

# PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

Within the modern church there's a lot of debate about end-times prophecy, especially when it comes to the rapture. I believe the Bible teaches that one day, before the seven-year tribulation begins, the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this world and take His church to Heaven. This is *not* the same thing as the Second Coming, which takes place *after* the tribulation is over. The rapture is a separate event, and is the time when when Christians will be caught up together to meet our Lord in the air.

There are a number of reasons why I believe this, but let's start at the beginning.

## ***One Day Jesus Will Return***

After the Last Supper took place and Judas left to betray Jesus, the Lord told His disciples that He was about to leave them:

**John 14:1-3:** "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Jesus was leaving so He could prepare a place for them. Once He finished He would come back and get them so they could be with Him forever. This tells us that one day Jesus will indeed return!

When Jesus ascended into Heaven, those who witnessed that event were told that one day Jesus would return in the same

manner that He left:

**Acts 1:9-11:** “And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”

These passages teach us that Jesus is going to come back one day. However, neither of these passages give us very many details. What is His return going to look like and when it is going to happen?

The first person to teach the doctrine of the rapture is the apostle Paul. God used him to reveal it:

**1 Corinthians 15:51-54:** “Behold, I shew 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.”

Do you see how Paul called this a “mystery”? When that word is used in the Bible it has a very specific meaning. It refers to a doctrine that had previously been hidden but was now

revealed. Paul was the first person to tell us that one day the trumpet would sound, the dead saints would be raised, and the living saints would be transformed into incorruptible immortals.

He expanded upon this teaching in 1 Thessalonians:

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-17:** “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”

This passage goes into more detail about the time when Jesus will return for His church. First, all Christians who died before the Lord returns will be raised from the dead – their bodies will be brought back to life. That, after all, is what “resurrection” means! In order to have a resurrection you must have something that died and then comes back to life. When we die the only part of us that stops living is our bodies. *That* is what's raised from the dead when Jesus returns.

After the dead have been resurrected, the living saints will be transformed. In an instant we will become immortals. All that's sinful or unclean about us will be banished forever. Next, everyone will meet Jesus in the air, after which we will “ever be with the Lord”.

Incidentally, the word “rapture” comes from verse 17. The phrase “caught up” in Latin is very similar to the word “rapture”. For centuries the only version of the Bible which was commonly available was the Latin version, and that's where the word came from. When people speak of the rapture they're talking about the time when the church will be “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air. (That's why it's incorrect to say that the word “rapture” never appears in the Bible. It actually does appear in *Latin* Bibles because it's taken from a Latin word.)

There really shouldn't be any debate among Christians about whether or not Jesus will return. The Bible is quite clear that He will! So far we've seen four different passages which teach that doctrine. Jesus is definitely going to return one day and raise His saints from the dead. There's no question about that<sup>1</sup>.

## ***What Is The Context Of Christ's Return?***

The major source of debate has to do with the events surrounding the rapture. Does Jesus return at the end of the world, right before Judgment Day? This seems to be the majority view of the modern church, but I don't think it's correct.

I believe the Bible teaches a more complicated series of events:

- One day the rapture will take place. Jesus will return to this world (1 Thessalonians 4:16). He will raise the dead saints, transform the living saints, and take them all to Heaven. Those who are unsaved will be left behind.
- Some time after this, the antichrist will sign a seven-year covenant with Israel (Daniel 9:27). This will start the tribulation period, which will be the worst time in human history (Matthew 24:21).
- At the end of the tribulation period, Jesus will return to

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<sup>1</sup> I realize there are a few people who teach that this has already happened, but that view is so hard to believe and so rare that I don't think it's worth addressing.

this world with His church (Revelation 19:11-21). He will defeat the antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:8) and reign over this world with the resurrected tribulation saints (Revelation 20:6).

