

A Friendly Conversation with a Proponent of Pre-Trib Dispensationalism

James-Michael Smith

www.jmsmith.org

I. On Jesus' words in Matthew 24-25

Pre-Trib Disp: *I believe Jesus was referring to the generation that would not only see the signs, but most importantly, experience the "birth pains". The birth pains He mentioned to me indicates that all the wars, famines, plagues, natural disasters etc. are going to get progressively worse and on a more epic scale, just as the pains of birth get worse and more frequent.*

JM: This is the only way that the Pre-trib view can work. Unfortunately, the discourse is pretty clear in multiple ways that Jesus is speaking to His disciples about their own current generation-- just as He had when He spoke elsewhere in Matthew about "this generation":

"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." 'But wisdom is proved right by her actions.'" **Matthew 11:16-19**

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation." **Matthew 12:39-45**

A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away. **Matthew 16:4**

"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. **Matthew 17:17-18**

Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. **Matthew 23:34-36**

The generation being spoken of is definitely Jesus' contemporary generation. Now look at His words regarding the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem which many have mistakenly interpreted as a primarily a prediction of a Pre-trib Rapture scenario:

Matthew 24:1 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.

2 "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

4 Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains.

9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. 10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

15 "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel-- let the reader understand-- 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. 18 Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. 19 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now-- and never to be equaled again. 22 If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.

23 At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great

signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible. 25 See, I have told you ahead of time. 26 "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 27 For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28 Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

29 "Immediately after the distress of those days "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.' 30 "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of Heaven, with power and great glory. 31 And he will send his angels/messengers with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

32 "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 33 Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. 34 I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

In Jewish Apocalyptic fashion, Jesus takes their question about the end of their age and His teaching about the destruction of Jerusalem and uses it to describe the events that will accompany it. And while this certainly does function as a prophetic "type" of the ultimate final coming in Judgment at the end of history, the primary emphasis is on Jesus' own generation--the 40 years between His death and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

To read all of this as describing only a future time of suffering (and add in a notion of a 'rapture') is simply not grammatically or contextually plausible. One must first arrive at a Pre-trib Rapture theology, as John Nelson Darby did in the 1850s and then read this passage (and its parallels in the other synoptic Gospels) through the lens of that system. But this is *reading into Scripture* rather than interpreting its original meaning.

II. On current world events resembling Jesus' words

Pre-Trib Disp: But you have to admit that with the weapons and technology we have today that the stakes have increased exponentially. We now have the ability to exterminate everyone in the world, or control them through technology (cybernetic implants, tracking devices, etc.). Look around at how weather patterns have changed, how hurricanes are so much worse, how much of the earth is turning to desert. Look at the famines and diseases like AIDS that ravage the world. Look at the anti-Christian activism all over the world. In Europe, once the most zealous continent, less than 5% of the population even attends church now. Islam/terrorism is spreading. Everything the Pretrib Disp crowd has been predicting for years is happening today. The world is turning more and more against God each day. How long will He allow it to go on?

JM: While this description of the world seems accurate from our perspective, this exact argument has been used by every single generation since the middle ages as evidence that they were near the end of things. In otherwords, there has never been since Jesus when the world was not going through famines, droughts, earthquakes, wars, disease (black plague?), and other massive suffering.

But if we read Jesus' words as Apocalyptic descriptions of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (He employs OT imagery describing the destruction of various nations hundreds of years before), then we won't make the mistake that every successive generation has made in trying to fit current events to these particular images.

Pre-Trib Disp: *Ah yes, but the descriptions of how things will be in the Tribulation are completely different from history up to that time.*

Mark 13:19

"because those will be days of distress unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now and never to be equaled again."

The wars, persecution, etc. of history have been horrible, but the Tribulation will be Satan's final attempt to wipe all trace of God from the earth.

JM: If Jesus had never spoken in hyperbole, then I could concede this point to you. However, Jesus frequent use of hyperbole, combined with the already Apocalyptic nature of the imagery being used (stars falling from the sky, etc.), combined with the amazing atrocities that Josephus reports as having taken place during the seige in 70 A.D. (see the attached page with Josephus' account of the destruction of the Temple and the unheard-of horrors that accompanied it!), it seems much more probable that Jesus is primarily referring to the period between 30-70A.D. which may possibly foreshadow the future time right up until His actual return at the End of the Age.

III. On Jesus prediction of some being taken and some being "left behind."

Pre-Trib Disp: *Just like God saved Noah and his family from the wrath that He unleashed upon the rest of the world, so God will Rapture Christians out of the world before the Tribulation. Noah suffered before he entered the ark, but God spared him from the final judgment that the wicked endured. I think it would be against God's love to indiscriminately wipe out all his followers along with the rest of the world.*

JM: I don't think one can take a single example such as Noah, and therefore conclude that God will always spare His people from catastrophic suffering. He didn't do it for Christians under Domitian's reign. He hasn't done it for the Christians in Darfur. He hasn't done it for the Christians in China. He didn't do it during the destruction of the Roman Empire. And Jesus' words in the Olivet Discourse above seem to teach that if His followers are to avoid such suffering, it is up to them to flee from it and wait for the sign of the Coming of the Son of Man. Only those who have come out of "the tribulation" (the primary characteristic John chose to use to describe life in Christ in Rev. 1:9) via natural death or martyrdom are finally able to rest forever in the presence of God (see the 5th seal in Revelation as well as the description of God's followers and their ultimate destiny in 7:13-17). The "wiping out" that God's followers will not have to endure will be the one that really counts--the final Judgment!

