

## Rapture Timing

We return this morning to 1 Thess 4 where Paul is teaching on the subject of the Rapture of the church.

We looked last week at Paul's description of this most precious promise of a sudden and total removal of believers in Jesus from this world and the resurrection of all who have died believing in Jesus. This one teaching has been a treasure trove of comfort to troubled Christians throughout the ages, and the anticipated hope of all Christians – the day, the hour we first see Jesus – our Savior, our King - coming in the clouds to rescue us, resurrect us, release us from our pain and toil and sin, rejoin us with those in Christ who have gone before, and bring us to our eternal home. Faith will turn to sight, prayer to praise, sadness to shouts of joy!

And so – v. 17 – (in this manner) we will always be with the Lord!

With such an anticipated event, the question we are going to answer is, “When is it going to happen?!?”

For we know there are many other prophesied future events in the Scripture as well. Where does this Reunion in the Clouds fit in relation to everything else??

Jesus' 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming to earth itself  
The Great Tribulation that's coming upon the earth  
Great Apostasy within the Church  
Antichrist's rise and rule over the world  
Satan being cast into the Lake of Fire  
Judgment at the Great White Throne  
Reward of the Saints  
Marriage Supper of the Lamb  
Jesus' 1000 year Kingdom on a Renewed Earth  
Israel Purged, Protected, given Prominence  
Saints Ruling and Reigning with Christ  
Moon turned to blood,  
Great Hailstones thrown from heaven,  
1/3 of sea creatures dying,  
Locust hordes coming out of the pit,  
Two Witnesses murdered and Resurrected,  
An Angel flying in mid-heaven crying Woe Woe Woe Battle of Armageddon,  
Swords to Plowshares  
Renewed earth,  
Desert blooming,  
New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven,  
The Tree of Life,  
Gates of Pearl,  
Streets of Gold

Where does it all fit? How does it all fit?

To answer that, we need to step outside of this passage, and just have some good old fashion big-picture “Bible Teaching” this morning. We are about to see what seems to be the best way to understand the timing of the Rapture... [NOTE – “best way”, not right or wrong way].

And here is the reason – neither this passage, nor 1 Cor 15, nor John 14 nor Rev 3 ... None of them say directly when the Rapture fits in the sequence of End Times events. They only describe the character and purpose of the Rapture. So, we have to come at the timing based on what else the Scripture reveals about the return of Jesus. And we are not told as much as we would like to be told...

(like putting together a puzzle in which we are missing a few pieces – we don't throw the puzzle out, we just fit it together as best we can..., nor do you just start cramming pieces wherever you want. There is a cohesive picture that needs to emerge)

So, let me say at the outset that many Christians differ on how to understand these things. And that difference arises out of differing convictions on how to view End Times Prophecies....

### 1) End Times Questions

- **Literal** – do we take these prophecies literally?
- **Israel** – is there a future plan for Israel?
- **Imminence** – will Jesus' return be unexpected?

Our convictions are...

- to take all portions of Scripture as literally as possible,
- there is a clear distinction between God's ongoing plan for Israel and God's plan for the Church (although merged in the end),
- we see no reason to take Jesus' return as anything but imminent, just as He spoke of it.

Others have differing convictions in these areas, and so 3 general views have emerged about End Times Events, specifically related to the Bible's teaching on the “Kingdom of God on earth” and Jesus' Return to judge the living and the dead...

### 2) End Times Views

Post-Millennial – we “Christianize” the world to make it like “the Kingdom of God on earth” and when we do Jesus returns to earth for final judgment of living and dead

Amillennial – the “Kingdom of God on earth” exists in our hearts as we live out a “kingdom ethic” and Jesus will return for final judgment of living and the dead

Premillennial – we prepare souls now for the Kingdom (even as we live out “kingdom ethics”), and Jesus will return to rule and reign on the earth for 1000 years, before judging the living and the dead

Our convictions (literal, distinction between Israel & Church, and imminence) would lead us to be “Premillennial” as to the reality of a 1000 year Kingdom that Jesus brings at His return.

