

The Rapture - Part 16

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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. Only pretribulationism understands that the very next event on the prophetic horizon involves the return of Jesus Christ for His church through the rapture. The immediate expectation of the other competing rapture positions is always placed on some other eschatological event rather than the rapture. This differing expectation is even revealed in some non-pretribulationist book titles. For example, the title of the posttribulationist book by Bob Gundry is, "First the Antichrist." The book's sub-title reads, "Why Christ Won't Come Before the Antichrist Does."¹ By contrast, the Pretribulationist is not looking for the Antichrist but rather Jesus Christ since the rapture of the church is the next event to transpire. We now move on to our fifth argument favoring pretribulationism.

The Rapture is a Comfort

The fifth reason that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation period even begins relates to the fact the rapture doctrine is designed to comfort the believer. The first reference to the rapture is most

¹ Robert Gundry, *First the Antichrist: Why Christ Won't Come before the Antichrist Does* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

likely found in the Upper Room Discourse through Christ's words as recorded in John 14:1-4.² Notice how Christ begins this section with words of comfort. In John 14:1, He says, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me." Perhaps the most specific treatment of the rapture is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Again, notice how Paul concludes this section with words of comfort. In 1 Thessalonians 4:18, he writes, "Therefore comfort one another with these words." Titus 2:13 similarly associates comfort with the return of Christ for His church by referring to the rapture as the "blessed hope." This verse says, "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

Some become confused how the rapture can possibly comfort since they incorrectly associate the "thief in the night" imagery with the rapture. Since a thief breaking into one's house in the middle of the night is a harmful and negative occurrence, people misassociate such negativity with the rapture. However, the New Testament never analogizes the rapture with the coming of a thief. While the New Testament uses "thief" imagery seven times (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15), none of these references contextually allude to the rapture.³ For example, Matthew 24:43 and Luke 12:39 both refer to the need for the nation of Israel to remain faithful to the Lord and watchful of His return in the midst of the coming seven-year Tribulation period unlike those Jews that failed to recognize Christ at His First-Advent. Similarly, the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4 speaks of those unsuspecting unbelievers who are caught off guard by the judgment attached to the eschatological Day of the Lord. Moreover, 2 Peter 3:10 has nothing to do with the rapture or any other Church-Age event, but rather with the dissolving of the present order subsequent to the Millennial Kingdom and Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:1-15; 21:1) just prior to the Eternal State (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21-22). In addition, Revelation 3:3 likely refers to the imminent discipline by Christ (Heb. 12:5-11) soon to be imposed upon the wayward and carnal Sardis church. Finally, since Revelation 16:15 appears parenthetically between the sixth and seventh bowl judgments, it is an exhortation for the Tribulation saints to be watching for the soon-return of Christ at the end of the seven-year Tribulation period. In sum, when all of the New Testament data is considered, the rapture is a comforting event that the Church-Age believer is to look forward to rather than a negative event to be dreaded.

What does this notion of comfort and hope have to do with the doctrine of pretribulationism? Recall the various views on the timing of the rapture relative to the impending Tribulation period. At least four differing perspectives exist. **First**, *pretribulation* rapturism holds that the rapture will occur before the Tribulation period even begins. **Second**, *midtribulation* rapture theory asserts that the rapture will take place in the middle of the coming Tribulation period. **Third**, *posttribulationism* 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**, *prewrath* rapturism

² For an exegetical defense of the reality that Christ spoke of the rapture in John 14:1-4, see Andy Woods, "Jesus and the Rapture," online: www.pre-trib.org, accessed 27 August 2013, 20-48.

³ Thomas Ice, "A Thief in the Night," *Pre-Trib Perspectives* 8, no. 3 (August 2013): 1, 4-5.

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 twenty-five percent.

Notice that only *pretribulationism* is in harmony with the concept of comfort. Unlike pretribulationism, all of the other rapture positions convey a list of prophetic judgments that must first transpire before the rapture can occur. Only *pretribulationism* teaches that the rapture will take place before these judgments can occur. *Midtribulationism*, for example, contends that the Church-Age believer must first endure 42 months of hell on earth and assuming that he is not martyred by the beast, only then does he have the hope of participating in the rapture. How is such a scenario consistent with the New Testament passages describing the rapture as a comforting, hopeful, and blessed event (John 14:1; 1 Thess. 4:18; Titus 2:13)? The other rapture positions create even more disharmony with the comfort of the rapture since they place the Church-Age believer into either three quarters (*prewrath* rapturism) or all of the Tribulation (*posttribulation* rapturism).

Thus, only *pretribulationism* teaches that the rapture is a comfort since only this view promises the church a complete exemption from the horrors of the Tribulation period. In the following stanza, Donald Grey Barnhouse well captured the idea that only *pretribulationism* is consistent with the promises of imminency and comfort:⁴

Jesus may come today, Glad day! Glad day!
And I would see my friend; Dangers and troubles would end
If Jesus should come today.
Glad day! Glad day! Is it the crowning day?
I'll live for today, nor anxious be,
Jesus, my Lord, I soon shall see;
Glad day! Glad day! Is it the crowning day?

By way of parody, Dr. Barnhouse also pointed out that if the midtrib or posttrib advocates sang this song, it would instead have to say:

Jesus can't come today, Sad day! Sad day!
And I won't see my friend; Dangers and troubles won't end
Because Jesus can't come today.
Sad day! Sad day! Today is not the crowning day?
I won't live for today, and anxious I'll be,
The Beast and the False Prophet I soon shall see, Sad day!
Sad day! Today is not the crowning day?

⁴ Cited in Mark Hitchcock, "An Overview of Pretribulationist arguments," online: www.pre-trib.org, accessed 27 August 2013, 29-30.

The Rapture - Part 16

In sum, having previously answered the question, "what is the rapture?", we noted the first five of at least seven reasons that affirm the pretribulation 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. The third reason is that 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, hopeful, and blessed event.

(To Be Continued...)



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