

The Rapture - Part 20

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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 to a second main question, namely, when will the rapture take place relative to the coming seven-year Tribulation period? We offered the contention that believers can develop certainty that they will be raptured before the Tribulation period occurs for at least seven reasons. First, the Tribulation period's purpose concerns Israel rather than the church. Second, there is no reference to the church as being on the earth in Revelation 4–19. Third, the church has been promised an exemption from divine wrath. The fourth reason is that the rapture is an imminent event and only the pretribulation view is in harmony with this doctrine. The fifth reason is that only pretribulationism is in harmony with the New Testament's presentation of the rapture as a comforting event. The sixth reason that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation period begins is because the Antichrist cannot even come forward until the Holy Spirit's restraining ministry through the church is first removed. The seventh and final reason that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation period begins relates to the fact that the symbolic parallels of the days of Noah and Lot mandate that God's people must first be taken out of harm's way before the pouring out of divine judgment.

Now that we have dealt with these two questions, we will begin to explore some of the weaknesses associated with the other competing views that seek to answer the question, "when will the rapture take place relative to the coming Tribulation period?" Recall the various views on the timing of the rapture relative to the impending Tribulation period. At least five differing perspectives exist. *First, pre-tribulation* rapturism holds that the rapture will occur before the Tribulation period even begins. This is the position that has been defended in this series. *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. *Fourth, 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 first 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 quarter. *Fifth, partial rapturism* maintains that only those believers who are truly living for Christ at the time of the rapture will actually participate in the rapture by being removed from the earth at that time, thereby leaving behind the carnal or backslidden believers to experience the events of the Tribulation period.

At the onset, it is important to understand that all of the non-pre-tribulation positions have a difficult time handling the seven arguments favoring **pre-tribulationism** previously discussed in this series. In other words, **mid** and **post-tribulationism** as well as **pre-wrath** rapturism fail to explain how the church could be placed in a future time period where God is primarily dealing with Israel rather than the church, where the church is never mentioned or even alluded to, and when God's wrath is directly being poured out. They also do not acknowledge the New Testament teaching on imminence or that the rapture is the very next event to occur on the prophetic horizon rather than some other eschatological occurrence. Nor do they consider that the doctrine of the rapture is a comfort. They also fail to explain how the church could still be present after the Holy Spirit's restraining ministry is removed. They also do not harmonize well with the symbolic parallels concerning the days of Noah and Lot. Beyond these initial problems, the competing positions also contain several other weaknesses and inadequacies. Let's begin our discussion with **mid-tribulationism**.

Mid-Tribulation Rapture

Mid-tribulation rapture theory asserts that the rapture will take place in the middle of the coming Tribulation period. Those adhering to the mid-tribulation rapture typically rely on at least one of the following *three* arguments to support their position. Let us now enumerate and briefly respond to each of the three arguments used to justify the mid-tribulation rapture position.

1. *Although the church is exempted from God's wrath, the church will be on the earth during the first half of the tribulation period because God's wrath will not actually begin until the second half of the tribulation period.* While conceding that the church is exempted from God's wrath, the mid-tribulation rapture view assumes that God's wrath will not begin until the second half of the Tribulation period. This assumption exists in the minds of some on the grounds that the Antichrist will rule the world in peace and prosperity for the first half of the Tribulation period, and the rest of the apocalyptic judgments will not come upon the world until the second half of the Tribulation period.

