

The Rapture - Part 11

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INTRODUCTION

My previous articles commenced a series on the rapture of the church. We began with the question, "What is the Rapture?" This question can best be answered by noting ten truths about the rapture from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. In previous articles from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, we saw that the rapture is an important doctrine and not something that can be marginalized or explained away as a secondary doctrine. We also noted that the rapture is an event that is distinct from the Second Advent of Christ. We further observed that the rapture will involve the catching up of every believer to meet the Lord in the air, and that the rapture will involve a reunion between living and deceased Church-Age believers. We then began to examine several more points from 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. We noted that the rapture will be a resurrection, will exempt an entire generation of believers from death, will be an instantaneous event, is a mystery, and is an imminent event, and is also a traditional doctrine now being recovered.

A Brief Survey of the Different Views

We now move on to our second major question, namely, "when is the rapture?" As we seek to answer this question, we make no attempt at assigning a date for the rapture. Such a practice is forbidden since the Scripture itself assigns no such date. Rather, here we merely seek to answer the question, "when will the rapture take place with respect to the coming tribulation period?" Unfortunately, this is a question that is at first glance intimidating to answer since it has generated much controversy. Theologians have generated a bewildering number of positions concerning when the rapture will occur relative to the coming tribulation period. Let's briefly survey these positions.

At least five differing views exist. **First**, *pre-tribulation* rapturism is the idea that the rapture will occur before the tribulation period even begins. **Second**, *mid-tribulation* rapture theory asserts that the rapture will take place in the middle of the coming tribulation period. **Third**, *post-tribulationism* contends that the rapture will take place at the end of the coming tribulation period. This view typically sees no distinction between the rapture and the Second Advent and thus seeks to harmonize all references to Christ's return as taking place at the end of the future tribulation period.

The confusion on this issue has been compounded by the recent popularization of two more views alongside the aforementioned three traditional views. **First**, *pre-wrath* rapturism maintains that, because the wrath of God does not begin until the final twenty-five percent of the tribulation period, the church will be present for the three quarters of the tribulation period only to be raptured to heaven just before the wrath of God is poured out during the tribulation's final twenty-five percent.

Second, *partial* rapturism contends that only those believers that are earnestly waiting for, seeking, and living for the Lord will be raptured. Those believers in a backslidden state at the time of the rapture will be left behind. Thus, the purpose of the tribulation period is to bring the left-behind backslidden believers out of their spiritual slumber and into a sanctified state. As they are each brought out of their carnality, they will be raptured to heaven on an individual basis.

After looking at all of these competing views, some opt for "prophetic agnosticism" by concluding that any degree of certainty on the "when" question is impossible. However, I contend that it is possible to develop certainty on this matter. In other words, it is possible to become certain that the church will be removed from the earth prior to the tribulation period. Thus, conviction and certainty can be attained regarding the fact that the pretribulation position is the correct view. Such an assertion is far more than mere wishful thinking. The pretribulation position posits seven arguments in its favor. The other views either ignore or do not handle well these seven arguments. No single argument completely "seals the deal" favoring pretribulationism. However, when these seven arguments are considered cumulatively, a potent case exists that the rapture will take place before the tribulation period even begins. For the remainder of this series, I will share these seven arguments with you as well as offer some brief interaction with the other positions after these seven arguments have been discussed.

The Tribulation's Purpose Concerns Israel Rather Than the Church

The first reason that the rapture will take place before the tribulation period even begins relates to the fact the tribulation period itself concerns God's unfinished work with national Israel rather than the church. The whole purpose of the Tribulation is to bring a believing remnant of Israel to faith in her Messiah so that God can fulfill His long awaited covenanted promises through this believing remnant. This divine purpose behind the Tribulation is articulated in Jeremiah 30:7, which is a well-known Tribulation passage. It says, "Alas! for that day is great, There is none like it; And it is the time of Jacob's distress, But he will be saved from it." That this verse is speaking of the coming Tribulation period seems apparent from the fact that it speaks of an unparalleled time of distress, particularly for the Jews, unknown to the world. It is difficult to locate an event of such magnitude as having been fulfilled at any time in past history (Matt. 24:21-22). Furthermore, the verse speaks of Israel's salvation or conversion when it says, "he will be saved from it." "Jacob" is a synonym for "Israel" since God ultimately changed the patriarch's name to Israel in Genesis 32:28; 35:10. Thus, this event must be yet future since national Israel, right up to the present hour, remains in a state of unbelief.

