

THE RAPTURE—AND ITS TIMING

Why You Can Trust the Pre-Tribulation Rapture

A. The Two Phases of the Lord's Return

The tenor of New Testament Scripture indicates that the return of Jesus Christ takes place in two different phases. One phase involves the Lord's coming in the air *for* His betrothed—the Church (those persons, dead or living, who, from Pentecost until this unannounced return, have put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation). The other phase involves the Lord's bodily return to the earth *with* His betrothed (as well as pre-Pentecost believers and Tribulation martyrs) to save Israel from annihilation and to establish His Millennial Kingdom on earth. The first phase is typically called the “Rapture” and the second phase is typically called the “Second Coming.” (See Chart 6-A.)

B. The Contrasts Between the Rapture and the Second Coming

The two different phases of the Lord's return are best understood when the contrasts between the two are noted. Christ's return at the Rapture will be *unannounced*, just as a thief's entrance into a home at night is unannounced (Matt. 24:43-44; I Thess. 5:2-3). Christ's return at the Second Coming, however, will be *announced*—by signs in the sky (Matt. 24:29; Zech 14:6-7; and others). Christ's return at the Rapture will be in the air (I Thess. 4:15-18); Christ's return at the Second Coming will be to the earth (Zech. 14:4; Acts 1:4-11). Christ's return at the Rapture will be instantaneous and *invisible*, in the “twinkling of an eye” (I Cor. 15:51-52). Christ's return at the Second Coming will take several minutes (if not several hours) and will be *visible*—every person still alive on earth will see His return (Acts 1:9-11; Rev. 1:7). (See Chart 6-B.) Moreover, upon examining the contrasts, it becomes apparent that a passage of a time logically, if not necessarily, must take place between these two events.

C. The Certainty of the Rapture

The Apostle Paul describes the Rapture in two separate New Testament passages. In I Thessalonians, Paul describes it as follows:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, comfort one another with these words. (I Thess. 4:15-18)

In I Corinthians, Paul offers additional information about the Rapture:

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (I Cor. 15:50-52).

The Rapture, then, is an invisible, unannounced (Matt. 24:43), instantaneous “catching up” into heaven of all dead and living born-again believers. The *certainty* of the Rapture cannot be debated by Christians; it is the plain, straight-forward teaching of the Scriptures. Those who deny a future Rapture are apostate. The only item for debate is the Rapture's *timing* relative to the Tribulation. *No passage of Scripture gives the timing of the Rapture explicitly*; Christians must deduce its timing after reviewing all statements which deal with the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ. Careful analysis, however, allows us to harmonize these passages into one most likely position.

D. The Different Views on the Timing of the Rapture

Five viewpoints with regard to the timing of the Rapture of the Church exist in Christian circles today. These five viewpoints are as follows: (1) the “pre-tribulation” Rapture; (2) the “mid-tribulation” Rapture; (3) the “post-tribulation” Rapture; (4) the “pre-wrath” Rapture; and (5) the “partial” Rapture. The first view contends that the “Rapture”—this invisible, unannounced, instantaneous “catching up” into heaven of all dead and living born-again believers from the day of Pentecost until the instant of the Rapture—takes place *before* the Tribulation begins (hence the name, *pre-tribulation* Rapture). The second view contends that the Rapture takes place at the *mid-point* of the Tribulation. The third view contends that the Rapture takes place at the *end* of

the Tribulation. The fourth view contends that the Rapture takes place before God pours out His *wrath* upon mankind at the end of a Christ-shortened Tribulation (hence the name, *pre-wrath* Rapture). The fifth view contends that only those who are faithful in the church will be raptured before the Tribulation begins (and that the remaining believers will be raptured either during, or at the end of, the Tribulation). All five of these positions acknowledge the reality and certainty of the Rapture—the instantaneous “catching up” into heaven of all dead and living born-again believers.

E. Nine Principal Reasons why a Pre-Tribulation Rapture is the Best View

The primary objective of this paper is to enable the reader to gain a better understanding of the prophesied End-Times events. One of the essential ingredients to a proper understanding of these events is the adoption of a pre-tribulation Rapture—and the embracing of the logic which lies behind this view. Though other reasons can be rendered, the following nine arguments explain why the pre-tribulation Rapture is the best position to take.

