

The History of the Pretribulation Rapture – I Thessalonians 4:13-18

I. Introduction:

- A. When the Lord saved me, more than 50 years ago, I joined a church which taught that the scriptures we just read should be understood simply and directly.
1. I was told that **all** scripture should be interpreted literally, unless some passage was obviously meant to be understood as an allegory or an illustration.
 2. So in regard to **I Thess. 4**, Paul really meant that we need not be confused about certain future events.
 - a. I.e., there is no need to worry about those saints who have died. They will not miss what is coming.
 - b. Their souls are already with the Redeemer, and when He returns to earth they will return with Him.
 - c. And we, who are alive, will join the resurrected bodies of those earlier saints, to meet Christ in the air.
 3. I was taught that the pronoun **“we”** in **verse 17** first meant Paul and the saints in Thessalonica, but now it includes me – and you who are alive and well, trusting Christ as our Lord and Saviour.
 4. **“Then WE which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall WE ever be with the Lord.**
 5. **Wherefore comfort one another with these words,”** and comfort myself is something which I have done.
 6. This catching up & meeting Christ, aren't spiritual or virtual events, in the sense of mystical or impractical.
 7. This is talking about something literal and real, including physical bodies – as well as souls and spirits.
 8. And since Paul was expecting it in his day, but it didn't come, we have every right to expect it tonight.
- B. Then I went off to Bible school – to a school which was not associated with the church which baptized me and which I first joined.
1. I was taught the same thing there at that Bible school.
 2. When I later returned to Canada as a missionary, I went with the doctrines of my fourth church, and they were exactly as the first, the second and the third.
 3. Naively, I concluded that all Baptists and all Bible-believers had their hope in the imminent return of Christ for His people.
 4. I thought that all fundamentalists believed in the pretribulation rapture of the saints – that Christ would collect His people prior to the days when He would judge the world, preparing it for His millennial reign.
 5. I believed that only religious liberals, the neo-orthodox and some neo-evangelicals believed anything else.
 6. But as I say, I was naive, and I have learned that I was mistaken.
- C. Two weeks ago, in our Baptist history vignette I shared just a bit about the life of **Morgan Edwards**.
1. I included a statement that – long before a fella named **John Darby** – Morgan Edwards believed in the return of Christ prior to the Tribulation.
 2. I even used the word **“lie”** in reference to Darby.
 3. A great many people attribute to John Darby the doctrine which I hold – the pre-tribulation translation of God's saints.
 4. That article which I wrote, and which I publish on the internet, provoked two responses.
 - a. One man called me, saying that he agreed with me 100%, asking me for more information.
 - b. And another man texted suggesting that my interpretation of Morgan Edwards' position was inaccurate.
 5. These sent me to my library and to other sources for more information.
 6. I even found, bought and read a copy of Edward's thesis from 1788.
 7. This evening I'd like to share some of the information which I have gathered on the Pretrib rapture.
- D. But first – while I was in Bible school, a man named **Dave MacPherson** began writing books, claiming that the Pretribulation Rapture was a recently contrived doctrine, and therefore it was unbiblical.
1. He called the doctrine a **“cover-up”** suggesting that it was a **“humbug.”**
 2. His best known book was titled, **“The Great Rapture HOAX,”** and one of his last was **“The Rapture PLOT,”** as if it was a conspiracy to bring down the government or something.
 3. In essence MacPherson cites two sources as the beginnings of the doctrine which I hold dear, and which has comforted so many.

- a. One was an English charismatic, spinster named **Margaret MacDonald**, to whom the doctrine was given by special revelation in about 1840.
 - b. But even more, MacPherson credits a member of the Plymouth Brethren sect named **John Darby**.
 - c. With little doubt, Darby did popularize the idea of the return of Christ.
4. But neither he nor MacDonald created the doctrine.

E. Anyway, MacPherson's books became very popular for some reason.

1. People were apparently yearning for an excuse not to expect the imminent return of Christ.
2. They wanted to throw away the hope and the comfort to which Paul referred in this scripture.
3. And that man's ideas have been trickling down to us over the last 50 years, until many other books have been written and a number of other ideas have evolved, often repeating MacPherson's ideas.

F. I apologize in advance – our message this evening will be less a Bible study and more a history lesson.

II. But we **WILL** start with the Biblical doctrine.

A. I believe that ***I Thessalonians 4***, encourages us to expect the Lord to come for His saints ***imminently*** – that you and I should expect to hear the call to meet Christ in the air.

