

## THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH: A PRETRIBULATIONAL VIEW

In the study of the last times we usually think of that which is far in the future, especially when we consider the bliss of the coming eternal state in the new Jerusalem and the new earth which God has prepared for them that love Him. This is indeed a blessed hope.

Yet in all of this looking forward to some future fulfillment, there is an aspect of these future events which is right around the eschatological corner. This concerns the rapture of the church. Although there are many aspects of eschatology which are future, the rapture of the church is possible at any moment.

Because we need to know what the rapture is and because the rapture is possible at any moment, let us examine what the Scripture says about this wonderful event and what this means to the life of the believer.

### I. THE RAPTURE AND THE VIEWS CONCERNING IT

#### A. Meaning of the rapture

1. The word “rapture” comes from the Latin raptura, meaning “to be caught up, or away” (Blackstone; 75). Although the term does not appear in the Bible, it is used to describe the “catching up” of believers by Christ to heaven. “The Greek word from which we take the term rapture appears in I Thessalonians 4:17 and is translated ‘caught up’” (Ryrie; 27).
2. Rapture: “The coming of Christ for His Church, including the reunion of living saints and their joyful meeting in the air with those who are the ‘dead in Christ’” (Stanton; 19).
3. Revelation or Second Coming: The rapture must be distinguished from the Revelation as separate aspects of the Lord’s return. “The Revelation” or “the Second Coming” is “the Coming of Christ back to earth to judge His enemies and to set up His millennial kingdom” (Stanton; 19).

#### B. Views of the rapture

- \* (The arguments for the following views of this section are stated by those who hold that position. In the paper “Tribulation Views,” I will address these views individually and provide further support for the Premillennial Rapture of the Church.)
1. The Partial Rapture View
    - \* Only the believers who are looking for Christ to return will be raptured.
  2. The Midtribulation Rapture View
    - \* “Holds that the church will go through the less severe part (usually the first half, or three-and-a-half years) of the tribulation, but then be removed from the world” (Erickson; 1223).
    - \* “The Day of Wrath has only now come [Rev.] (11:18). This means that nothing that precedes in the Seals and Trumpets can rightfully be regarded as wrath. He has restrained until this time. The relation of the Rapture to the Tribulation is greatly clarified. The seventh Trumpet sounds for the pouring of the Bowls of Wrath. While it brings glory to the Church, it brings Woe (the third) to the world. There is no interval. The Man of Sin ushers in the Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:2,3), but the Son from heaven saves His own from it” (Harrison; 119-120).
  3. The Post-tribulation Rapture View
    - \* Maintains “that the coming of Christ for his church will not take place until the conclusion of the Great tribulation” (Erickson; 1220).
    - \* “I began to realize that the Tribulation would begin without tremendous fanfare of the

Rapture of Christian believers. At the end of the seven years, ...Christ will start toward earth in power and glory, followed by His heavenly army. As He breaks down through the clouds, the trumpet will sound and the dead Christians will rise into the air, followed by the Christians still living. Immediately all of these Christians will be transformed and become part of his heavenly army. The Christians thus will return to the earth at that time, with Christ, to participate in the defeat of the armies of the world and the Antichrist" (McKeever; 32-33).

#### 4. The Pretribulation Rapture View

- \* The procedure of the pretribulation rapture is presented by Blackstone when he says that the true Church "will be accounted worthy to escape it [that is, the Great Tribulation], by the Rapture, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36 and Rev. 3:10) (Blackstone; 99).
- \* I have chosen the pretribulation rapture view to be the most consistent Scriptural view. The rest of the message will address different aspects of the pretribulation position as well as answer arguments against it. In continuing our view of the rapture, we see that...

## II. THE RAPTURE IS THE FIRST ASPECT OF HIS COMING.

### A. Explanation

1. The Bible clearly states that the Lord Jesus is returning, and this is what we normally call the Second Coming. Although this is true, there is an aspect of His coming we refer to as the "rapture of the church."
2. The rapture of the church is a mark of the end times of which His Second Coming is not far behind. In the rapture, Jesus comes to the clouds to call His children to Himself, but at this event He is not fully come back to earth in the sense that He will in the Second Coming. In the Second Coming (which succeeds the Rapture and the Tribulation) Jesus will return to earth itself.
3. "There are two phases to His coming. Thus we find that he will come into the air, and that some things will take place in the air; and we find that He will come to the earth, and that some other things will take place on the earth" (Thiessen; 449).