But even in the Premillennial camp, views differ as to the Timing of the Rapture in relation to the Great Tribulation that will precede Jesus' return.

### 3) Rapture Views

Post Tribulation  
Mid-Tribulation  
Pre-Tribulation

There are reasons for each, but...

Again, our convictions (literal, distinction between Israel & Church, and imminence) would lead us to say that a Pre-Tribulational Rapture is the best place to sequence the Rapture. And I want to explain to you the primary reason we believe so...

But first... let me be very clear... our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ on this does not mean that they are not good, orthodox, Bible-believing Christians.

For we all agree on 3 major events that are absolutely clear and essential with regard to End Times:

1. Jesus will return bodily to this earth as He promised at a time known only to God
2. Satan and all unbelievers will be judged and cast into the eternal Lake of Fire
3. Believers will be resurrected, rewarded, and in the presence of the Lord in glory forever

If you don't believe that or teach otherwise, you are a false teacher and are to be rejected by the Church. But if you do, we fellowship with you as a brother in the Gospel.

So, if that is what is necessary to be orthodox believers..., why fuss around with the timing and the sequence of all these events?? Why does it even matter?

### 4) Why Timing is Important

#### 1. The Bible is a Book

Shuffle Mode is only for your favorite songs, not for your audio book

The Bible was not given to us as a random collection of stories and events, but as a cohesive story of God's relationship and self-revelation to mankind from beginning to end. And as that story unfolds, we see more and more of God's glory and the various streams of His redemptive work coming together in the end (like any good story).

Look both David and Joshua were men of faith and used as mighty deliverers for God's people. And David and Joshua might be your favorite songs. But you can't play David before Joshua. Unless you are only interested in the Bible for moral lessons that you might apply immediately to live out a better life today....

But there is so much more that Joshua and David teach us... in the progress of God's redemptive plan and establishing an earthly Kingdom, David is far more significant than Joshua.

- a. Joshua was temporary leader, but David's Kingship was established forever.
- b. Joshua was a faithful Israelite, but David was the forefather of the Messiah.

c. Yet, if there were not a Joshua, there would be no David.

This is just a micro-example of God's plan working its way out in time, building to a crescendo, not only in the salvation of God's elect, but in the establishment of a Kingdom and a Throne among the children of Israel upon which His Messiah will rule and bless the whole world in a grand culmination of human events.

You can't shuffle-play that one. Jesus couldn't have come before David, or Joshua, or Abraham – otherwise nothing makes sense.

And the same is true as we move forward into the Last Days events. Most all of these events have a clear time-stamp on them, and we need to understand the story in sequence if we are to properly stand in awe of the grand story of God.

## 2. Robust Confidence in God's Word

We need to be able to read God's word (every part of it), and take it at face value, and not feel like we need to ignore, explain away, spiritualize certain portions.

When we can simply take what it says at face-value, then we grow in our confidence that God can be trusted to do what He said, as He said it.

Now, this doesn't mean we always need to default to the most simplistic understanding – the nature of the Bible is that we are not given timeline charts or dates or even all the facts in one place... and thus we do need to piece together what we are told into a cohesive whole – and so some rigorous study is needed at times.

But, seeking to understand the best sequence we can from what we are plainly told helps build confidence that we truly can trust God's Word.

Because as soon as you begin to ignore or explain away some portions or act as if they don't really matter... you are on a dangerous path to distrusting any particular portion.

If God has said something about the future, we need to be able to simply take what we have been told and simply ask, "what does all this tell us?"

## 3. Sets our Perspective

We know what's next, and thus we can prepare ourselves for it.

### **So, why then do we say that the Rapture will come before the Tribulation.**

There are several reasons, but the primary reason deals with one question...

Did Jesus teach that His personal return for His Church (rapture) would be preceded by recognizable signs or would it be sudden and unexpected?