However, God's wrath will take place during the first half as well as the second half of the Tribulation period. During the first half of the Tribulation period, the Antichrist will be unveiled. Consequently, his coming will be just as much a judgment upon the world as will be the remaining judgments, many of

which will take place during the second half of the Tribulation period. The revelation of the Antichrist will be a spiritual judgment sent by God for the purpose of deceiving many of those who have rejected the gospel. Second Thessalonians 2:9-12 says, "*that is*, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness." This text makes it clear that the Antichrist will be sent as divine spiritual judgment to deceive many who have rejected Christ. While many will be saved during this awful time period (Rev. 7:9-17), many others who reject the gospel will be blinded by God Himself to its truth during the Tribulation period. They will be judicially blinded with the revelation of the Antichrist, who is the rider on the white horse (Rev. 6:1-2). Although not identically akin to the type of physical judgment which will take place during the subsequent aspects of the Tribulation period, this spiritual form of judgment will actually be far worse because it will eternally damn souls. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 10:28, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Just as the opening of seals 2 through 7 will bring horrific judgments upon the world, the opening of the first seal, which will reveal the Antichrist, will also bring forth horrible divine judgment upon the world. The only difference between seals 2 through 7 and the first seal will be the nature of the judgment. Physical judgment will come upon the world with the opening of seals 2 through 7 and spiritual judgment will come upon the world with the opening of the first seal. Thus, God's wrath as manifested through spiritual judgment will actually be manifested at the very beginning of the Tribulation period. This notion of continuity of wrath coming forth through all seven seal judgments, including the first seal, is strengthened when it is understood that all of the seal judgments are connected to Christ in heaven opening the seven sealed scroll (Rev. 5:1-7). Consistency seems to dictate that if the physical judgment contained in seals 2 through 7 are manifestations of divine wrath, then the spiritual judgment contained in the first seal judgment must also be a manifestation of divine wrath.

Moreover, with the opening of the sixth seal, Revelation 6:16-17 says, "and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?'" Interestingly, this verse looks backward upon all of the prior six seal judgments and categorizes them as divine wrath. These seal judgments are manifested early on in the Tribulation period and most likely take place in the first half. Thomas explains:

The verb *ēlethen* ("has come") is aorist indicative, referring to a previous arrival of wrath, not something that is about to take place. Men see the arrival of this day at least as early as the cosmic upheavals that characterize the sixth seal (6:12-14), but upon reflection they probably recognize that it was already in effect with the death of one-fourth of the population (6:7-8), the worldwide famine (6:5-6), and the global warfare (6:3-4). The rapid sequence of all of these events could not escape notice, but the light of their true explanation does not dawn upon human consciousness until the severe phenomena of the sixth seal arrive.¹

Thus, contrary to the belief of **mid-tribulationism**, the wrath of God is a phenomenon that appears at the earliest part of the Tribulation period.

Even if the premise is granted, as **mid-tribulationism** maintains, that the wrath of God encompasses only a portion of the Tribulation period, the Church-Age believer still cannot experience any of this Tribulation time period. Christ in Revelation 3:10 makes the following promise to the church at Philadelphia: "Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that *hour* which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth." Notice that in Revelation 3:10, Christ promises the believer not just an exemption from divine wrath, but rather a removal from the very hour of testing itself. Rhodes explains the significance of this promise as a refutation to non-pretribulationist perspectives:

This means the church will go through the time of judgment prophesied in the book of Revelation, but believers will be kept from Satan's wrath during the tribulation (Revelation 3:10). Pretribulationists (such as myself) respond, however, that Revelation 3:10 indicates that believers will be saved out of or separated from (Greek: *ek*) the actual time period of the tribulation.²

Regarding the promise of Revelation 3:10, Geisler similarly observes, "In context, the statement about being saved 'out of' (Gk: *ek*) the time of trial does mean saved from it (not through it). One cannot be saved from an entire hour by being in any part of it."³

In sum, having previously answered the question, "what is the rapture?", we noted at least seven reasons that affirm the pretribulationist rapture view. We then began interacting with the other positions on the timing of the rapture. Starting with **mid-tribulationism**, we noted the first of at least

¹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 457-58.

² Ron Rhodes, *The End Times in Chronological Order: A Complete Overview to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2012), 50.

³ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 2004), 654.

three deficiencies with this position. **Mid-tribulationism** errs in failing to consider that the wrath of God begins early on in the Tribulation period.

(To Be Continued...)



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