



LESSON 30

Foundations Curriculum

The Secret Rapture?

By Marcos Moraes, Benito Lopez, Gilberto Bajo

Introduction

The Secret Rapture?

In this thirtieth lesson, we will talk about pre-tribulationism. Its defenders believe that the church will be raptured before the beginning of the Great Tribulation, and that Jesus may come at any moment, invisibly, to take the church in a secret rapture. We will compare this view with the views of Jesus and the apostles and point out the contradictions.

Pre-tribulationism is a view according to which the church will be raptured before the beginning of the Great Tribulation. For its defenders, there will be a secret rapture: Jesus may come at any moment, invisibly, and will rapture the church. Only after this will the antichrist be revealed and manifest himself, and the tribulation will begin.

During a period of 7 years, there will be new converts, and a tribulation church will arise. After that time, Jesus will return, visibly and gloriously, to destroy the antichrist and establish his thousand-year reign.

It is important for us to make clear that this theory is recent. We find no mention of pre-tribulationism in the early church, and for eighteen centuries this view was not taught.

In 1830, in England, a brother named Nelson Darby began to teach on the subject. Going to the United States, he was received by Cyrus Scofield, a well-known Bible commentator and one of the greatest promoters of this idea. Pre-tribulationism was widely promoted among Americans.

We have in the teaching of the early church our greatest reference point. It is there that we find the truths we believe, intact, before many deviations were incorporated over the course of history; it is a safeguard for us to check what existed there from the beginning.

Let us go on to list the biblical evidence that shows that pre-tribulationism is a mistake.

1) It Is Contrary to the Teaching of Jesus

In the chronology given by Jesus, we have six moments: it is not yet the end; the beginning of sorrows; the great tribulation; the sun is darkened and the powers of the heavens are shaken; the sign of the Son of Man; the rapture — the gathering of the elect. Pre-tribulationism presents a different chronology: first, the secret rapture, followed by the great tribulation; then the sun is darkened and the powers of the heavens are shaken; and finally the visible coming of Jesus. In light of the above, pre-tribulationism diverges from the teaching of Jesus.

2) It Is Contrary to the Teaching of the Apostles

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, Paul's teaching is clear and literal: he states that the coming of the Lord and our being gathered together to him will only occur after two events: the apostasy and the revealing of the man of lawlessness (the great tribulation). The chronologies presented by the apostle Paul and by Jesus are the same. The base texts (Matthew 24 and 2 Thessalonians 2) are clear and do not require interpretation.

3) It Confuses Tribulation with the Wrath of God

Pre-tribulationists claim that the church will be kept from the wrath of God, which is true. But they believe that the church will be taken out before the great tribulation, and this is a mistake, because tribulation is not the same as the wrath of God. The great tribulation is something that will be brought about by the antichrist against the church and against the Jews; the wrath of God is not brought about by any man — it is the Lord Himself bringing judgment and punishment against the nations. These are events that occur at different times: the tribulation will happen right at the beginning of the antichrist's manifestation, as we learn from Jesus in Matthew 24. The wrath of God, however, begins after those great cataclysms: the sun is darkened, the moon gives no light, the stars fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens are shaken, according to the prophet Joel.

And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.

Joel 2:30–31 (NKJV)

Tribulation and wrath are two completely distinct events, separated by the darkening of the sun.

4) The First Resurrection Would Have to Happen in Several Stages

(Revelation 20:5) Pre-tribulationists use many texts that confirm the persecution of the church. Both in Daniel and in Revelation there are clear texts that speak of the persecution of the saints and martyrs who will die for the name of the Lord. But since they propose that the church will be raptured before the great tribulation, they believe that a church will arise during the tribulation. This is a great confusion, because if the church could not suffer the great tribulation, then the new church should not be able to either. They also argue that it is the Holy Spirit in the church who

restrains the manifestation of the antichrist. It is contradictory for a church full of the Holy Spirit to arise while he (the antichrist) manifests himself.

We might ask: if the secret rapture happens before the great tribulation, and during the great tribulation new converts arise, when will they take part in the first resurrection? There would need to be more than one “first resurrection” for them to be raised. We see that this teaching keeps running into conflicts with the Word of the Lord.

Up to this point, we have covered the arguments found in the Scriptures that strengthen the understanding that the church will go through the great tribulation.

This idea of pre-tribulationism is called imminence — that is, Jesus may come at any hour, even while we are here, and we would be caught by surprise.

Put another way, nothing would need to happen first; no prophecy would need to be fulfilled before Jesus returns and raptures the church.