Let's consider exactly what Jesus said (as well as the Apostles) about the suddenness of His return, as well as all the recognizable signs that will precede His return to earth in glory... and then see what is the best way to reconcile those two realities.

### 5) Watch for the Signs – Matthew 24-25

A cluster of teachings from Jesus on this occurs in Matthew 24-25 – turn there with me...

Context is Jesus being asked His disciples – “What will be the signs of your coming and the end of the age?” (Mt 24:3)

Jesus is about to give them a number of signs of His return, but begins with a specific warning against being misled – v. 4 – presumably by signs...

1. False Christ's/False prophets – v. 5, 23-28
2. Wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes – v. 6-8 (not signs of end)
3. Betrayed, Killed, Hated by all nations – v. 9-10
4. False prophets – v. 11
5. Lawlessness / love grow cold – v. 12
6. Gospel preached in whole world – v. 14
7. Great Tribulation – v. 15-22 (cf. Rev 6-18)
8. Sun, Moon, Stars fail – v. 29
9. Sign of Son of Man appears in sky – v. 30

THEN Son of Man will come in power & glory – v. 30, and the angels will gather His elect from the 4 corners of the sky...

At this point Jesus pauses to give several warnings to be ready... 24:32-25:30

And then in 25:31, Jesus picks up the sequence of events with what He will then do when He returns and His gathering angels with Him (particularly regarding all who have been gathered before Him).

- He will sit on His glorious throne (on earth) – that is the Throne of David, as prophesied in Ezek 37
- All nations will be gathered before Him – v. 32  
Those still alive on the earth after the Tribulation and Armageddon
- Separate Sheep / Goats – v. 32-46  
Who will and will not enter the Kingdom...
- Then, the 1000 Year Kingdom (Rev 20)

Add to these signs teaching from prophets and apostles...

10. Coming of “man of lawlessness” – 2 Thess 2:3-4

Revelation calls him “Antichrist”. Between Daniel 8-11 and Rev 13, we find that he will

be a world leader who works miracles, receives a mortal wound and survives, makes a covenant with Israel for 42 years, breaks that covenant, sets himself up as god in the Temple in Jerusalem, makes everyone receive a mark on their head or hand to be able to buy things... And he will only be removed from power when Jesus returns to earth (Rev 19)

Pretty recognizable signs, and time-stamped too!

#### 11. Seal, Trumpet, Bowl Judgments – Rev 6-16

Jesus (Lamb that was Slain of Revelation) pours out His “wrath” on the sinful world and the kingdom of the Antichrist...

While some of these signs might coincide with things going on in our world today (or have happened in history), if you take them literally, there is no mistaking the cataclysmic events that will come in the 7 years prior to Jesus’ return.

Once the man of lawlessness is revealed, the clock starts ticking – Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> “week” has begun (also called “The Day of the Lord”), and all these cataclysmic signs will begin to show themselves, and the unbelieving world has 7 final years before the return of Messiah to rule on the earth. Just like the previous 69 weeks were exactly 7 years apiece, so this one will be (or as Daniel puts it – 1290 days to the middle of that “week”)

So, once these events begin to occur, anybody who studied the Bible could reasonably predict when Jesus would return to establish His Kingdom on earth.

Only one problem... Jesus, in the midst of giving all of these signs, gives a series of parables that speak about the unexpected nature of His coming...

Let’s see how Jesus put it...

### 6) Be on the Alert – Matt 24:32 – 25:30

6 Parables here, all intended to sober us... The first two speak about being Alert because of the signs, and the next 4 speak about being Alert because there will be no signs...

#### 1. Tree Leaves – 24:32-35

When leaves appear, summer is near. When you begin to see the signs (just stated), Jesus return is near. This is specifically pointed to “this generation” – meaning the generation that sees the signs. *“You see the signs, you are going to see the coming.”* Jesus stakes His Word on it – v.35

But even so (v. 36), you won’t know the exact day or hour during that time... But you will know that you will see Jesus return in power. This is intended both as a comfort to those who have come to believe in Him during that time, and a sober warning to those who haven’t.