1. I will read our text once again, asking you to simply let the words speak to you.
2. *“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.*
 - a. *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.*
 - b. *For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.*
 - c. *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:*
 - d. *Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.*
 - e. *Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”*

B. Earlier, in ***I Thessalonians 1***, Paul praised those saints saying that their testimony *“shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; **And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.**”*

1. The Christians in Thessalonica were awaiting the return of their Saviour.
2. They expected it to be soon; in fact they expected it imminently – at any moment – and so should we.

C. ***I Corinthians 15*** is Paul's great exposition on the subject of resurrection – Christ's resurrection, our own and even the lost man's resurrection.

1. Towards the end of the chapter, he points out that not all God's saints will have died when Christ returns.
2. *“Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep (physically die), but we shall all be changed,*
 - a. *In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump:*
 - b. *for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”*
3. This does not specifically say that the Lord's return is imminent, but I believe it is implied, using the pronoun ***“we”*** once again to do so.
4. In addition to what it might say, it certainly ***doesn't*** tell us that we'll have to wait until certain events take place before we are changed.
5. We don't have to wait for the rebuilding of the Jew's temple, or the revelation of the Anti-Christ.
6. I am convinced that Paul and the other apostles were looking for the return of the Messiah.
7. I believe that Paul was telling the saints in Thessalonica and in Corinth to live in the light of the imminent return of Christ.

III. Following the close of the New Testament era, there is evidence that God's people continued to expect the return of Christ in their lifetime.

- A. According to the research of a man named **Michael Svidgel**, the first historical reference, still in existence, to this doctrine was from a man called "*The Shepherd of Hermas*" – perhaps referring to his position as a pastor.
1. This was written in the second century – that is before the year 200 AD.
 2. Unfortunately, this reference isn't to a sermon – or an exposition of the scriptures – but rather to a dream which the man had.
 3. In talking about that dream he describes the Anti-Christ and some of the events of the Tribulation, saying of God's saints, "*You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast (the antichrist).*"
 4. Svidgel & others, interpret that to mean the Shepherd of Hermas accepted a pre-tribulational rapture.
 5. I'm not going to put much stock in what he says, because it is not a Biblical message.
 6. But it does indicate that the subject of a pre-trib rapture or translation was being discussed very early on.
- B. Svidgel's second reference is to a document to which my old pastor often referred – "*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*" – more commonly known "*Didache*" (*did-e-kay*) – again from the middle of the 2nd century.
1. But again, I'm not putting all my eggs into this man's basket.
 - a. What is written in that ancient book is open to various interpretations, due to the language he used.
 - b. But I'll share it with you despite my lack of great confidence.
 2. "*For in the last days false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate;*
 - a. *For when lawlessness increaseth, they shall hate and persecute and betray one another, and then shall appear the world-deceiver as Son of God, & shall do signs & wonders, & the earth shall be delivered into his hands, & he shall do iniquitous things which have never yet come to pass since the beginning.*
 - b. *Then shall the creation of men come into the fire of trial, and many shall be made to stumble and shall perish; **BUT** they that endure in their faith shall be **saved from under** the curse itself.*
 - c. *And then shall appear the signs of the truth; first the sign of an outspreading of heaven; then the sign of the sound of the trumpet; and the third, the resurrection of the dead; yet not of all, but as it is said:*
 - d. *The Lord shall come and all his saints with Him. Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.*"
 3. This could be interpreted as a pre-tribulational rapture of those who endure in their faith.
 - a. Or it could also be a middle of the tribulation rapture, or even something else.
 - b. But still, it does appear that the author believed in the Lord's deliverance of His people before the final judgments of the Great Tribulation.

IV. That brings us to a man named Irenaeus (*ee-ruh-NEI-uhs*), who was born in Smyra in 130 AD.

- A. Irenaeus (**ee-ruh-NEI-uhs**) was an a student of Polycarp, one of the Apostle John's students.
1. He is best known for his five-volume treatise, "*Against Heresies*," in which he exposed the false religions and cults of his day.
 2. But he wasn't interested only in exposing heretics, he gave advice on how to share the Gospel with them.
 3. In his writings on Bible prophecy, he acknowledged the phrase "*a time, times and dividing of times*" from **Daniel 7** to signify the 3½ year reign of the Antichrist as ruler of the world before the Second Coming of Christ, just as I do.
 4. He also believed in a literal thousand year or Millennial reign of Christ on earth following the Second Coming and the resurrection of the just.
- B. On the subject of the translation of God's saints Irenaeus wrote:
1. "*Those nations however, who did not of themselves raise up their eyes unto heaven, nor returned thanks to their Maker, nor wished to behold the light of truth, but who were like blind mice concealed in the depths of ignorance, the word justly reckons 'as waste water from a sink, and as the turning-weight of a balance — in fact, as nothing.'*"