IV. On the chronology of Revelation

Pre-Trib Disp: *I found this to help explain the Pretrib Disp viewpoint on this for those interested:*

The 7 Churches in Revelation: This tradition also views the 7 churches in Revelation as prophecizing the 7 stages in Church history. One interpretation describes these 7 churches as the Patient Church (1st Century), the Persecuted Church (100-316), the Polluted Church (316-500), the Paganized Church (500-1500), the Peculiar Church (1500-1750), the Pure Church (1750-1910) and the Passive Church (1910-?). The present church age is equated with the lukewarm church of Laodicea, as one Brethren writer described:

Whatever interpretation we may take of the book of Revelation, it is undeniable that the church of Laodicea presents a vivid picture of the age in which we now live. Luxury-living abounds on every hand while souls are dying for want of the Gospel of Christ... There is no sense of spiritual need, no longing for true revival...

This is our condition on the eve of Christ's return.

[Found at <http://www.deliriumsrealm.com/delirium/articleview.asp?Post=32>]

JM: The biggest problem I see with this interpretation (aside from it having never been held by any interpreter of Revelation up until John Nelson Darby and C.I. Scofield!) is that it is irredeemably subjective and Euro-Amero-centric. What I mean is that these "ages" of the church are not based on anything authoritative or factual. They are simply the view of interpreters in the 19th and 20th centuries of the church in previous centuries.

Furthermore, when you study Church History, you see that these titles only apply to some of the church some of the time. They also only really apply to European and North American experience of Church. Take for instance the example of they give of the modern church being like the church at Laodicea. Far from being "undeniable", I would argue that it is absolutely deniable that luxury living and spiritual apathy describe the current age of the church--except maybe in mainline churches in North America and Europe! The vast majority of Christians live in the southern Hemisphere and are non-European, non-white. They are anything BUT representative of Laodicea. Whether it's the underground house churches in China and central Asia, the charismatic churches in Latin America, the indigenous churches in Sub-Saharan Africa, or the fiercely evangelistic churches in Korea, the state of the church in our culture is not justification for imposing these purely futurist labels to the seven churches in Revelation 1-3.

Pre-Trib Disp: So then you don't think Revelation is to be read chronologically? Please give some evidence of this non-chronological view.

JM: The cycles of Judgment represented by the 3 sevens (seals, trumpets, bowls) all seem to lead right up until the final judgment, only to then jump back to an earlier point and begin again. Also, the allegory of the woman, her child, and the dragon depicts broadly the casting down of satan, his attempt to destroy God's people, and God's protection of them from spiritual destruction during their time in a dangerous world where they are aliens and exiles. Other examples could be given, but they are not recognized by those who first assume that the text must be chronological. Rather, various attempts to chronologize and harmonize all the images ensue. Sources that explain the often non-chronological nature of Jewish Apocalypse, and specifically Revelation, would be:

[Revelation and the End of All Things](#) by Craig Koester

[The Theology of the Book of Revelation](#) by Richard Bauckham

[The Throne, the Lamb, and the Dragon](#) by Paul Spilsbury

[The Revelation of St. John](#) by G.B. Caird

The Book of Revelation (NIGTC commentary series) by Greg Beale
The Climax of Prophecy by Richard Bauckham

V. On the nature of the Rapture

Pre-Trib Disp: *1 Thessalonians 4:16 says He will "come down from heaven", He won't actually come to earth. This is explained in the next verse where it says, "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air". To me, this is not the second coming. This is us going to be with Him. It will be a victory procession, because we will at last be at peace in heaven with God.*

JM: This is something I actually agree with you on in principle, just not in timing! This is definitely the language of a victory procession where we meet our conquering Lord and go to be at peace with Him. However, we don't go back to Heaven with Him; we accompany Him to the New Creation, our glorified/resurrected state of existence with Him on the New Earth.

Pre-Trib Disp: *This sure is a lot to wade through!*

JM: This is something else we totally agree on! :) Study of eschatology is quite challenging and time-consuming! However, it's something that we are called to do, in order that we may accurately handle the Word of Truth and give a reason to anyone who asks of the faith we have. A lack of proper attention to eschatology was, I believe, the cause of this reactionary Dispensational Rapture theology that arose in the 1800's.

I believe a healthy, critical, Biblical re-examination is always in order. For instance, I myself seem to waver between an Historical Premillennial position and an Amillennial one. Both have strengths and both have weaknesses—but both have been embraced by brilliant and Godly Christians in every era of the Church's existence. This cannot be said about the Dispensational Premillennial position—which is one of the primary red flags we should take note of.