First, the Lord's many exhortations that His return will be sudden, unannounced, and as unexpected as a thief entering a home at night are *meaningless* except in the context of a pre-Tribulation Rapture. Once the Middle-East peace treaty between the Antichrist and Israel is signed, the Christian knows from Scripture that Christ will return bodily to the earth exactly 2,550 days after the signing of the treaty—1,260 days to the breaking of the treaty and 1,290 days from the breaking of the treaty to the bodily return of Christ (Dan. 12:11-12). Thus, a person who holds to a mid-tribulation Rapture need not be looking for an any-moment Rapture, but instead need only be looking for the signing of the Antichrist's peace treaty with Israel. Moreover, such Christians could “live it up” until just before the mid-point of the Tribulation, should they choose to do so, and then “clean up their act” for the Rapture. Likewise, a person who holds to the post-tribulation position need not be looking for an imminent, unexpected, any-moment Rapture of the Church, but indeed need only be looking for the Antichrist's peace treaty. Such Christians could live it up until the end of the Tribulation, should they choose to do so, and then get ready for the Rapture. Unfortunately for these particular Christians, they probably will not have survived the Tribulation: true Christians will be hunted down and murdered by the Apostate Church (the “harlot”) during the first half of the Tribulation and by the Antichrist's followers during the second half of the Tribulation (Rev. 12:17; 13:6,7; 17:6). The pre-wrath position is similarly flawed because

the whole concept of “imminence”—the Lord's coming for His “bride” (the Church) unannounced and at any moment, as taught by Christ in the Gospels and as pictured in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13)—is rejected by this position. *Only the pre-tribulation Rapture challenges the Christian to be alert to, and ready for, an imminent, unannounced, unexpected, any-moment return of Christ for the Church.* [Note: the “partial” Rapture must be also rejected because Christ states that He will come for *all* of His sheep not just some of them (John 14:1-3).]

Second, the Lord Himself promises that Church Age believers will not go through the Tribulation. Jesus tells His sheep: “*Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth*” (Rev. 3:10). Jesus states unequivocally that He will keep His children—born-again Christians—from the “hour of testing.” Because this hour of testing is to come upon the whole world (and because the context of the Lord's promise is the book of Revelation, which deals almost exclusively with the End-Times and the Tribulation judgments), it is clear that Christ is talking about the Tribulation. Only the pre-tribulation Rapture coincides with Christ's promise. *All other Rapture positions invalidate this promise.* Critics of this verse often state that Christ does not promise to take his children out of the Tribulation but only to protect them during the Tribulation. Yet such an argument patently contradicts certain passages in Revelation which state that tens of millions of Christians will be murdered and martyred during the Tribulation. How has Christ thus “protected” Christians during Tribulation if millions of Christians are slaughtered? Under the pre-tribulation position, on the other hand, Christ takes all born-again Christians with Him at the Rapture, thus leaving, at the instant of the Rapture, no true Christians on earth. Those who subsequently come to faith in Christ during the Tribulation through, for example, the ministry of the 144,000 Jewish Tribulation evangelists, only to be killed because of their new-found faith in Christ, are the martyrs pictured in Revelation. We need not try to finesse Christ's plain teaching. Christ has stated that He will keep His sheep from the horrors of the Tribulation—and we can trust that He will do just that. *Only the pre-tribulation position takes Christ's promise at face value.*

Third, the Apostle Paul teaches that Church Age believers will not go through the Tribulation. Paul states in I Thessalonians 5:9: “*For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Paul presents exactly the same promise as Christ: believers (the “us” in Paul's passage) are not destined to go through “wrath” (the Tribulation). Instead, each Church Age believer's salvation will be *completed* (1) at the Rapture when he or she receives an eternal, imperishable resurrection body and (2) at the judgment seat of Christ (which takes place in heaven during the

Tribulation period) when the dress of his or her Christian life is removed for all eternity (II Cor. 5:10; I Cor. 3:10-15).

Fourth, the substance and tenor of Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy calls for a pre-Tribulation Rapture. On the Day of Pentecost in 30 A.D., God interrupted His prophetic plan for Israel so that He could begin to fulfill His purposes in and among the gentile nations (Romans 11:25-26). When God finishes this Gentile grace, He will Rapture the Church and will then once again undertake for His people Israel in order to bring Daniel's "Seventy Weeks" prophecy to completion. Furthermore, because the Church (all born-again Christians from Pentecost until the Rapture) had no role whatsoever in the first 483 years of Daniel's prophecy, then logic would suggest that the Church would likewise have no role whatsoever in the final seven years of the prophecy. The only Rapture position which harmonizes with Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy (God's previous and still-future dealings with Israel—with a now nearly 2000-year Church Age "parenthesis" in the middle) is the pre-Tribulation Rapture. (See Charts 6-C & 7-B.)