### B. Scriptural Support for the Rapture

1. I Thessalonians 4:15-17 "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. 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: 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."
2. John 14:1-3 "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."
3. II Thessalonians 2:1 "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering unto him . . ."
4. I Corinthians 15:51-52 "Behold, I shew 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

### C. Argument against two aspects of the coming

- \* Erickson disagrees that the rapture and second coming are different when he states, "We

conclude that the use of a variety of terms is not an indication that there will be two stages in the second coming. Rather, the interchangeableness of the terms clearly points to a single event” (Erickson; 1192).

- D. Differences between the Rapture and the Second Coming (Many Scripture verses are involved in establishing the two aspects of His coming. See the adjoining page for a comparison of the Rapture and the Second Coming.)

| RAPTURE  | SECOND COMING   |
|--|---|
| Resurrection of believers<br>(I Thess. 4:16b-17)       | Return of Jesus<br>(Zech. 14:4)                       |
| Based on love<br>(I Thess. 4:17)                       | Based on wrath<br>(Rev. 19:11, 15, 21)                |
| Comes only in the air, clouds<br>(I Thess. 4:17)       | Comes to the earth<br>(Zech. 14:4)                    |
| Hidden to the eyes of the world<br>(I Thess. 5:2)      | Open to the eyes of the world<br>(Matt. 24:27, 29-30) |
| Jesus greets the saints<br>(I Thess. 4:16-17)          | Jesus accompanied by the saints<br>(Rev. 19:14)       |
| Before the tribulation<br>(II Thess. 2:1-3, 7)         | After the tribulation<br>(Matt. 24:29ff)              |
| Unexpected<br>(Matt. 24:40-44)                         | Identifiable by signs<br>(Matt. 24:29ff)              |
| Saved gathered by the Lord<br>(I Thess. 4:16a)         | Saved gathered by angels<br>(Matt. 24:29ff)           |
| Saints are changed<br>(I Cor. 15:51-52)                | Saints already clothed in white<br>(Rev. 19:14)       |
| Saints to be with the Lord forever<br>(I Thess. 4:17a) | Saints already with Him<br>(Rev. 19:14, 20:4)         |
| Jesus rides nothing<br>(I Thess. 4:16)                 | Jesus rides a horse<br>(Rev. 19:11)                   |
| Saints are going up to the Lord<br>(I Thess. 4:17)     | Saints are going down with the Lord<br>(Rev. 19:14)   |
| Bad things happen afterwards<br>(II Thess. 2:6-12)     | Good things happen afterwards<br>(Rev. 20:1-6)        |

### III. THE RAPTURE IS IMMINENT

#### A. Explanation of Imminency

- \* Imminency means that the rapture of the church could occur at any moment. Imminency does not mean that it has to happen soon, but it does mean that there is nothing prophetically preventing it from happening at the present. Therefore, imminency does not necessarily mean soon but rather possible at any time.

#### B. Arguments against imminency

##### 1. Midtribulation argument

- \* The Midtribulationist supports non-imminency by such texts as John 21:18-19 where it is said that Christ promises Peter to live to an old age; that Christ's preaching commission to Paul in Acts 22:21 prevented an imminent coming of Christ; and that "apostasy" and "perilous times" will come before His coming (Pentecost; 180).
- \* As one example, Harrison states that Christ's coming could not be imminent because "for Peter there was no possibility of such an experience, our Lord having told him that he would live to an old age and die a martyr's death . . . (John 21:18,19)" (Harrison; 231).

##### 2. Post-tribulation argument

- \* ". . . until tribulational events have taken place, New Testament expectancy does not mean to look for the return of the Lord as a present possibility, but to look *forward* to His return after the events of the tribulation" (Gundry; 43).

