

The Rapture of the Church

Introduction (Edited from Article by Dr. Thomas Ice on Reasons for the PreTribulation Rapture)

Thomas Ice

“A systematic, literal interpretation of all New Testament passages relating to the Rapture will lead to the pretribulational viewpoint: that, at the Rapture, all living believers will be translated into heaven at least seven years before Christ’s Second Coming.”

Foundational Issues

Several affirmations provide a biblical framework for the Pretribulational Rapture: They are (1) *consistent* literal interpretation, (2) Premillennialism and (3) a distinction between Israel and the church. These are not mere suppositions, but rather are important biblical doctrines upon which the doctrine of the Rapture is built.

Literal Interpretation

Consistent literal interpretation is essential to properly understanding what God is saying in the Bible. Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usage of its language. How is this done? It can only be accomplished through the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), contextual (in accord with its context) method of interpretation.

Literal interpretation recognizes that a word or phrase can be used either plainly (denotative) or figuratively (connotative). A "Golden Rule of Interpretation" has been developed to help us discern whether or not a figure of speech was intended by an author.

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.

The principle of consistent, literal interpretation of the entire Bible logically leads one to the pre-trib position. This means that the prophetic portions of the Bible are interpreted like any other subject matter in Scripture. The prophetic sections of the Bible use the same conventions of language found throughout the Bible.

Premillennialism

The next biblical principle foundational to Pretribulationism is Premillennialism. Premillennialism teaches that the Second Advent will occur before Christ's thousand-year reign upon earth from Jerusalem (Revelation 19:11-20:6). It is contrasted with the Postmillennial teaching that Christ will return after He has reigned spiritually from His throne in heaven for a long period of time during the current age, through the Church, and the similar Amillennial view that also advocates a present, spiritual reign of Christ.

Biblical Premillennialism is a necessary foundation for the PreTrib position since it is impossible for either the Postmillennial or Amillennial view of Scripture to support a PreTrib understanding of the Rapture.

Distinction between Israel and the Church

The final principle related to the pre-trib position is the biblical truth that God's single program for history includes two peoples, Israel and the Church. While the basis of salvation (God's grace) is always the same for Jew and Gentile, God's prophetic program has two distinct aspects. Presently, God's plan for Israel is on hold until He completes His current purpose with the Church and raptures His Bride to heaven. Only pretribulationism provides a purpose for the rapture. That purpose is to remove the Church via the Rapture so God can complete His unfinished business with Israel during the seven-year Tribulation period.

Therefore, if one does not distinguish between passages which God intends for Israel from those intended for the church, there results an improper confusion of the two programs.

It should not be surprising that God's single plan for history has a multi-dimensional aspect (Ephesians 3;10) that we know as Israel and the Church.

Those commingling God's plan for Israel and the church destroy an important basis for the pre-trib rapture. The Bible clearly teaches that the church and Israel have in many ways different programs within the single plan of God even though both are saved on the same basis.

Rapture vs. Return

Some students of Bible prophecy strongly object to the notion that the rapture of the church and the return or Second Coming of Christ are distinct events separated by at least seven years. They contend that this is teaching two future comings of Christ while the Bible only presents one event.

However, the New Testament teaches that Christ will come *for* His church to escort her to His Father's House (John 14:3). And also teaches that He will come *with* His saints when He descends from heaven to judge His enemies and establish His glorious 1,000 year kingdom on earth (Zech 14:5; Rev 19:14). I view this as one coming that will occur in two distinct phases or stages separated by at least seven years.

The distinct differences between these two phases of Christ's coming are harmonized successfully by the pre-trib view, while other views of the timing of the rapture are unable to accommodate the differences.

John Walvoord concludes that these "contrasts should make it evident that the translation of the church is an event quite different in character and time from the return of the Lord to establish His kingdom, and confirms the conclusion that the translation takes place before the tribulation." Both events mention clouds

symbolizing a heavenly role in both, but other differences demonstrate that these are two distinct events.

At the Rapture, the Lord comes **for** His saints; at the Second Coming the Lord comes **with** His saints. At the Rapture, the Lord comes only for believers, but His return to the earth will impact all people. The Rapture is a translation/resurrection event; the Second Coming is not. At the Rapture, the Lord takes believers from earth to heaven “to the Father’s house” (John 14:3). At the Second Coming believers return from heaven to the earth (Matt 24:30). The rapture is an imminent, signless event that from the human perspective could occur at any moment; whereas, the Second Coming will be preceded by all kinds of signs (Matt 24:1-29).

The same event cannot logically be both signless and yet portended by numerous signs. This is contradictory. The best harmonization of these two different events supports a pretribulational rapture (which is signless and could happen at any moment), while the many events taking place during the Tribulation are best understood as signs leading up to the Second Coming.

Conclusion

While both the rapture and the return describe a coming of the Lord, these dramatic differences demand that they describe two very unique events at two separate times. It is simply impossible to merge the rapture and second coming into a single event that makes sense of the passages that describe them.

Note- See page 11 of Notes for description of differences in these two events.

Edited Excerpts from “The Pre-Trib Rapture in 1 Thessalonians”

Mark Hitchcock

There are four strong points in 1 Thessalonians that indicate the church will be exempt from the coming wrath of the tribulation.