## 2. Flood People – 24:37-41

Just like in the days of Noah – both Noah’s big boat and Noah’s preaching should have been a warning to them... but they totally ignored the signs until it was too late.

Same will be true in the day of Jesus’ 2<sup>nd</sup> coming – the signs will be there, but the final judgment of Jesus’ return will be to those who remain unbelieving “sudden and unexpected.” 1 Thess 5:3 – *While they are saying, “Peace and Safety!”, destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains on a woman with child, and they will not escape.*

These 2 parables of Tree Leaves and Flood People follow after Jesus saying there will be signs just prior to His return to earth.

But now He shifts gears and speaks directly to His disciples (we know this is a general teaching because He spoke essentially the same lessons earlier to them in Luke 12:35-48). These parables call for Watchfulness due to the sudden unexpectedness of His return.

### 3. Head of Household – 24:42-44 (Watchfulness)

### 4. Faithful & Sensible Slave – 24:45-51 (Usefulness)

### 5. Ten Virgins – 25:1-13 (Watchfulness)

### 6. Entrusted Talents – 25:14-30 (Usefulness)

This dual emphasis matches the constant teaching of the Apostles as to how we are to be spending our days – especially given that Jesus could return at any moment ...

Eagerly Waiting – Rom 8:19-25, 1 Cor 1:7, Phil 3:20, 1 Thess 1:10, 5:4-6, Heb 9:28, James 5:7-11, 1 Pet 4:7, Rev 1:3, 22:7,12,20

Kingdom Working – Rom 12:1-2, 1 Cor 15:58, Phil 1:27, 1 Thess 5:14, James 2:14-18, 1 Pet 4:10-11

But... these parables of imminence surrounding the Lord’s return combined with the signs that will accompany the Lord’s return – how do we resolve the tension?  
They seem to be in contradiction with one another.

It seems the best solution is to understand the Rapture to be the very next thing to happen, followed by the Great Tribulation, followed by Jesus’ return to earth. (Pre-Tribulation Rapture)

This means...

- Rapture is without signs, and the Return is with signs.
- “Near, Soon, Quickly” mean “without warning, next on the agenda, suddenly”, which is appropriate translations of those Greek terms.
- Since Great Tribulation is described as the “wrath of God and of the Lamb” (Rev 6:19), this fits with Paul’s statement that the Church is to be “rescued from the wrath to come” and “not destined for wrath” (1 Thess 1:10, 5:9), and “kept from the hour of trouble which is about to come upon the whole world” (Rev 3:10).
- Allows actual time for the Rewarding of the righteous acts of the Saints (Rev 19:7-8, 2 Cor 5:8-10) and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9) prior to the Millennial Kingdom.
- Allows for conversion of Jewish Nation and Unbelieving Gentiles in the Tribulation time, who will then enter the Kingdom in unglorified state, and be able to bear children and repopulate the earth during the 1000 years (Isa 65:17-25).

There are other reasons this seems to be the best way to fit the Rapture into the overall sequence of events – you can read up on this, or study it out yourself.

My point in putting this forward is for the reasons given earlier...

- 1) To look forward to the Grand Culmination of God’s Story – He is the author and the Lord over all our story.
- 2) Confidence in the Word of God, taken at face value. It does not contradict, and we need not shoo away uncertain details, but rather keep intently considering them until they begin to fit together.
- 3) Setting our Perspective

If Jesus teaches us to be Eagerly Watchful and Patiently Working, then the reality that He might return at any minute to meet us in the air serves as a constant motivator.

When my circumstances weigh me down, I look up to the clouds, and reaffirm my true hope will meet me there.

When my Kingdom labors begin to flag – either due to weariness or distraction... I remember that the King is right at the door, waiting for the nod from the Father to step into the room. In both anticipation and loyalty, I return to my work, awaiting that “Well done, good and faithful servant.”