It is striking that the creators of this theory thought this way even at a time when God had not yet restored the land to Israel — a fact that took place in the last century. So even while believing a prophecy that speaks about Israel, they believed that Jesus could come at any moment, showing a lack of critical thinking.

The proposal of imminence tries to rest on those texts that convey the idea of surprise — that show Jesus speaking about watching — but above all on those that mention that he comes like a thief. The impression given is that Jesus can come at any hour, because a thief comes without warning.

We agree that there is a real difficulty, because many prophecies indicate surprise on the earth when Jesus appears. There are prophecies showing that Jesus comes like a thief. But there are others showing that there will be signs before his coming.

How do we resolve these questions? Are there signs that will clearly appear before Jesus comes, or could he come today without those signs being fulfilled?

The defenders of imminence sought to solve an apparent problem, but the solution they found does not agree with biblical teaching. They become confused by claiming that these texts are speaking of two distinct comings: one coming for the church and another coming for the earth. The coming for the church would be imminent, at any hour. Then the signs would be fulfilled, and Jesus, seven years later, would descend to the earth.

We need a solution that does not contradict what Jesus and the apostles taught. In fact, the texts that seem to be contradictory are not referring to two comings, but to two different kinds of people at the Lord's return:

- 01 those who watch and are alert, like the wise virgins;
- 02 those who, by not watching, will be caught by surprise.

Let us cite a text that confirms what we are saying.

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.

1 Thessalonians 5:1–4 (NKJV)

Here the apostle Paul confirms that the church will not be caught by surprise, because those who are watching are looking at the signs. In this way, the problem is resolved.

We recognize that in the Lord's return there will be several distinct events, just as there were in his first coming. The first coming did not happen only in Bethlehem; it began nine months earlier, when Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb. Then came his birth, followed by a long history of thirty-three years, whose events are known to us.

The second coming of the Lord will likewise not be made up of a single event. We understand that there are two distinct moments. Our meeting with the Lord in the air is one, and the descent of Jesus, mentioned in Zechariah 14, when his feet touch the Mount of Olives, is another moment. They are different events, but there is no biblical evidence that they are secret.

Let us examine the most common arguments put forward by pre-tribulationists.

One of these claims that in Matthew 24, Jesus is not speaking to the church. Because he mentions Judea — "let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" — for them, the text proves that the prophecy was being given to the Jews and not to the church.

Examining the text, we see that Jesus was saying these things in a private conversation with the disciples. The text of Mark (13:3) shows us that there were four of them: Peter, James, John, and Andrew. This was Jesus' target audience — his disciples, who received all of his teaching and passed it on to us.

Some, when confronted with this problem, say that up to verse 14 Jesus is speaking to the church, but that from verse 15 on, the church has already been raptured, and he begins speaking to the Jews. We consider this approach inconsistent, because in verse 9 Jesus says, "you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake."

Indeed, up to verse 14, Jesus is speaking to the church, because the Jews were never hated anywhere for the name of Jesus, except for those who converted and became the church of the Lord.

The flaw in this argument — that from verse 15 on Jesus would be speaking to the Jews — is quite rudimentary. Beyond the theological problems, it reveals a failure in the interpretation of the text.

Jesus is speaking to a group, always using the second person plural — "you": "let no one deceive you," "you will be afflicted," "they will kill you," "you will be hated"; and after verse 15 he continues with the same address: "if anyone says to you," "I have told you."

If we can choose what “is for us and what is for the Jews,” what criterion will we use to separate one from the other? We would be left with no criterion at all.

This freedom to say that this is for some and that is for others allowed Scofield, in his annotated Bible, to say that the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, 7) is not for the church, but is a set of rules for the Kingdom in the Millennium. Let us take note that this way of thinking exposes us to error.

A second argument, much used by them, is that the word “church” does not appear in the book of Revelation, which they claim indicates that the church has already been raptured.

Besides being mistaken, this argument is quite naive, because the word “church” does not appear in six epistles: 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 and 2 Peter, 2 John, and the book of Jude. Would we then be saying that these epistles are not for us, but for the Jews? This is another great error of argumentation.

Along the same line, we can cite the texts that speak of our union with Christ, found in John 14, 1 Corinthians 15, and 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, where the word “church” is not present. Should we build doctrine based on the absence of a word?

A third argument that needs to be addressed has to do with the attempt to base an argument on the letter to the church of Philadelphia, found in Revelation, to say that the church will be kept out of the great tribulation.

Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

Revelation 3:10 (NKJV)

For these brothers and sisters, the letters were written to those churches there in Asia, but they also refer to various eras of the church — to the seven periods of church history.