##### 3. Pretribulation answer

###### a. Answer to the Midtribulation argument:

- \* "It is not clear that Peter so understood the Lord on this point. Certainly he encouraged the believers of his day to look for the coming of the Lord. Also, he knew that he might die suddenly (II Pet. 1:14)." Even if the promise of Christ were "interpreted in the strictest sense that Peter's death must precede Christ's coming, there was no reason for the Church to reject her belief in the imminent return on that basis. Judging from their spirit of expectancy, it is evident that they did not" (Stanton; 113-114).

###### b. Answer to the Post-tribulation argument:

- \* "The coming of the Lord for his church is distinctly said to be 'at hand' (Phil. 4:5). The expression in its usual use in the New Testament signifies either imminent nearness (Mt. 26:18, 45, 46; Titus 2:13; I Tim. 4:6), or that the event announced as at hand is the next on the revealed program (Mt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Rev. 22:10). In the unrevealed knowledge of God, periods of time and intervening events, may lie hid, but it remains true that in ordinary usage of Scripture, the expression is a warning or appeal to the man who is, at any time, living" (Scofield; 27-28).

#### C. Scriptural Support for Imminency

1. I Thessalonians 5:5-9 "Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober . . . For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ."
2. Titus 2:11-13 "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the

great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.”

3. Revelation 3:3 “If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.”
4. Other passages: John 14:2-3; Acts 1:11; I Cor. 15:51-52; Phil 3:20; Col. 3:4; I Tim. 6:14; James 5:8; II Peter 3:3-4

#### IV. THE RAPTURE INCLUDES ALL BELIEVERS

##### A. Explanation

- \* I mean by this that when the rapture occurs, all believers who are alive will be “caught up” together to meet the Lord in the air. The rapture will include those who have died in the Lord and those who are alive in the Lord. None will be left out.

##### B. Argument against an all-inclusive rapture of believers

###### 1. Argument of the Partial Rapturist

- \* The concern of this view is not the time of translation but rather the subject of translation. “It is contended that not all believers will be taken at the translation of the church, but rather only those who are ‘watching’ and ‘waiting’ for that event, who have reached some degree of spiritual attainment that makes them worthy to be included.” The partial rapturist will use the following verses to support this view: Luke 21:36; II Tim. 4:8; and Heb. 9:28. (Pentecost; 158)

###### 2. Answer from the Pretribulation Rapture View

###### a. Concerning the theory (from Pentecost)

- (1) Misunderstands “the value of the death of Christ” which makes a believer “acceptable to God” (158).
- (2) Denies the “unity of the body of Christ” taught in I Corinthians 12:12-13 (160).
- (3) Implies the incompleteness “of the resurrection of believers at the translation” because some may have died “in spiritual immaturity” (160). Paul confirms however that all shall be changed (I Cor. 15:51-52; I Thess. 4:14).
- (4) Confuses the Scriptural teaching on rewards.” In speaking of rewards, the Scripture never mentions inclusion in the rapture as a “reward for watching” (160-161).
- (5) Confuses the distinction between law and grace” (161).
- (6) Places “a portion of the believing church in the tribulation period.” Since the purpose of “the tribulation period is to judge the world in preparation for the kingdom to follow”, “the church needs not such a purging judgment” (161).

###### b. Concerning the passages

- (1) Luke 21:36 Found in the chapter context of Israel who is already in the tribulation period. That which is “to be escaped are the judgments associated with ‘that day’ (vs. 34), that is, the Day of the Lord” (Pentecost; 161).
- (2) II Timothy 4:8 The question here is not the “subject of translation . . . but rather the question of reward. Therefore those that truly ‘love his appearing’ will experience a new kind of life which will bring a reward” (Pentecost; 163).
- (3) Hebrews 9:28 The contrast of “them that look for him” is not made with those who do not; Rather, the phrase is used synonymously for those who are true believers. “Believers are those that ‘look for the Saviour” (Phil. 3:20) (Pentecost; 162).

