

The Rapture - Part 27

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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-tribulation 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.¹ According to

¹ 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?

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-tribulationist premillennialism."² 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-tribulationist."³ 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*, in our last article, we saw that 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. *Second*, we also observed that the notion that the earliest Church Fathers were universally post-tribulationist 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. Imminency is compatible with pre-tribulationism rather than post-tribulationism. We now move on to our *third* response.

Third, even if the post-tribulationism was influential in church history long before pre-tribulationism, this fact in and of itself would

be insufficient to establish post-tribulationism's credibility. Prophetic truth is designed by the Holy Spirit to become progressively more understandable as the world approaches the allotted time period when the prophecies will be fulfilled. Progressive revelation has ceased with the closing of the biblical canon back in the first century (Jude 3; Rev. 22:18-19). However, progressive illumination, whereby the Holy Spirit enables the Church to comprehend ever increasing degrees of already revealed biblical and prophetic truth, not only has been taking place but even now continues to be an ongoing reality. After receiving a prophetic vision about the future, Daniel was told, "But as for you, Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time; many will go back and forth, and knowledge will increase" (Daniel 12:4). Daniel then inquired into the vision's meaning and was once again told that the words are to be closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Daniel 12:8-9 says, "As for me, I heard but could not understand; so I said, 'My lord, what will be the outcome of these events?' He said, 'Go your way, Daniel, for these words are concealed and sealed up until the end time.'" Many incorrectly interpret this reference in Daniel 12:4 to how many in the last days "will go back and forth, and knowledge will increase" as increase in travel and technology in the last days. However, the reference going "back and forth" is also used in Amos 8:12 to refer to a vain search for spiritual knowledge during a time period when it is inaccessible. This verse says, "People will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it." When this

Please see part 10 of this series for answers to these questions.

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

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

parallel passage is taken into account, going "back and forth" or "to and fro" is a reference to reading revealed Scripture. As people will give themselves in the last days to reading and studying prophetic truth, Daniel predicts that God's obscure end time program will become increasingly understandable, especially as the time period for the predicted events draws ever nearer (Dan. 12:4, 8-9; 1 Peter 1:10-11).

We find this principle of progressive illumination also at work in Daniel's vision of the Ram and the Goat in Daniel 8, which would not be ultimately fulfilled until the Grecian era, or several centuries from Daniel's personal time frame. Daniel 8:27 says, "Then I, Daniel, was exhausted and sick for days. Then I got up *again* and carried on the king's business; but I was astounded at the vision, and there was none to explain *it*." This same concept of progressive illumination is also discernible in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, who were unable to comprehend some of the specific details of their own messianic prophecies. Concerning these Old Testament prophets, First Peter 1:10-11 says, "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow." In this same sense, God's end time prophetic truth becomes progressively unsealed or illuminated as history finally catches up to the time period when the prophetic scenario will be fulfilled.

Because God's prophetic truth is not meant to be fully understood until just before the prophetic events transpire, we have the ability to understand end times prophecy better than

the great minds who studied it throughout church history. This is not because we are more intelligent than them, but rather because we are living closer in time toward the fulfillment of these prophecies. Similarly, if the Lord tarries, those living on the earth just before the Tribulation period begins, or those who are actually in the Tribulation period itself will comprehend prophecy far better than we will. Because prophecy is progressively revealed, it is logical to assume that prophetic truth would be better understood by believers living later in Church history than by Christians early on in Church history.

This reality explains why Eschatology was the last of all the branches of theology to be developed and systematized. Here is a very rough outline of doctrinal history. The Church resolved issues related to canonicity around A.D. 180. It then applied itself to the subject of Christology around A.D. 400. It dealt extensively with issues related to the Atonement around A.D. 1100. About mid A.D. 1500, the Church systematized issues related to salvation, known as Soteriology. It was not until around A.D. 1800 that the vast subject of Biblical eschatology began to be systematized and developed.

Orr outlines the progress of Christian dogma in a similar way. The second century was the age of Apologetics. The doctrine of God and especially the Trinity then took center stage in the third and fourth centuries as the Church dealt with the Monarchian, Arian, and Macedonian controversies. Anthropology then became the Church's focus in the early fifth century during the Augustinian and Pelagian controversies. The late fifth and then sixth and seventh centuries were characterized by an

ecclesiastical interest in Christological (Nestorian, Eutychian, Monophysite, Monothelite) matters. In the sixteenth century the reformers focused upon salvific or Soteriological concerns. Finally, the Church gave itself to correcting a Mythical and Mediaeval pre-reformation Eschatology. Thus, Eschatology was the last of the branches of theology to be systematized since it was not designed to be progressively unsealed or illuminated by the Holy Spirit until just before the fulfillment of the predicted events (Dan. 12:4, 8-9).⁴

If this doctrine of progressive illumination related to biblical prophecy is accurate, then turning to the sages of the past throughout corridors of Church history in order to understand end times prophecy is an exercise in futility. The real question should be not what the earliest Church Fathers or even the Protestant Reformers taught about Bible prophecy. Rather, a more fruitful inquiry should relate to what the Holy Spirit is illuminating to the Church today about Eschatology through God's written Word as interpreted in its plain and ordinary sense. If the preceding discussion is accurate, then post-tribulationism's appeal to antiquity for support is significantly undermined.

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 and the prior article, we observed that **post-**

tribulationism's argument from antiquity errs in appealing to historical sources outside the Bible, failing to acknowledge that imminency was embraced by many Church Fathers, and failing to understand the notion of progressive illumination of prophetic truth.

(To Be Continued...)



Source: SpiritAndTruth.org

⁴ James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 21-31.