Fifth, the metaphor of the Betrothal, Marriage, and Marriage Supper of Christ (the Bridegroom) and His Church (the Bride) readily suggests, if not demands, a pre-Tribulation Rapture (Matt. 25:1-13; Rev. 19:6-9). The first century Jewish betrothal was unlike the typical Gentile engagement of today. In the Jewish betrothal, the bridegroom, after proposing to his loved one, would "go away" to his "father's house" to "make a place" for them to live on the father's land. Often he would be away for a year while he completed their home. Then, when the home was ready and all the arrangements had been made for the wedding feast, the bridegroom, in a touch of Jewish romance, would come for his bride *unexpectedly*, usually in the middle of the night. The bride, of course, was to be alert and ready for his return, eager to have their marriage consummated. To be fully prepared (after all, her groom might come for her in the middle of the night), she would have to have her lamp trimmed with oil so that she would have sufficient light to go out to greet him. And so it is to be with the Church, the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-32; Rev. 19:7). All persons indwelt with the Holy Spirit (the "oil") are to be alert and ready for an any-moment coming of the Bridegroom (Christ) to take them to the Father's home for the consummation of their wedding (the completion and perfection of their salvation) and for the subsequent wedding feast prepared for them by the Father. The pre-tribulation Rapture best fits this picture.

Sixth, the Holy Spirit as the restrainer of evil must be taken out of the way *before* the "lawless one" (the Antichrist) can be revealed (II Thess. 2:7-10). In addition, the lawless one—the Antichrist—in turn must be revealed *before* the Tribulation begins so that he can have time to rise to power and eventually sign the peace treaty with Israel, the event which inaugurates the Tribulation.

States Paul: “*For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one (the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan) will be revealed, whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming.*” Paul’s argument is straightforward: the One who restrains lawlessness (the Holy Spirit) must be taken out of the way before the Antichrist can be revealed. Only the pre-tribulation Rapture lines up with Paul’s argument.

Seventh, the Holy Spirit as the restrainer of evil cannot be taken out of the world unless the Church, whom the Holy Spirit indwells, is translated at the same time. Because the Holy Spirit indwells believers (who in turn are part of the restraining influence of sin) (I Peter 3:1-4), the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit cannot be removed to make way for the coming of the Antichrist unless the Church (whom the Holy Spirit indwells) is also removed. (See Chart 6-D.) Again, only the pre-tribulation Rapture lines up with Paul’s argument.

Eighth, the calling out of the 144,000 Jewish virgin males in the book of Revelation (Rev. 7:1-8; 14:1-5) readily suggests, if not demands, a pre-Tribulation Rapture. It is clear that the 144,000 are saved *before* the Tribulation begins: “*do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads*” (Rev. 7:3). Moreover, it should be noted that the 144,000 Jewish Christians are not only saved before the Tribulation period begins, but in fact are the *first persons saved* after the Rapture occurs: “*These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.*” The first persons saved during the Church Age (i.e., the “first fruits” of the Church Age harvest) were the 120 disciples (including Peter and several women) in the Upper Room, then the 3,000 Jews who responded to Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, then the ones who were being added day by day (Acts 2:47), and then the 5,000 Jews (including widows) who responded to Peter’s second sermon a few weeks later. In the early years of the church, the Gospel always went “to the Jew first and then to the Gentile” (Rom. 1:16; Acts 13:46). It seems logical, then, that the Gospel will also go forth “to the Jew first and then to the Gentile” after the Rapture. Accordingly, the 144,000 are the first persons saved, perhaps in the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours after the Rapture. More to the point, however, is the significance of the 144,000 Jewish evangelists in the Rapture debate. The calling out of the 144,000 *before* the earth or sea or trees are harmed (Rev. 7:3) renders—because of the Law of Non-Contradiction—the pre-wrath and post-tribulation Rapture positions Biblically impossible: by the time a pre-wrath or post-tribulation Rapture takes place, one-half of the earth’s population will have been killed (Rev. 6:3-8; 9:13-18); Israel will have been denuded by the Antichrist; a worldwide earthquake will have taken place

(Rev. 6:12-14); a third of the earth, a third of the trees, and all the green grass will have been burned up (Rev. 8:7); a third of the sea will have become blood (Rev. 8:8); a third of all marine life will have died (Rev. 8:9); and a third of the rivers and lakes will have become bitter (Rev. 8:10-11). Thus, for an expositor of Scripture to suggest that the earth has not yet been harmed by the time a pre-wrath or post-tribulation Rapture takes place—a stance which pre-wrath and post-tribulation proponents would have to take if they are to interpret God’s word at face value—is simply untenable.