C. Scriptural support for all believers being raptured

1. John 14:1-3 Jesus qualifies that He will come and receive to Himself those who are believing in Him (vs. 1).
2. I Thess. 4:15-17 Paul says those who will be changed are those who are “alive and remain.” The dead in Christ will already be taken care of first. After this, there is no distinction made among those who are alive and remain apart from being believers.
3. I Corinthians 15:51-52 Paul confirms that “we shall all be changed.” This most certainly indicates an all-inclusive collection of believers.

V. THE RAPTURE IS PRETRIBULATIONAL

A. Explanation of the pretribulation view

- \* This view holds that “the church, the body of Christ, in its entirety, will, by resurrection and translation, be removed from the earth before any part of the seventieth week of Daniel begins”, that is, the Great Tribulation (Pentecost; 193).

B. The basic foundation for the theory

1. The literal interpretation of Scripture

- \* This is not only the basis on which a position of premillennialism is formed but also pretribulationism. “Pre-tribulation rapturism rests essentially on one major premise--the literal method of interpretation of the Scriptures. The literal method of interpretation, consistently employed, can lead to no other conclusion than that the church will be raptured before the seventieth week” (Pentecost; 193-194).

2. God’s promise to keep His people from wrath

a. Scriptural statements

- (1) II Thessalonians 5:9 “For God hath not appointed us to wrath.”
- (2) Revelation 3:10 “I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.”

b. Scriptural examples

- (1) The saving of righteous Noah and his family above the destruction which was beneath in the flood.
- (2) The removal of righteous Lot and his family before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. God gave the promise then that He would not destroy “the righteous with the wicked” (Gen. 18:23) (Thiessen; 480).

3. The nature of the Tribulation period (Daniel’s seventieth week) in relation to the nature of the Church

a. It is a time of the pouring out of God’s wrath.

b. Isaiah 26:20-21 speaks of this same period saying, “Come, my people enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast. For, behold, Jehovah cometh forth out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity: the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain.”

c. “The Tribulation is the period in which God will go forth to punish a God and Christ-rejecting world.” Chapters 6-19 of the Book of Revelation speak of this very period. “Now the main features of those chapters are the Seals, the Trumpets and the Wrath Vials. But each of these is a judgment that emanates from heaven. It is God’s visiting of wrath upon this sin-

- cursed world” (Thiessen; 480).
- d. “It is concluded that the nature of the church and the completeness of her salvation prevent her from being in the seventieth week” which is a time which succumbs to the power of the Beast and to Satan (Pentecost; 200).
- 4. Many other arguments are available for study in Things To Come by Pentecost, 193-218.

### C. Arguments against Pretribulation rapturism

1. Midtribulation Rapturism
  - a. Argument: “The Day of Wrath has only now come (11:18).” That is, the Day of Wrath is only present in the last 3½ years. “This means that nothing that precedes in the Seals and Trumpets can rightfully be regarded as wrath. He has restrained it until this time” (Harison; 119).
  - b. Answer: “It is contrary to the clear testimony of the book of Revelation to say that nothing before the seventh trumpet is *wrath*, or *judgment*. Revelation 6:16, 17 twice calls the first six seals ‘wrath.’” It is significant that Revelation 7:14” is the only verse in the book which uses the term ‘great tribulation,’ ...found before the opening of the seventh seal and before the opening of the trumpets” (Stanton; 183).
  - c. Post-tribulation Rapturism
    - (1) Argument: “The church will be present during and experience the great tribulation. The Lord will preserve the church during, but not spare it from, the tribulation” (Erickson; 1220, 1221).
    - (2) Answer: See point V, B, 2 for the answer to this argument. Found on page 10.