2. *“And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, ‘There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.’*
 3. *For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption.”*
 4. Irenaeus (ee-ruh-NEI-uhs) describes the saints leaving the sinful world just before unprecedented disasters
 5. He used the word *“harpazo”* translated as *“caught up”* – which is what Paul used in *1 Thessalonians 4*.
 6. In Irenaeus’ (ee-ruh-NEI-uhs) theology, the Rapture will take place prior to the end times’ Great Tribulation
 7. And I remind you that this was more than 16 hundred years before Margaret MacDonald *“created”* the idea or John Darby popularized it.
- C. Then a man named ***Ephraem the Syrian*** was born about a hundred years after Irenaeus – (303-373AD).
1. He wrote a great deal and many of his sermons and psalms are to be found in print today.
 2. Ephraem believed in a literal fulfillment of prophecy, including a Rapture of New Testament saints prior to the Tribulation.
 3. *“For all the saints and Elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins.”*
 4. Ephraem taught a literal antichrist who will sit in a literal rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, a literal Tribulation, and two literal witnesses who will preach in Jerusalem, and a literal battle of Gog and Magog.
 5. His non-allegorical understanding of the scriptures is seen in this quote:
 - a. *“And when the three and a half years have been completed, the time of the Antichrist, through which he will have seduced the world, after the resurrection of the two prophets, in the hour which the world does not know, and on the day which the enemy or son of perdition does not know, will come the sign of the Son of Man, and coming forward the Lord shall appear with great power and much majesty, with the sign of the word of salvation going before him, and also even with all the powers of the heavens with the whole chorus of the saints. ...*
 - b. *Then Christ shall come and the enemy shall be thrown into confusion, and the Lord shall destroy him by the Spirit of his mouth. And he shall be bound and shall be plunged into the abyss of everlasting fire alive with his father Satan; and all people, who do his wishes, shall perish with him forever; but the righteous ones shall inherit everlasting life with the Lord for ever and ever.”*
- D. One of the things I found in my survey was that most of these writers believed that the Tribulation would last only 3½ years.
1. Their *“Tribulation”* was equivalent to what I was taught as *“The Great Tribulation.”*
 2. They were still pretribulation rapturists, but with a shorter Tribulation.
 3. And this falls into the mindset of some of the other interpretations of the Tribulation.
- E. ***Cyprian*** was the Bishop, or pastor, of the church in Carthage, Africa. He was martyred in the year 258.
1. In one of his books he wrote about the end times.
 2. *“We who see that terrible things have begun, and know that still more terrible things are imminent, may regard it as the greatest advantage to depart from it as quickly as possible.*
 - a. *Do you not give God thanks, do you not congratulate yourself, that by **an early departure** you are taken away, and delivered from the shipwrecks and disasters that are imminent?*
 - b. *Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world and restores us to paradise and the kingdom.”*
 3. This kind of language sounds to me like the rapture, and he used the word *“imminent.”*
 4. Christians will have an *“early departure”* and be *“delivered”* from the devastating global judgments that come during the Day of The Lord.
 5. Whether or not the eschatology of Cyprian or of these others exactly matches our own, let it be clearly understood that they believed in a translation of the saints before the Great Tribulation
 6. That was long before the 19th century.
 7. And that is my primary purpose for this message.

- F. Finally, a man named **Victorinus**, wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse about the turn of the 4th century.
1. He said, *“and the heaven withdrew as a scroll that is rolled up. For the heaven to be rolled away, this is that the Church shall be taken away.”*
 2. *“. . . and I saw another great and wonderful sign, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is completed the indignation of God.*
 3. *For the wrath of God always strikes the obstinate people with seven plagues, that is, perfectly, as it is said in Leviticus; and these shall be in the last time, when the Church SHALL have GONE out of the midst.”*