Ninth, the Lord Himself teaches a pre-tribulation Rapture in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25). Careful scrutiny of Matthew 24-25 reveals that Jesus describes *two* very different comings of the Son of Man in the Discourse. These comings not only are two separate events, but they are *mutually exclusive* events. In addition, these two events are necessarily separated in time while the human condition disintegrates from the one described in Matthew 24:37-38 to the one described in Matthew 24:15-22.

One coming is *unannounced* (like a thief in the night), unexpected, and occurs when the human condition is one of “eating, drinking, and marrying.” Scoffers in fact will mockingly ask during this timeframe: “*Where is the sign of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation*” (II Pet. 3:4). This previously undisclosed coming of the Son of Man (introduced and explained parenthetically by Christ in Matthew 24:36-44 and Matthew 25:1-13) is the *pre-tribulation Rapture of the Church*—Christ’s sudden, unannounced, unexpected, instantaneous coming in the air *for His own*. To be sure, Jesus provides significant information about the Rapture in the Olivet Discourse. First, He describes the *human condition* prior to the Rapture—people will be eating and drinking, and marrying and giving in marriage. In the vernacular of our day, it will be “business as usual” on earth at the time of this unexpected coming. Second, He describes *what happens* at the Rapture—some will be taken and others will be left behind. Third, He teaches *who* will be taken into heaven at the Rapture—born again believers in Jesus Christ (those having indwelling Holy Spirit)—and *who* will be left behind on earth to face judgment—counterfeit “Christians” (those not having the indwelling Holy Spirit) and all other unbelievers. And, fourth, He explains that the Rapture will occur *before* the Tribulation judgments. [Note: It is Paul who later adds that the Rapture will be instantaneous (“in the twinkling of an eye”); that the dead in Christ will be raised first and the living in Christ will then be translated; that the raptured will meet Christ in the air; that the raptured will be given eternal, imperishable bodies; and so on.]

The other coming is *announced* (by signs in the sky), expected (thirty days after the end of the Tribulation period), and takes place immediately after the final three-and-a-half years of the Tribulation period—a period filled with death, horror, terror, panic, and fright. It will *not* be “business as usual” on earth

prior to the Lord's bodily return. This particular coming of the Son of Man (presented chronologically by Christ in Matthew 24:29-31) is the **Second Coming of Jesus Christ**—the bodily return of Christ to the earth *with* His own, the entirety of His elect (including resurrected Old Testament saints, resurrected Church Age saints, and resurrected Tribulation saints), in order to save Israel from annihilation, to judge the earth's remaining nations, and to set up His long-awaited Millennial Kingdom. Indeed, Christ's revelation of two very different and mutually-exclusive comings of the Son of Man—separated in time by two entirely different human conditions—renders the pre-wrath and post-tribulation Rapture positions Biblically impossible.

F. Conclusion

The pre-wrath and post-tribulation Rapture positions, while well-meaning, have serious flaws and must be laid aside by born-again Christians. Both positions: (1) reject Christ's straightforward teaching on the imminent, unannounced, unexpected, any-moment nature of the Rapture; (2) reject Christ's unequivocal statement that He will keep believers "from the hour of testing, which is to come upon the whole world" (the Tribulation period); (3) fail to harmonize with Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy; (4) fail to harmonize with Paul's teaching that the restrainer must be removed *before* the Antichrist can be revealed; and (5) contradict Christ's revelation to John that the 144,000 Jewish "first fruits" of God's Tribulation harvest will be called to salvation *before* the earth is harmed; and (6) fail to distinguish between the business-as-usual human condition described in Matthew 24:36-44 and the *not* business-as-usual condition at the time of Christ's bodily return to the earth.

The partial Rapture position, even though it recognizes the efficacy of the pre-tribulation Rapture, must also be rejected because Christ clearly teaches that He will come in the air for *all* born-again believers, not just some of them.

The mid-tribulation position has some merit, but (1) lacks the doctrine of imminency; (2) places the removal of the Restrainer at the mid-point of the Antichrist's public presence rather than *before* his emergence on the world scene—thus contradicting II Thess. 2:7-10; and (3) does not harmonize with Daniel's "Seventy Weeks" prophecy.

The pre-tribulation position, on the other hand, harmonizes seamlessly with the various similes, metaphors, promises, statements, and exhortations which deal with the Lord's unexpected, unannounced, invisible, any-moment return for His own—and can be trusted unreservedly by born-again Christians as the best eschatological position.