A Promise of Deliverance

First, in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 an exemption from the coming wrath of the tribulation is explicitly stated. “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who *delivers us from the wrath to come.*” (italics added) Notice in this verse that it is Jesus coming from heaven who delivers us from the wrath to come. And the word “wrath” has the definite article in front of it. It’s not just any wrath, but *the* wrath to come. This points to the specific time of wrath in the coming day of the Lord. Moreover, Jesus’ coming for us is the means of our deliverance from the coming wrath of the tribulation. This strongly supports the pre-trib position.

The Rapture distinguished from the Day of the Lord

Second, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:9, the order of events is striking. First Thessalonians 4:13-18 deals with the rapture of the church to meet the Lord in the air. Then, in 1 Thessalonians 5:1, a new subject is introduced by Paul with the words, “Now as to” (*peri de* in Greek). This Greek phrase is one of Paul’s favorite ways in his letters to change subjects. So, it’s clear that he is finished focusing on the rapture. But what is the next subject in 5:1-9? The day of the Lord or coming time of tribulation.

“Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:1-2). Why is this significant?

Because of the order of the events. Which event is mentioned first the rapture or the tribulation? It’s the rapture first, then the tribulation or Day of the Lord. The tribulation is pictured as a *separate* and *subsequent* event from the rapture.

The order is clear...

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 The Rapture

1 Thessalonians 5:1-9 The Day of the Lord (Tribulation)

The rapture and the day of the Lord can hardly be parts of the same event as posttribulationists maintain. The rapture comes before the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 4–5.

“You” and “Them”

Third, in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5 the interplay between the different audiences is critical, yet easy to miss. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5 and notice the pronouns that are in italics (you probably never knew someone could get this excited about pronouns).

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, *you* have no need of anything to be written to *you*. For *you yourselves* know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While *they* are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon *them* suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and *they* shall not escape. But *you*, brethren, are not in darkness, that they day should overtake *you* like a thief; for *you* are all sons of light and sons of the day. *We* are not of night nor of darkness.

Notice the dramatic change in this setting between *you* and *we* (the believers) in the first and second person, and *they* and *them* (the unbelievers) in the third person. It’s striking. The wording indicates that when the tribulation comes there will be two groups of people each exclusive of the other.

One group will be raptured, and the other will face destruction. The day of the Lord will come upon *them*, and *they* shall not escape (5:3). Then in 5:4 there's a sudden contrast: "But *you* are not in the darkness." *They* stand in sharp contrast to the believers in vv. 4-11 who will escape.

This clear distinction between the unbelievers, who will not escape, and the believers, who will escape, is another strong indication that believers are exempt from the wrath of the day of the Lord.

An Appointment to Keep

Fourth, 1 Thessalonians 5:9 says clearly, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." This verse is clear that we have an appointment with salvation, not wrath. Some maintain that this simply means that believers are not destined for the wrath of hell, but that we will be saved. However, there are two reasons why I don't think that's what this verse is referring to.

First, the Thessalonians already knew they were not destined for God's wrath in hell. Paul had told them this very clearly in 1 Thessalonians 1:4. Second, in the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8 what wrath has Paul just been talking about? Not the wrath of hell but the wrath of the tribulation or day of the Lord. In this context, that's the wrath that believers will be delivered from. As Walvoord says, "In this passage he is expressly saying that our appointment is to be caught up to be with Christ; the appointment of the world is for the Day of the Lord, the day of wrath. One cannot keep both of these appointments."

Edited Excerpts from "Why A Pretribulational Rapture?"

Richard Mayhue

The basic idea of the word is "to remove suddenly or snatch away." It is used by the NT in reference to stealing/plundering (Matt 11:12; 12:29; 13:19; John 10:12, 28, 29) and removing (John 6:15; Acts 8:39; 23:10; Jude 23).

There is a third use, which focuses on being caught up to heaven. It is used of Paul's third heaven experience (2 Cor 12:2, 4) and Christ's ascension to heaven (Rev 12:5). Obviously, harpazo is the perfect word to describe God suddenly taking up the church from earth to heaven as the first part of Christ's second coming.

Will There Be an Eschatological (End Times) "Rapture"?

First Thessalonians 4:16-17 unquestionably refers to a rapture that is eschatological in nature. Here, harpazo is translated "caught up" (NASB).

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Without employing harpazo, but by using similar contextual language, 1 Cor 15:51-52 refers to the same eschatological event as 1 Thess 4:16-17.

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Thus, it can be assuredly concluded that Scripture points to the fact of an eschatological rapture, even though neither of these foundational texts contains an explicit time indicator.

Will the “Rapture” Be Pre, Mid, or Post in a Time Relationship to Daniel’s Seventieth Week?

The following evidences point to a pretribulational rapture.

• The Church Is Not Mentioned in Revelation 6–18 as Being on Earth

The common NT term for “church” is used nineteen times in Revelation 1–3, a section that deals with the historical church of the first century toward the end of the apostle John’s life (ca. A.D. 95). However, “church” is then used only once more in the twenty-two chapter book and that at the very end (22:16) when John returns to addressing the first-century church. Most interesting is the fact that nowhere during the period of Daniel’s seventieth week is the term for “church” used for believers on earth (cf. Rev. 4–19).