This is an interpretation that has convinced many. In their view, we would be in the era of the church of Laodicea.

The main reasons we have to refute these ideas are the following:

01 The seven churches of Asia truly existed. This is not something that can be spiritualized. The letters were sent to them addressing real situations they were going through.

02 How would those brothers and sisters have been helped in the suffering they were going through by letters that referred to other people in the future and not to themselves?

This proposal that the seven churches represent the seven eras of the church has some interesting parallels, but the great majority of them do not fit.

Many of these parallels are forced. For example, saying that the church of Laodicea could be the church of today. If the reference were to the church of Europe, it might be possible to call it the church of Laodicea. But when it comes to the church in the third world, the picture is different:

more brothers and sisters have died, persecuted for their love of the Lord, in this past century than in all the centuries of church history combined. So it is not correct to say that the church of our time is the church of Laodicea, since there have never been as many martyrs as there are today.

In Revelation 4, after hearing the voice speak about the letters, John hears a voice again:

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this."

Revelation 4:1 (NKJV)

In other words, it is starting at chapter 4 that he begins to receive future revelations — not before. It is obvious that the characteristics seen in the seven churches are also found today. But we consider it very forced to think that in Revelation 3:10 Jesus would be referring to the rapture before the tribulation. This is an inference drawn from a relatively recent theory.

A reading of the literature produced by these brothers and sisters shows how dedicated they have been to spiritualizing the entire biblical text, always looking for hidden revelations.

So, if it is not referring to the rapture of the church, let us consider what the text of Revelation 3:10 does refer to. We consider it a plausible possibility that Jesus is promising the church of Philadelphia that it would be protected and would not fall to the Islamic Empire. This empire came out of Arabia, centuries later, invaded North Africa and Asia Minor (where the seven churches were, and which today is Turkey), drawing near to Vienna and threatening freedom of faith throughout the known world of that time.

Testimonies confirm that even today, 2,000 years after this word, Philadelphia — today the Turkish city of Alaşehir — still has a strong Christian presence. This was the fulfillment of the promise Jesus gave. As for the other six churches of Revelation, all of them disappeared.

In other words, the deliverance God gives us is not always removing us from tribulation, but giving us the capacity to face that tribulation. We believe Jesus is doing this in the church today, preparing us for the days to come. Those who are not watching will be caught by surprise; but for the saints, this day will not come like a thief.

Pre-tribulationists also raise a question about the character of God. They claim that God is good, that he is love, and that he will not allow the church to suffer. He will not allow the church to go through this great tribulation.

However, as we have already said, the church will be kept from the day of wrath that will be brought about by God against the nations. But it will go through the great tribulation that the antichrist will bring about against the saints.

This idea that God will not let the righteous suffer is not true. Throughout the history of the church there has always been suffering among the saints; there have always been martyrs. This suffering began already at the start of the church, when all the brothers and sisters had to flee Jerusalem because of the persecution that came. Later, many righteous ones were thrown to lions, burned alive, tortured, or killed. The Lord is glorified when his children suffer for love of his name.

A statistic from the Open Doors mission warns that in the 20th century there were more Christian martyrs than in all the other 19 centuries before it, combined. It would be incorrect to claim that there will be no suffering in the last days.

One final point to observe about the dangers of pre-tribulationist teaching, in claiming that the church will not be here when the antichrist rises up and when the great tribulation happens, has to do with the deception and confusion that will occur among believers.

Because they are not expecting to see these events, they will not recognize the lawless one when he manifests himself, and they may be deceived. They will also be completely unprepared for the persecution and suffering that the church will go through during that period.

For this reason, the apostasy — a great mass of believers will abandon faith in Jesus to follow the antichrist.

The end is very near. We need to be prepared for everything that is going to happen, so that none of us is caught by surprise.

CONCLUSION

In this thirtieth lesson of the Foundations Curriculum, we learned about pre-tribulationism. This doctrine advocates the idea that the church will be raptured before the beginning of the Great Tribulation. For its defenders, Jesus may come at any moment, invisibly, and will rapture the church in a secret rapture. We have seen that this view contradicts the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. We need to be watchful and prepared for the persecution and suffering that the church will go through during the great tribulation.

CONSIDER CAREFULLY

- 01 Name at least 2 arguments that show that pre-tribulationism is mistaken.
- 02 Why is the second coming of the Lord not imminent?
- 03 Paul said that Jesus comes like a thief. So will all the disciples be caught by surprise?
- 04 What is the harm in believing in a rapture before the great tribulation?

*having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.*

Ephesians 2:20 (NKJV)

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contato@fundamentos.me | fundamentos.me