V. Of course we don't base our theology on theologians, historians or history.

- A. But it is sometimes helpful to know that we are not alone in what we believe.
1. For example, I have several books by **William Newell**.
 2. In his commentary on **Revelation** he says: *“The early Church for 300 years looked for the imminent return of our Lord to reign, and they were right.”*
- B. Why does he refer to 300 years?
1. It is because in 354 AD a man named **Augustine** was born.
 2. He became very popular and the leading theologian among the Roman Catholics.
 3. This was the man who really spread the allegorical interpretation of the Bible.
 4. Prior to this, and thus for 350 years, it was common among Christians to interpret prophecy literally.
 5. The early Christians believed that Christ would return literally, and imminently, bind Satan, and establish a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth.
 6. And interestingly, proving that point, in his own famous book **“City of God,”** Augustine wrote, *“I myself, too, once held this opinion. ... They who do believe them are called by the spiritual, Chiliasts, which we may literally reproduce by the name Millenarians.”*
 7. Those who believe in a literal thousand year millennium – those who are not *“a-millennial,”* millennium-deniers – are called *“Millenarians”* and *“chiliasts.”*
- C. **Henry Thiessen** in his **“Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology”** says, *“It is clear ... that the Fathers held not only the pre-millennial view of Christ's coming, but also regarded that coming as imminent.*
1. *The Lord had taught them to expect His return at any moment, and so they looked for Him to come in their day.*
 2. *Not only so, but they also taught His personal return as being immediately, with the exception of the Alexandrian Fathers, who also rejected other fundamental doctrines”* (Thiessen, p. 477).

VI. And with that I come back to Morgan Edwards who started me down this path.

- A. As I said two weeks ago, Edwards died in 1795.
1. As a young student in Bristol College he wrote a thesis on eschatology – the doctrine on future events.
 2. This was later republished after he had moved to the United States.
 3. The 1788 reprint was essentially unchanged from its original form.
 4. Like some of the others, Edwards believed in a 3½ year tribulation, but he clearly believed that the saints would be removed prior to that period.
 5. He prefaces his thesis by speaking directly to his instructor.
 - a. *“And IS IT come to my lot to treat of the Millennium, or Christ's thousand years reign on earth?*
 - b. *Thousand pities, sir, that you had not allotted the task to one of these older and abler students!*
 - c. *But since it is your pleasure, I will do my possible: and in the attempt will work by a rule you have often recommended, viz. ‘To take the scriptures in a literal sense, except when that leads to contradiction or absurdity.’”*

- B. Later we read: *“The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years.*
1. *I say, somewhat more; because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ’s ‘appearing in the air’ (I Thes. iv. 17);*
 - a. *and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium, as we shall see hereafter:*
 - b. *but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many ‘mansions in the father’s house’ (John xiv. 2), and disappear during the foresaid period of time.*
 - c. *The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for ‘now the time is come that judgment must begin,’ and that will be ‘at the house of God’ (I Pet. iv. 17).”*
 2. Edwards totally rejected the idea of an allegorical approach to the Bible, and so he rejected amillennialism.
 3. Of the Lord’s thousand year kingdom, he said, *“Miserable work do the Antimillenarians make of these texts.”*
 4. And listen to this amazing statement – *“The Turkish or Ottoman Empire will be demolished; for otherwise the right owners cannot possess their inheritance ... The twelve tribes (as observed before) will return to their ancient inheritance, else how can the twelve apostles be their judges? ... In this united capacity they will rebuild Jerusalem in its place, and the temple in its place on mount Zion; for in this temple will antichrist sit as god, and be the abomination mentioned by Daniel, and referred to by Christ.”*
 5. Remember, this was written 175 years before the destruction of the Ottoman Empire and its hold on the land of Israel.
 - a. The Ottomans ruled Palestine from 1299 until the early 20th century.
 - b. Edward’s statement was 200 years before the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948.
 - c. Yet he knew these things would happen, because of his literal interpretation of the scriptures.
 - d. And now most of what he predicted has come to pass, because God’s Word can be trusted.
 6. Just as some of God’s prophecies have been literally fulfilled, we can be sure that the rest will follow.

VII. My primary purpose this evening has been to encourage you against what is becoming a common attack of our faith.

- A. It is said that a Pre-tribulational Rapture or a Pre-trib translation of the saints, is a recent innovation.
1. But the truth is – it did not come from a deranged charismatic girl in England.
 2. Nor was its author a Plymouth Brethren preacher, whom his contemporary, C. H. Spurgeon considered a heretic in several ways.
 3. It wasn’t the Scofield edition of the Bible which popularized our doctrine of the Pre-trib rapture.
 4. It has been apart of Baptist doctrine from the beginning.
- B. The imminent return of the Saviour and the translation of the saints is to my mind the most logical way to interpret several Bible passages, such as ***I Thessalonians 4*** and ***I Corinthians 15***.
1. And there have been believers throughout the ages which have clung to some form of this doctrine.