

A Study in Acts 1:6–8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

*Times and Seasons — The Day of the Lord — Pre-Tribulation
Rapture and Its Grounds*

We are reading Acts chapter 1, verse 6, together with 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, beginning at verse 1.

"When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power." — Acts 1:6–7

"But of the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day... For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ." — 1 Thessalonians 5:1–4, 9

Come Together — but Not Yet Gathered Together

Acts 1:6 opens with the words: when they therefore were come together. There is something beautiful about togetherness, and the disciples being come together with a common mind and common desire is a lovely thing. But it is not yet the language of the assembly of God. That language is: where two or three are

gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them — Matthew 18:20. In verse 4, it says He was assembled together with them. That too is an honor. But to have the Lord Jesus in the midst of His assembly — as its living center, in the Spirit, not bodily present — is something that awaited the next chapter.

The great distinguishing event between Acts 1 and Acts 2 is the descent of the Holy Spirit. Before Pentecost, believers were come together. After Pentecost, they were gathered together. Before Pentecost, the body of Christ had not yet been formed. After Pentecost, all who believed were baptized in one Spirit into that one body, and thus gathered to a heavenly center by a heavenly power. Every expression in Acts 1 — come together, abode together, assembled together, numbered with us — reflects the state of things before that great constitutive act.

The Kingdom Question — Affirmed, Not Denied

Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? The disciples had just spent forty days hearing the Lord speak of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Their question was entirely natural, and the Lord's answer does not rebuke them or correct their expectation. He simply says: it is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in his own authority.

The expectation of an earthly restoration of the kingdom to Israel was not carnal or mistaken. When John the Baptist preached that the kingdom of the heavens was drawn nigh, no one who was godly would have taken that to mean something entirely different from what the Old Testament prophets had described. The godly remnant in Israel expected the kingdom the prophets promised. The Lord Jesus presented that kingdom in His own person. It was rejected. Its coming is deferred — but it is not cancelled. The Lord's answer in Acts 1:7 is actually a post-resurrection confirmation of the hope of the kingdom. He does not say: you are wrong to expect any such thing. He says: it is not for you to know the timing. The Father has that in His own authority.

Two Different Greek Words for Know

There is a key to understanding the apparent tension between Acts 1:7 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1–2. In Acts 1:7, the word for know is a Greek word that means to know by direct contact and experience — to come to know something by passing through it. In 1 Thessalonians 5:1–2, the word is a different Greek word that means intuitive or subjective knowledge — to have a conscious grasp of something without necessarily having experienced it.

The disciples in Acts 1:7 were told it was not for them to know — to experience — those times and seasons. That is entirely consistent with the heavenly calling of the church: the church does not pass through the defined prophetic periods of Scripture, it is above and outside them. The church is not a prophesied epoch. It occupies a certain period of time, but that period is undefined in Scripture. The Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 are told they know perfectly well — they have an intuitive grasp of the character of the day of the Lord — precisely because they are not going to experience it. They know what it is like without passing through it. The German language preserves this distinction well: *kennen* for knowledge through acquaintance or experience, *wissen* for knowledge held in the mind. In Acts 1:7 it is the former; in 1 Thessalonians 5 it is the latter.

Times and Seasons — Defined Periods and Their Characteristics

The times and seasons in both passages refer to the same thing: the defined prophetic periods of Scripture and the characteristics belonging to each. Times refers to defined prophetic epochs — Jacob's trouble, the kingdom, the day of the Lord. Seasons refers to the character or quality of each period: the time of Jacob's trouble has its own dreadful character; the kingdom has its own character of peace and righteousness. They are distinct times with distinct seasons.

The church is not one of those defined periods. It is an undefined epoch, awaiting the coming of the Lord Jesus to take His people home. After the rapture, there may be an undefined interval of transition before the 70th week of Daniel opens — Scripture does not require us to suppose that the very day after the rapture Daniel's 70th week begins. The Father has put those things in His own authority. But the fact that the church does not pass through those defined periods is entirely consistent with everything this passage teaches.

