggests the thought of relief through the relaxing of tension or pressure. It thus suggests rest, not from toil and fatigue, but from tension and suffering.”<sup>34</sup> With this characterization virtually all would agree. However, the post-trib advocate often stops at that point and sees the content of the relaxing as merely the absence of the suffering. As shown before, this allows the generation of a so-called problem for the pre-trib view since such release would happen at least seven years earlier. However, structural analysis and an examination of contextual developments in the passage suggest that the relaxation is filled with much more content, which allows the pre-trib advocate to make his case more strongly.

2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 yields a telescopic structure wherein later verses encompass and expand upon earlier ideas. This ties the relief or relaxation of verse seven to the larger idea of vindication, which Ryrie had suggested. The structure could be demonstrated as below:

v. 3	Paul gives thanks for the example of the Thessalonians		
v. 4	Paul shares the example of the Thessalonians with other churches, especially concerning their faithful perseverance under persecution		
v. 5	The persecution of the Thessalonians and/or the way they were handling the persecution is a “sign” of the following:	<b>God’s righteous judgment so that the Thessalonians can be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which they are suffering</b>	
v. 6-7a	God will . . .	<b>1. Repay those who persecute you (v. 6)</b>	<b>2. Give relief, rest to you, the Thessalonians, and us, the apostles (v. 7a)</b>
v. 7b-12		<b>1. Jesus with His mighty angels in flaming fire deals out retribution to unbelievers who will be punished with eternal destruction (v. 7b-9)</b>	<b>2. Jesus will be glorified in His saints (v. 10-12)</b>

There is a parallelism that exists within the passage as Paul expands his meaning throughout. After the introductory verses (3 & 4), verse five gives the summary statement of encouragement for the Thessalonians. This summary declaration includes an affirmation of God's future righteous judgment, which is going to be applied later in the passage in two different ways, negatively and positively. Verses 6-7a apply the statement in a more personal way to the Thessalonians. Negatively, God will repay their persecutors. Positively, they will experience relief. Verses 7b-12 is parallel to verses 6-7a and gives an expansion of what Paul means by his earlier statements, thus giving the passage its

<sup>32</sup> Ryrie, *Come Quickly*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “ἄνεσις.”

<sup>34</sup> Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 287.

telescopic nature. Negatively, when Jesus comes He will punish all unbelievers (v. 7b-9). Positively, Jesus will be glorified in His saints (v. 10-12). In this expansion by Paul, the subject is not limited to the Thessalonians and their persecutors or even to a first century group of people. All unbelievers and all saints are in view. This points the interpreter in the direction of seeing the passage in a broad eschatological sense.

It is important to remember that these two tracks, positive and negative, help to frame the entire passage, including the implications of the relief or rest promised to the Thessalonians. In a general way, the two tracks deal with the retributive justice of God and the compensatory justice of God, respectively.<sup>35</sup> The reference to "God's righteous judgment" (v. 5) encompasses both tracks. One day God will make all things right. The destruction of the persecutors of the Thessalonians is only implicit in verse five but made explicit in the next verse. What is explicit in verse five is that the Thessalonians could consider themselves worthy of God's coming kingdom, which, according to the rest of the passage, will begin at the Second Advent. Thus, the entire passage begins with at least a hint of kingdom promise and not merely the absence of temporal suffering on the part of the Thessalonians as the major point.

This leads to a more specific examination of the parallelism of the *relief* mentioned in v. 7a and the *glorification* that is mentioned in verse ten. Hendrickson argues that there is a connection between relief and glorification in the passage in such a way that Paul's discussion of the latter is a continuation of his discussion of the former: "this rest which they will enjoy means glory for him."<sup>36</sup> The Greek expression for "to be glorified in His saints" (v. 10) is quite emphatic. Morris comments

The verb "glorified" is an unusual compound (only here and v. 12 in the New Testament), the preposition "in" being prefixed. Then it is repeated before "saints." The meaning probably is that He will not only be glorified "among" them, but "in" them. On the great day it is not only the Lord Himself who will be glorious, but His glory will also be seen in the saints. The thought may be that they have been redeemed and indwelt by the Lord, and that this will cause the angels to ascribe glory to the Lord. . . . But it seems more likely that the idea is that of the Lord's glory being shared with or mirrored in His people. They are one with Him and they will share His glory.<sup>37</sup>

This statement reflects what Ryrie means when he maintains that the main subject of the entire passage is the vindication of the saints.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Paul's message is not that the Thessalonians should take heart in the midst of their present suffering because the rapture of the Church is going to remove immediately the experience of suffering. It is that the Thessalonians should be encouraged because they have a divinely sanctioned and special place in His coming kingdom when all in the universe will know who they really are in Christ. The resulting experience of all believers, not just the Thessalonians, will be the removal of all persecution and the institution of kingdom hope. Paul had

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<sup>35</sup> This language is borrowed from Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 223.

