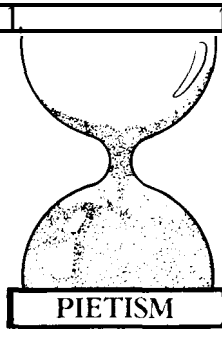




Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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"THE GREAT JUBILEE" (Part 12 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36) by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Th.D.

Our text for consideration this month is Matthew 24:31: "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Dispensational Cacophonism

The surface appearance of an eschatological rapture in this verse would seem to lend itself quite easily to the dispensational system. Were there to be a dispensational type rapture, certain expressions in this verse would certainly seem to suggest it: "they will gather together His elect from the four winds," at the "trumpet" sound issued by "angels." Yet dispensationalism has such a pandemonium of theological qualifications, historical compartments, redemptive peoples, eschatological phenomena, revelational programs, law principles, and so forth,¹ that this passage really pushes the system to further unbearable clifficulties.²

Walvoord writes of this verse: "Some³ have taken the elect here to refer specifically to the elect living on earth, but it is more probable that this event will include all the elect, or the saved, including Old Testament saints, saved Israel, the church,⁴ and the saints of the Tribulation period leading up to the Second Coming. Some will need to be resurrected from the dead, such as the martyrs (Rev. 20:4-6) and the Old Testament saints (Dan. 12:2). The church was resurrected, or transited, earlier, at the time of the Rapture. At the second coming of Christ no child of God will be left unresurrected or unrestored, but all will share in the millennial kingdom."⁵

Notice the multiplicity of groups Walvoord mentions here. The postmillennial conception of the general resurrection divides people into two classes: the saved and the lost. But when talk of resurrection arises, advocates of the "plain, simple, face value literalistic hermeneutic" have to herd all the various classes of peoples off to their respective programs, resurrections, judgments, rewards, eternal destinies, and so forth.

For example, notice the following partial listing of judgments by Walvoord: "According to the Scriptures a series

of judgments is related to Christ's return. . . . [T]he martyred dead of the Great Tribulation will be judged and rewarded [Rev. 20:4]. In addition, Israel will be judged (Ezek. 20:33-38), and the Gentiles will be judged (Matt. 25:31-46). These judgments precede and lead up to the millennial kingdom."⁶ Thus, "while all the righteous will be raised before the Millennium, individuals will retain their identities and their group identifications such as Gentile believers and believers in Israel in the Old Testament, the church of the New Testament, and saints of the Tribulation."⁷

In Matthew 24:31, then, Walvoord has to define the elect in terms of the various dispensationally imposed categories: "Old Testament saints, saved Israel, the church, and the saints of the Tribulation period." Fortunately, the timing of this resurrection is such that it does not have to account for another group of the righteous: those who die in the millennium after having been converted to Christ during the millennium!⁸ Walvoord explains that the "first resurrection" language of Revelation 20 actually "supports the conclusion that the resurrection of the righteous is by stages." These stages include the church at the Rapture, the two witnesses in the Tribulation, the martyred of the Tribulation soon after Christ's return to earth, and the Old Testament saints.⁹

And this is the system that claims two physical resurrections on the basis of a literal approach to Revelation 20? But now back to Matthew 24:31 specifically.

Postmillennial Jubilee

A far preferable approach to Matthew 24:31 would be to see it symbolically trumpeting the ultimate Jubilee Year, the time of the forgiveness of man's ultimate debt, that is, the day of salvation. That is, by employing imagery drawn from the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25, the Lord here speaks of the final stage of redemption. This redemptive culmination was begun in His ministry (Mark 1:15) and sealed at the destruction of Jerusalem (Mark 9:1). The levitical Jubilee law was a ceremonial law that previewed the coming of full forgiveness in the Messiah and the incorporation of the nations into the people of God (Eph. 2:12-21).

1. Apparently, God's eschatological program is controlled by one large computer task switching software program. O, what tangled webs we weave!

2. This may explain Walvoord's facial expression in his picture on the dust jacket of his *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990).

3. One of the "some" is J. Dwight Pentecost, who teaches that this verse speaks of the "regathering of Israel." Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 282; Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), p. 255.

4. Pentecost comments: "the reference to 'his elect' (v. 31) could not possibly refer to the church." Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 255.

5. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 390.