It is remarkable and totally unexpected that John would shift from detailed instructions for the church to absolute silence about the church in the subsequent 13 chapters if, in fact, the church continued into the tribulation. If the church will experience the tribulation of Daniel’s seventieth week, then surely the most detailed study of tribulation events would include an account of the church’s role. But it does not! The only timing of the rapture that would account for this frequent mention of “church” in Revelation 1–3 and total absence of the “church” on earth until Revelation 22:16 is a pretribulational rapture which will relocate the church from earth to heaven prior to Daniel’s seventieth week.

Today, the church universal is God’s human channel of redemptive truth. Revelation gives certain indications that the Jewish remnant will be God’s human instrument during Daniel’s seventieth week. The unbiased reader would certainly be impressed by the abrupt shift from the “church” in Revelation 2–3, to the 144,000 Jews from the twelve tribes in Revelation 7 and 14. He would certainly ask, “Why?”

Further, because Revelation 12 is a mini-synopsis of the entire tribulation period and because the woman who gave birth to the male child (Rev 12:1-13) is Israel, then logically and topically the Tribulation period focuses on the nation of Israel and not the church.

How could this be? Because a pretribulational rapture has removed the “church” from the earth prior to Daniel’s seventieth week.

- **First Thess 4:13-18 Demands a Pretribulational Rapture**

For discussion’s sake, suppose hypothetically that some other rapture timing besides pretribulational is true. What would one expect to find in 1 Thessalonians 4? How does this compare with what is actually observed?

First, one would expect the Thessalonians to be joyous over the fact that loved ones are home with the Lord and will not have to endure the horrors of the tribulation. But the Thessalonians are actually grieving because they fear their loved ones have missed the rapture. Only a pretribulational rapture accounts for this grief.

Second, one would expect the Thessalonians to be grieving over their own impending trial rather than grieving over loved ones. Furthermore, they would be inquisitive about their own future doom. But the Thessalonians have no fears or questions about the coming tribulation.

Third, one would expect Paul, even in the absence of interest or questions by the Thessalonians, to have provided instructions and exhortation for such a supreme test, which would make their present tribulation seem microscopic in comparison. But not one indication of any impending tribulation of this kind appears in the text.

First Thessalonians 4 fits only the model of a pretribulational rapture. It is incompatible with any other time for the rapture.

- **The Nature of Events at Christ's Posttribulational Coming Differs from That of the Rapture**

If one compares what happens at the rapture in 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 1 Cor 15:50-58 with what happens in the final events of Christ's second coming in Matthew 24-25, at least eight significant contrasts or differences are observable.

These differences demand that the rapture occur at a time significantly different from that of the final event of Christ's second coming.

1. At the rapture, Christ comes in the air and returns to heaven (1 Thess 4:17), but at the final event of the second coming, Christ comes to the earth to dwell and reign (Matt 25:31-32).
2. At the rapture, Christ gathers His own (1 Thess 4:16-17), but at the final event of the second coming, angels gather the elect (Matt 24:31).
3. At the rapture, Christ comes to reward (1 Thess 4:17), but at the final event of the second coming, Christ comes to judge (Matt 25:31-46).
4. At the rapture, resurrection is prominent (1 Thess 4:15-16), but at the final event of the second coming, resurrection is not mentioned.
5. At the rapture, believers depart the earth (1 Thess 4:15-17), but at the final event of the second coming, unbelievers are taken away from the earth (Matt 24:37-41).
6. At the rapture, unbelievers remain on earth, but at the final event of the second coming, believers remain on earth (Matt 25:34).
7. At the rapture, there is no mention of establishing Christ's Kingdom on earth, but at the final event of the second coming, Christ has come to set up His Kingdom on earth (Matt 25:31, 34).
8. At the rapture, believers will receive glorified bodies (cf. 1 Cor 15:51-57), but at the final event of the second coming, no one will receive glorified bodies.

- **The Epistles Contain No Preparatory Warnings of an Impending Tribulation for Church-Age Believers**

God's instructions to the church through the epistles contain a variety of warnings, but never do they warn believers to prepare for entering and enduring the tribulation of Daniel's seventieth week.

They warn vigorously about coming error and false prophets (see Acts 20:29-30; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1-3; Jude 4). They warn against ungodly living (see Eph 4:25-5:7; 1 Thess 4:3-8; Heb 12:1). They even admonish believers to endure in the midst of present tribulation (see 1 Thess 2:13-14; 2 Thess 1:4; all of 1 Peter). However, there is absolute silence on preparing the church for any kind of tribulation like that found in Revelation 6-18.

It is incongruous, then, that the Scriptures would be silent about such a traumatic change for the church. If any time of the rapture other than pretribulation were true, one would expect the epistles to teach the fact of the church in the tribulation, the purpose of the church in the tribulation, and the conduct of the church in the tribulation. However, there is no teaching whatsoever. Only a pretribulation rapture satisfactorily explains such obvious silence.