

# The Rapture - Part 26

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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. 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. After dealing with these two questions, we began 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?" At least five differing perspectives exist. We noted at the onset that it is important to understand that all of the non-pretribulation positions have a difficult time handling the seven arguments favoring **pre-tribulationism** previously discussed in this series. We have already noted the problems associated with **mid-tribulationism**. In the last few articles we began to scrutinize the arguments favoring **post-tribulationism**. In this article, we will continue to scrutinize **post-tribulationism**.

## Post-tribulation Rapture

*Post-tribulation* rapture theory 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. Those adhering to the **post-tribulationism** rapture typically rely on at least one of *four* arguments to support their position. In past articles, we noted that **post-tribulationism** errs in superficially connecting Paul's depiction of the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:50-58) with either the events of Matthew 24:30-31 or Revelation 20:4-6. Moreover, we noted that contrary to the assertion of **post-tribulationism**, although believers will be exempted from some of the judgments during the Tribulation period, they will still be subjected to many other judgments during this time period. Thus, **post-tribulationism** errs in failing to understand that the divine promise of Revelation 3:10 conveys a complete escape not only from coming Tribulation judgments but also the very time of those judgments. We now move on to an analysis of a *fourth* argument posited by post-tribulationists.

*4. The post-tribulation rapture position has been the dominant view held by theologians throughout the history of the church.*

Adherents of the post-tribulation view are quick to point out that the pretribulation rapture view appeared relatively late in church history and that the dominant view early on was the posttribulation view.<sup>1</sup> According to

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<sup>1</sup> Was the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church really an 19th century innovation? Why was it not prominently taught in church history? Please see part 10 of this series for answers to these questions.

posttribulationist George Ladd, "every church father who deals with the subject expects the church to suffer at the hands of the Antichrist" and "the prevailing view is post-tribulational premillennialism."<sup>2</sup> Gundry similarly concludes, "Until Augustine in the fourth century, the early Church generally held to the premillennarian understanding of Biblical eschatology...And it was post-tribulational."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, post-tribulationism's appeal to history rather than the Scripture at this juncture may be a subtle concession of the inadequacy of its biblical support. At any rate, this objection can be handled in *three* ways.

*First*, the issue is not when the view became popular but if it is taught in the Bible. If the view can be successfully defended from the Scripture, this fact alone should be sufficient to settle the argument, regardless of when the view became popular. For example, when Martin Luther attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century and bring the church back to the truths taught in Scripture, he faced the same criticism. Luther was told that his way of doing things was a departure from centuries of church tradition. Luther's response was "sola scriptura," which means that the final authority for all matters of faith and practice is the Bible and not church history, tradition, or popularity. Note Pentecost's response to the post-tribulational appeal to antiquity: "If the same line of reasoning were followed one would not accept the doctrine of justification by faith, for it was not clearly taught until the Reformation. The

failure to discern the teaching of Scripture does not nullify that teaching."<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Paul himself seemed to stress the necessity of relying upon apostolic truth as opposed to relying upon the subsequent generations of the Church Fathers when he gave the following exhortation to the Ephesian Church elders: "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:29-32). According to Paul, truth should be determined by reliance upon "the word of His grace" handed down from the apostles rather than the savage wolves that would infiltrate the Church from within after the apostles had left the scene.

*Second*, the notion that the earliest Church Fathers were universally post-tribulational is a highly debatable proposition. One of the pervasive characteristics of their writings was their belief in the imminent, or any moment, appearance of Christ.<sup>5</sup> As explained earlier in this series, imminency is only compatible with

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<sup>2</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 173.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1964), 168.

<sup>5</sup> See part 9 of this series for a fuller discussion of imminency.

pre-tribulationism.<sup>6</sup> Pentecost observes, "The early church lived in the light of the belief in the imminent return of Christ. Their expectation was that Christ might return at any time. Pre-tribulationism is the only position consistent with this doctrine of imminence."<sup>7</sup> Note the following citations from various Church fathers demonstrating their belief in imminency.<sup>8</sup> *The Second Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* (A.D. 95–140) proclaims, "Wherefore let us every hour expect the kingdom of God in love and righteousness; because we know not the day of God's appearing."<sup>9</sup> *The Didache* (A.D. 120) similarly states, "Watch for your life's sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ready, for you know not the hour in which our Lord will come."<sup>10</sup> According to *The Epistle of Barnabas* (A.D. 70–135), "For the day is at hand on which all things shall perish with the evil [one]. The Lord is near, and His reward."<sup>11</sup> Such statements revealing a belief in Christ's imminent return are

incompatible with post-tribulationism, which denies that Christ can return at any moment. Thus, statements like these are sufficient to dispel the post-tribulational appeal to antiquity of the early Church Fathers.

In sum, in this series, having previously answered the question, "What is the Rapture?", we noted at least several reasons that affirm the pre-tribulational rapture view. We then began interacting with the other positions on the timing of the rapture. In this article, we observed that **post-tribulationism's** argument from antiquity errs in appealing to historical sources outside the Bible and failing to acknowledge that imminency was embraced by many Church Fathers.

(To Be Continued...)



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<sup>6</sup> See part 15 of this series for a fuller discussion of the relationship between imminency and Pretribulationism.

<sup>7</sup> Pentecost, 168.

<sup>8</sup> For additional quotes from the early Church Fathers demonstrating a belief in imminency, see Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers," in *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak out on End-Time Controversies*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 1995), 88-101; John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, Revised and Enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 50-53; Pentecost, 168-69; Grant Jeffrey, *Apocalypse: The Coming Judgment of the Nations* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 101-109.

<sup>9</sup> *Second Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* 4.15.

<sup>10</sup> *The Didache* 16.1.

<sup>11</sup> *The Epistle of Barnabas* 21.