6. Walvoord, "Revelation," in Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), New Testament, p. 980.

7. *Ibid.* Frankly, I hope all the players get team colors so we can tell them apart! Maybe a literalistic approach to Revelation will explain all the white, gold, scarlet, etc., garments in terms of team sports!

8. "In the millennial kingdom it will be a time of great joy and rejoicing and deliverance for the people of God, but death and sin will still be present." Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 119. In fact, Walvoord seems oblivious to the fate of deceased millennial saints, for he never mentions them in his Revelation exposition in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

9. Walvoord, *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (New Testament), p. 980.

The pattern of the Old Testament Jubilee Year was that it followed after seven consecutive sabbath years. The sabbath year was a God-ordained year of rest for the land in the seventh year. The Year of Jubilee occurred after the passing of seven sevens, or after the forty-ninth year.¹⁰ It was the culmination of all of the sabbatical tokens of rest.

In the Year of Jubilee, Israel experienced release from bondage and debt: "And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; and each of you shall return to his possession, and each of you shall return to his family. That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee to you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of its own accord, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine. For it is the Jubilee; it shall be holy to you; you shall eat its produce from the field. In this Year of Jubilee, each of you shall return to his possession. And if you sell anything to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor's hand, you shall not oppress one another" (Lev. 25:10-14).

The typology of redemption contained in the Jubilee legislation lent itself to prophetic usefulness. Isaiah employed Jubilee language to prophesy of the coming antitypical Jubilee: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:1-2).

The Lord Jesus Himself introduced the fulfillment of the Jubilee Law in His ministry, when He preached at the Temple from Isaiah 61: "And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the LORD.' Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:17-21). Thus, with Christ's coming we have introduced "the Acceptable Year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19), "the Day of Salvation" (2 Cor. 6:6), which the righteous of the Old Testament had longed to see (Matt. 13:17).

This is why the Lord mentions the Jubilee "trumpet." According to Christ's teaching in Matthew 24:31, and following upon the collapse of the Temple order, His "an-

gels" will go forth to all nations joyfully trumpeting the gospel of salvific liberation: "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

The word "angels" here is in the Greek *aggeloi*. It can and should be translated "messengers," signifying *human* messengers. It does not refer to supernatural angelic beings here. (The word clearly refers to human "messengers" in Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52.) All those who know Christ as Lord and Savior are to go forth to all the earth proclaiming the message of full and free salvation, the removal of man's ultimate debt to God.

It is particularly after the fall of Jerusalem that the Church is freed from its bondage to Judaism. This is so that it might become a truly universal Church, rather than a Jewish dominated Church (see the pre-A. D. 70 problems plaguing early Jewish-oriented Christianity in Acts 15, Galatians, and Hebrews).¹¹

Through gospel preaching, the elect are gathered into the kingdom of God from the four corners of the world. The phrase "from one end of heaven to the other" indicates from horizon to horizon (Deut. 30:4; Neh. 1:9) and thus parallels "from the four winds."

The "gathering together" involves both the local assembling of the saints in microcosm (Heb. 10:25; Jms. 2:2 "assembly/gathering") and the universal assembling of the saints in macrocosm (2 Thess. 2:12; cp. Matt. 22:7-13). The proclamation of the gospel is to be worldwide, as anticipated in the Old Testament (Psa. 22:27; Isa. 45:22; Mic. 5:4) and expected in the New Testament (Matt. 28:19-20; Luke 13:29; Acts 13:39).

Conclusion

It is important to realize how the collapse of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 effectively removed a great hindrance to the Christian faith. This hindrance was removed (or greatly reduced) in two respects: (1) Many of the early Christians were confused in thinking that the ceremonial laws, particularly circumcision, were necessary to keep in order to be a Christian (Acts 15). There was the danger that Christianity would forever be deemed a sect of Judaism, as the Romans thought. With the Temple's destruction this tendency would no longer arise. (2) The first persecutors of the faith were the Jews. With the demise of their strength in A.D. 70, Christianity could expect less resistance from them.

10. Daniel's Seventy Weeks, which lead up to Christ, is also clearly framed in terms of the Jubilee law. For a study of Daniel 9:24-27, send \$3.00 to me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.

11. For more information see my *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), chs. 8, 13.

12. For a study of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-9 send \$3.00 to me at the address mentioned in footnote 10 above.