The Day of the Lord — Not from the Beginning of the Tribulation

In 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Paul writes: if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. This refers to Christ's coming in glory, when He will bring with Him those who have already died — they will be brought with Him because they were previously caught up at the rapture. The parenthesis of 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18 explains the mechanism: the dead in Christ rise first, then we which are alive are caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. When He comes in glory, they are with Him because of that prior rapture. Revelation 19:14 then shows: the armies which were in heaven followed Him upon white horses.

The day of the Lord begins when the Lord appears in glory, not at the start of the tribulation. Man's day continues until the Lord comes as the smiting stone of Daniel 2, which strikes the image in its feet — not at the beginning of the great tribulation, but at the appearing of the Lord in glory. Until that moment the governments of men stand. The day of the Lord is thus introduced by the appearing of the Lord in glory, not by the opening of the 70th week.

God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ. That is a moral foundation for the pre-tribulation rapture. The tribulation is the time of Jacob's trouble — it is not the time of the bride's trouble. To suggest that the bride must be purified through the great tribulation

misunderstands both the sufficiency of the work of Christ and the nature of that period. God has made us fit to share the inheritance of the saints in light — we will never be more fit than we are now, and never less fit, because God has made us fit. Living up to our position is another matter, but the fitness itself is permanent and complete.

Who Populates the Millennium? — The Two Peoples of God

Post-tribulationism faces a difficulty it has never adequately resolved: if all the saints are caught up at the appearing of Christ in glory, and the wicked are simultaneously destroyed, who enters the millennium? The answer depends on rightly distinguishing two peoples of God — a heavenly people (the church) and an earthly people (Israel and the nations blessed through Israel).

Revelation 7 describes two groups: the sealed from among the twelve tribes of Israel (verses 1–8), and a great multitude from all nations who have come out of the great tribulation (verses 9–17). These are not saints in heaven — they are survivors of the tribulation who enter the millennium on earth. The great multitude from the nations are those described in Matthew 25 as the sheep who received the king's brethren. Jewish survivors and Gentile survivors together will populate the millennial earth.

The covenantist mistake is to treat all the people of God as one single people from Adam onward. When that is assumed, every dispensational distinction collapses. The church is absorbed into Israel, or Israel is absorbed into the church, and the two prophetic streams are confused. Darby's doctrine of the two peoples of God was not an arbitrary novelty — it was drawn directly from Scripture, and it is the only framework within which the prophetic passages of both Testaments make consistent sense. Those who reject it are forced into contradictions, and the millennium question is one of the most conspicuous of them.

Fallacious Arguments Examined

Several arguments raised against the pre-tribulation rapture deserve brief notice. First, the claim that we shall be changed at the last trump (1 Corinthians 15:52) means the seventh trumpet of Revelation. This is fallacious. Paul's expression is drawn from Roman military practice, not from the book of Revelation. Roman armies used three trumpet signals: the first to break camp, the second to fall in, the third — the last trump — to march. Paul is using that figure. There is no connection with the seven trumpets of Revelation.

Second, the claim that the rapture being accompanied by a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God makes it visible to the whole earth and therefore not a distinct prior event. This misunderstands the nature of the language. When the Lord raised Lazarus He said Lazarus, come forth. He did not shout in a way that blasted every eardrum in Jerusalem. The power of His word is not measured by its decibels. The shout, the voice, and the trump of 1 Thessalonians 4 are addressed to the dead in Christ and the living saints, not broadcast to the general population.

Third, the claim that the so-called peace and safety of 1 Thessalonians 5:3 belongs to some early part of the 70th week and therefore the rapture must have preceded it. The passage does not require us to place peace and safety at the very beginning. The trend of the tribulation period is unmistakably toward increasing intensity. If anything, the brief moment of apparent peace may correspond to the three and a half days when the two witnesses lie dead in the street and the world rejoices. The precise point is not specified, and it is unwise to build large arguments on silence.

*Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief —
ye are all the children of light.*