<sup>36</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 161.

<sup>37</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 207.

<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that Ryrie's understanding of this vindication expressed earlier includes both the positive and negative tracks inherent in the passage's structure. Others correctly see vindication as the main theme of the passage but come short of Ryrie's conclusion. For example, Polhill does not go far enough when he says "the emphasis is on God's vindicating the Thessalonians by punishing their persecutors" (John B. Polhill, "Hope in the Lord: Introduction to 1-2 Thessalonians, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [Fall 1999], 38).

suggested such an outcome when twice in the passage he reminds the Thessalonians of the issue of their worthiness with respect to God's coming kingdom (v. 5, 11).<sup>39</sup>

What really is the significance of this idea that the structure of the passage suggests a larger framework and meaning for the concept of relief given in verse seven? It means that the post-trib advocate cannot appeal quite so strongly to the simultaneous removal of persecution and the revelation of Christ to suggest a post-trib rapture (v. 7). Paul's concept of relief as framed by the entire passage apparently includes more than the simple removal of persecution. It is the positive track of the passage, which in the end helps the pre-trib adherent to explain the passage more carefully within his pre-trib system.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

One major post-trib strategy is to argue that the pre-trib position cannot effectively handle the specific teaching in 2 Thessalonians 1 that the relief given to the Thessalonians occurs at the same time as the visible appearing of Christ at the Second Advent. It would maintain that the pre-trib advocate must argue that such relief occurs at least seven years earlier. This leaves the pre-trib viewpoint in the throes of a contradiction within its theological system. Amillennial interpreters of the passage have argued in a similar way contra the pre-trib position.

Three various pre-trib responses to such arguments have been mentioned. First, the revelation spoken of in the passage refers to the pre-trib rapture itself. Following this understanding all of the events described in the passage are unified in a pre-trib rapture. This approach avoids the pitfall of seven years separating the giving of relief and the coming of the Lord as understood in this passage. One disadvantage of this view is that the judgment language throughout 2 Thessalonians 1 does not really fit other descriptions of the rapture including those given by the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians themselves (1 Thess. 4:13-18). The only recourse is to see the revelation/rapture in the passage as marking the beginning of the tribulation period with its judgments upon the lost world and to see the flaming fire described in the passage as referring metaphorically to those events.

A second interpretation is that the revelation refers to a complex of events covering the time period from the rapture to the visible Second Coming. This viewpoint has the advantage that the term revelation need not be a technical term and thus can possibly have such meaning. Furthermore, there is still a kind of unity in the view, which would be necessary in light of the tenor of the passage. Moreover, even those who are not pre-trib admit that other eschatological truths such as events framed by the millennium require an understanding of a complex of events. Nonetheless, the simplest reading of the passage seems to suggest that the relief and revelation involve a singular moment rather than a complex of events. These first two pre-trib schemes were introduced by Feinberg's response to Moo's post-trib use of 2 Thessalonians 1. While there are issues to be grappled with for each view, there is a plausible way of constructing the position in these ways.

A third way that was proposed and accepted was that of Charles Ryrie. It is the often overlooked view that believes (from within the framework of the pre-trib position) that the pre-trib rapture is simply not in view in the passage at all. All of the events are at the visible appearing of

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<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that Paul's emphasis on their worthiness does not contradict the Pauline idea of grace as 1 Thessalonians 1:12 attests.

<sup>40</sup> It is difficult to resist the temptation to link this discussion to Acts 3:19-21 which describes the Second Advent as bringing in times of refreshing and restitution.

Christ. Furthermore, the idea of relief must be understood as more than the removal of temporal suffering on the part of the Thessalonians and must include the ultimate removal of all oppression and the positive vindication and manifestation of the sons of God to the world. This view has the advantage that it preserves the unity of the two events, the giving of relief and the visible appearing of Christ. In addition, it does justice to the entire structure and eschatological context of the passage and harmonizes well with the absence of rapture language in the chapter.

In the end, this paper does not prove the pre-trib rapture. However, it does show that 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 can be harmonized plausibly with the doctrine of the pre-trib rapture of the Church and that posttribulational and amillennial arguments to the contrary cannot be maintained with any forcefulness. Consequently, the ultimate debate over rapture positions must be settled in other passages. The post-trib or amillennial interpreter will find no smoking gun here.