Jeremiah 30:7 is significant since it reveals that the purpose of the coming tribulation period is to bring Israel into salvation by allowing her to believe on her Messiah *Yeshua*, or Jesus Christ. God knocks us down so that we will look up. Most believers can testify to the reality of this statement since they see this divine pattern at work in their lives. God typically allows us to come to the end of ourselves through tribulations or failures or disillusionment. At that point, we trust in Him alone since He is the only One we have left to rely upon. According to Jeremiah 30:7, God will use this same strategy

regarding the future conversion of Israel. However, it will not be tribulations that God will use, but rather the Tribulation. Its purpose is to put unbelieving Israel under such duress that she will ultimately trust in Christ alone.

This divine purpose for the coming Tribulation period is taught in many other passages. For example, Daniel 9:24-27 depicts a 490 year divine time clock for Israel. The final seven years of this stop watch deal with the coming tribulation (Dan. 9:27). Daniel 9:24 predicts this final spiritual and political condition of the nation once this coming seven-year tribulation has completed its course when it says, "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy *place*." These six clauses taken together depict the physical and spiritual restoration of the nation of Israel and Jerusalem (Daniel's people and city) after the future seven-year tribulation period's completion. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the divine purpose of the Tribulation period is to convert Israel.

Furthermore, Daniel 12:7 says, "I heard the man dressed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, as he raised his right hand and his left toward heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half *a time*; and as soon as they finish shattering the power of the holy people, all these *events* will be completed." In context, this verse deals with the second half of the coming tribulation period. The phrase "holy people" refers to the Jewish nation. Notice what God is doing to His chosen yet unbelieving nation during this future time period. He is shattering their power. In other words, He is breaking them down during this future time of unparalleled distress so that they will look up and thus trust in Him alone and consequently be saved.

Why do these passages (Jer. 30:7; Dan. 9:24; 12:7) relate to the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture? Because they clearly explain the Tribulation's purpose as relating exclusively to national Israel, the church cannot be present during this future time. Since the church is already in faith, there is no need for the church to be present during a time period when God is trying His people for the express purpose of bringing them to saving faith. The program of belief after distress is unrelated to the church, which already believes.

Furthermore, God seems to use Israel and the church on a mutually exclusive basis. For example, only after national Israel rejected her messiah did God raise up the church to be His witness to a lost and dying world (Acts 2). While the church was always contemplated in the mind of God (Eph. 3:11), He only began His dealings with and through the church after no longer using Israel as His special people of bringing spiritual light to a dark world (Matt. 23:37-38; Rom. 10:19). Thus, if God's dealings with Israel and the church are mutually exclusive and the coming tribulation period expressly concerns His unfinished program purposes with Israel, the church cannot be present in any sense. It is contrary to the pattern of God to intermingle these two divine programs, Israel and the Church, in any sense.

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In sum, in an attempt to answer the question "what is the rapture?" we noted that the rapture is an important doctrine, an event that is distinct from the Second Advent of Christ, an event that will involve the catching up of every believer to meet the Lord in the air, a reunion of living and deceased Church-Age believers, a resurrection, an event that will exempt an entire generation of Church-Age believers from death, an instantaneous event, a mystery, an imminent event that can take place at any moment, and a traditional doctrine now being recovered. Furthermore, regarding "when" the rapture will occur, we will explain that believers can develop certainty that they will be raptured before the tribulation period for at least seven reasons. The first reason is that the tribulation's ultimate purpose concerns Israel rather than the church.

(To Be Continued...)



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