

The Rapture - Part 12

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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, is an imminent event, and is also a traditional doctrine now being recovered.

We then moved on to our second major question, namely, "when is the rapture?" We noted that 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?" After briefly defining the various views that theologians have posited in an attempt to answer this question, we stated that the pretribulation position (the church will be raptured from the earth before the Tribulation period begins) posits seven arguments in its favor. We explained that the first reason that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation period even begins relates to the fact that the Tribulation period itself concerns God's unfinished work with national Israel rather than the church. We now move on to the second argument favoring pretribulationism.

The Missing Church

The second reason that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation period even begins relates to the absence of any reference to the church on earth in Revelation 4–19. This point becomes clearer upon considering the broad structure of the Book of Revelation. Revelation 1:19 furnishes the three-part structure of the book. It says, "Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things." "The things which you have seen" consist of John's interaction with the glorified Christ as recorded in Revelation's first chapter. "The things which are" comprise the seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor as recorded in Revelation 2–3. "The things which will take place after these things" constitute the futuristic section of the book as recorded in Revelation 4–22. That Revelation 4:1 begins this third and futuristic section is evident from the two-fold repetition of the expression "after these things" (*meta tatuta*), which is the same phrase used to describe this final section of the book in Revelation 1:19. It is in this final section of the book that we discover the most vivid description of the Tribulation period in the entire Bible

(Rev. 4–19). Yet, this section contains no single clear reference to the church on the earth during this time period. While the Greek word *ekklēsia* translated “church” is found 19 times in Revelation 1–3 comprising the first two sections of the book, the word is not found a single time in the book’s futuristic section (Rev. 4–22). In fact, the only time in this section that *ekklēsia* is used is when John signs off in the benediction reminding his readers of Christ’s exhortation to preach these prophetic truths in the churches (Rev. 22:16). Other than this scant reference to the church, the word “church” is totally absent from the book’s futuristic section. We might inquire as to why? The obvious answer lies in the fact that the church will not be on the earth during this horrific time period having already been raptured to heaven before the Tribulation even begins.

Moreover, in the book’s second section, the following exhortation occurs seven times: “To him who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). It is worth pointing out that the nearly identical expression occurs in Revelation 13:9, which is given to encourage those experiencing persecution from the Beast during the Tribulation period. This verse says, “if anyone has an ear, let him hear.” Notice that the familiar expression “what the Spirit says to the churches” is omitted from Revelation 13:9 despite the fact that it is attached to the same expression seven times in Revelation 2–3. We might ask why “What the Spirit says to the churches” is left off in Revelation 13:9 despite its seven-fold prominence in Revelation 2–3? Once again, the answer lies in the fact that the church will not be on the earth during this seven-year time period having already been raptured to heaven before the Tribulation even begins.

Not only is the word “church” (*ekklēsia*) absent from the section of John’s Apocalypse directly pertaining to the Tribulation period, but the concept of the church is missing as well. Paul routinely described the church, or the body of Christ, as consisting of all people from all nations on equal footing as joint heirs in one new man or spiritual organism. According to Galatians 3:28, in the Church Age, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 2:14 similarly explains, “For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.” Thus, national barriers or boundaries no longer positionally divide believers from one another in the Church Age. Today, the preeminent servant of God is no longer national, ethnic Israel but rather the church, or the body of Christ, consisting of believers in Jesus from all nations.

Yet, the Book of Revelation, chapters 4–22 describes a period of time when national barriers will once again be erected as God will again use national Israel as His special instrument to bless the world. Prominently among them will be the 144,000 Jews from the 12 tribes of Israel (Rev. 7:1-8) who will evangelize the world (Rev. 7:9-16). Similarly, during the future Tribulation period, He will appoint two Jewish witnesses, most likely Moses and Elijah (Rev. 11:3-14). Moreover, despite the fact that the church is the object of Satanic opposition in the present age (Eph. 6:10-20), during the coming Tribulation, Satan will relentlessly attack national Israel (Rev. 12:1, 13; Gen. 37:9-10). Thus, not only is the word “church” absent from Revelation’s depiction of the future Tribulation, but the Pauline concept of the church as a body with no national barriers is also absent from this horrific time period. Unlike today, the singular national entity Israel will be the object of not only divine blessing but also

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Satanic wrath in the futuristic section of the Apocalypse. The only logical explanation for this abrupt transition is that the church has already been raptured to heaven before the events of the Tribulation period unfold.

If the church is ever hinted at or mentioned at all in Revelation's description of the Tribulation period, she is always portrayed as being in heaven and never on the earth. For example, Revelation 1:20 symbolizes the church as seven lampstands. These lamps and lampstands are described as already being in heaven once the events of the Tribulation period begin to unfold (Rev. 4:5).

This missing church concept is not only evident in John's description of the Tribulation period as recorded in the Book of Revelation, but it is also apparent in virtually all other Tribulation passages recorded throughout the entire Scripture. Thus, no matter how hard one tries, they will not be able to find the church either in word or concept in such passages as Jeremiah 30:7; Ezekiel 38-39; Daniel 9:24-27; Matthew 24-25, etc...The silence is deafening!

In sum, having previously answered the question, "what is the rapture?", we noted the first two of at least seven reasons that affirm the pretribulational rapture view. The first reason is that the Tribulation's ultimate purpose concerns Israel rather than the church. The second reason relates to the concept of the missing church not only from Revelation 4–22, but also from all central and critical Tribulation texts.

(To Be Continued...)



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