## VI. THE RAPTURE YIELDS IMPORTANT MESSAGES TO CHRISTIANS

### A. A message of comfort

1. “Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (I Thess. 4:18).
  - a. The basis of comfort
    - (1) Paul specifically uses the rapture of the believer to be the means by which comfort is offered.
    - (2) For the believer, eschatology brings joy and comfort rather than worry and wrath.
  - b. The type of comfort offered by the rapture
    - (1) The rapture comforts the present believer concerning the believers who have died in the Lord. Not only has God prepared for them, He gives them preferential treatment in the order of the glorification of the rapture.
    - (2) The rapture provides a reunion with the dead in Christ.
    - (3) The rapture ushers us into the presence of the Lord Himself to be with Him forever.
2. “Let not your hearts be troubled . . . I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1-3).
  - a. The basis of comfort
    - (1) Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ
    - (2) The promise of heaven
  - b. The type of comfort offered
    - (1) The promise of His return
    - (2) The receiving of us by Him
    - (3) The personal abiding He offers believers

## B. A message of watchfulness

### 1. Scripture passages

- a. I Thessalonians 5:5-9 "Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."
- b. Titus 2:11-13 "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."
- c. Revelation 3:3 "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."
- d. Other passages: John 14:2-3; Acts 1:11; I Cor. 15:51-52; Phil 3:20; Col. 3:4; I Tim. 6:14; James 5:8; II Peter 3:3-4

### 2. Spiritual messages to believers because of the rapture

#### a. Watchfulness

- \* The imminency of the Lord's return in the rapture encourages a spirit of careful and watchful waiting for the Lord. "Post-millennialists say that He will not come for a thousand years or more, which is equivalent to setting a date, as it places His coming out of all possibility in our lifetime; and then...how quickly do we lay down our watching. The principal condemnation pronounced in the Scripture, in regard to the Lord's return, is to those who say, "My Lord delayeth His coming" (Matt. 24:48). Premillennialists believe that He may come any moment, and that we should ever be found watching and waiting, with our loins girded about, and our lights burning, and ourselves like men that wait for the Lord. Lu. 12:35" (Blackstone; 65).

#### b. Serious Christian living

- \* Titus 2 specifically instructs that the coming of the Lord, for which we as believers are looking, is an encouragement to true Christian morality and spirituality. Living in Christian morality is the denying of ungodliness and worldly lusts in our lives. Living in true spirituality is a life of soberness (seriousness), righteousness, and godliness. The person who is truly believing in the Lord and thus is looking for His return at any moment will order his life in such a manner as this.

## Conclusion:

What a wondrous truth, comfort, and motivation the coming of the Lord is as it concerns the Rapture. To the believer, the rapture of the church is a blessed hope and an encouragement to godliness. To the unbeliever it is the beginning of sorrows and days of Great Tribulation.

The greatest need at this time is for each person to consider his or her personal standing before the Lord. Are you saved? Have you trusted Christ as your Savior? If the rapture of the church were to occur in the next few moments, would He call for you? If you are unable to answer affirmatively to these questions, you need to come to Christ right now and be saved. Make sure at this very moment that your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Christian, are you living in light of the imminent return of the Lord? Are you indeed watching intensely and are you living soberly in light of His return? I trust you are, but if not a change is order right now as well. It is now "high time to awake out of sleep" (Romans 13:11).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blackstone, W. E. *Jesus Is Coming*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908.
- Candlish, Robert S. *Studies in First Corinthians 15: Life In a Risen Savior*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985.
- Gundry, Robert. *The Church and The Tribulation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973.
- Gordon, S. D. *Quiet Talks About Our Lord's Return*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1912.
- Harrison, Norman. *The End: Rethinking the Revelation*. Minneapolis: Harrison Service, 1941.
- McKeever, Jim. *Christians Will Go Through The Tribulation*. Medford, Oregon: Omega Publications, 1978.
- Pentecost, J. Dewight. *Things To Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1958.
- Reese, Alexander. *The Approaching Advent of Christ*. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott Ltd., n.d.
- Ryrie, Charles C. *What You Should Know About the Rapture*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981.
- Scofield, C. I. *Will The Church Pass Through The Great Tribulation?* Philadelphia: Philadelphia School of the Bible, Inc., 1917.
- Stanton, Gerald B. *Kept From The Hour: Biblical Evidence for the Pretribulational Return of Christ*. Miami Springs, Florida: Schoettle Publishing Co., Inc. 1991.
- Thiessen, Henry Clarence. *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949.