- The millennium will begin. This is a thousand-year period of peace (Revelation 20:4, Isaiah 2:4).
- After the millennium, the devil will launch one final war against God. Satan will be defeated and cast into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:7-10).
- The Great White Throne judgment will take place (Revelation 20:11-15). All of the wicked will be cast into the Lake of Fire, where they will be tormented day and night forever.
- God will create a New Heaven and Earth. In that new world He will dwell with mankind for the rest of eternity. There will never again be any death, or sorrow, or pain (Revelation 21:1-4).

The real question is how all of these pieces will be put together. We know there will be a millennium because the Bible talks about it extensively. In fact, nearly every one of the major and minor prophets talk about the millennium:

- Isaiah 65:17-22
- Micah 4:1-4
- Habakkuk 2:14
- Ezekiel 40-48
- Daniel 12:1-3
- Hosea 1:10
- Joel 3
- Amos 9:11-15
- Obadiah 1:19-21
- Nahum 1:15
- Zephaniah 3:17-20
- Haggai 2:21-23

- Zechariah 14:8-11
- Malachi 4:1

This isn't an exhaustive list! There are many more passages which talk about a future time when the nations will be at peace, Jesus will reign over all the world as king (Zechariah 14:3-9), and the whole world will travel to Israel to worship God in His temple (Isaiah 2:3, Micah 4:2). Revelation 20 is far from the only chapter of the Bible that discusses this thousand-year period.

Likewise, we know there will a time of “great tribulation” because Jesus had a lot to say about it in Matthew 24. We know He will return at the end of this terrible time because He told us He would (Matthew 24:29-30).

We also know that one day the wicked will have to stand before God and be judged. Not only does Revelation teach this, but the rest of the Bible does as well (for example, see Matthew 11:22 and 12:36) Finally, we know that one day this universe will be destroyed and replaced by a better one where there will be no more sin or death or pain. All of these things are clearly taught by the Scriptures.

The question is one of timing. When are we going to be caught up to meet the Lord Jesus Christ in the air? Is the rapture going to happen first, followed by the tribulation, and then the millennium, and then the final judgment? I believe the Bible teaches that's the proper order. But how do we know this?

## ***A Pre-Tribulation Rapture***

I believe the church came into existence on the day of Pentecost and will be completed at the rapture. Before Pentecost there were Old Testament saints, but none of them were part of the church. One piece of evidence for this is the fact that John the Baptist referred to himself as a friend of the bridegroom:

**John 3:28-39:** “Ye yourselves bear me witness,

that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled."

Notice that John the Baptist didn't consider himself to be part of the Bride of Christ! Jesus agreed that John the Baptist was in a different category from the church, which is more evidence that the church didn't exist when John the Baptist was alive:

**Matthew 11:11:** "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

John the Baptist was beheaded before the day of Pentecost, so although he was saved he wasn't part of the church. The Old Testament has a lot to say about Israel but it doesn't address the church. The reason for this is because the church is a new entity that began after the death of Christ. There was no such thing as the church before the day of Pentecost.<sup>2</sup>

When the Lord returns at the rapture He will gather the church to Himself. Since the church is taken to Heaven we will no longer be in this world. This is supported by the fact that the church appears in Revelation 1-3, which takes place *before* the tribulation, but there's no mention of the church being on Earth in Revelation 6-18, which takes place *during* the tribulation. There are indeed saints mentioned in chapters 6-18 but they're never referred to as the church (just as the saints in the Old Testament are never referred to as the church either). On top of that, nowhere does the Bible ever speak of the church having to go through the

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2 This is a very large topic that I address in much greater detail in my paper on covenant theology.

tribulation.

However, there's even stronger evidence that the rapture takes place before the time of great tribulation. In Luke 21 Jesus said this:

**Luke 21:34-36:** “And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.”

Jesus said that the tribulation will be a snare to *all* those who dwell on the *whole Earth*. That means everyone who's on Earth will be forced to suffer through it. The Lord then commanded us to watch and pray so that we can escape this time of suffering, which is going to afflict *everyone in the entire world*. If it afflicts everyone on the whole earth then the only way to escape it is to not be in this world! If we should pray so that we can escape it then we must be praying that the Lord will come and get us before it begins. This means the rapture will occur prior to the tribulation and will remove the church from this world.

Some people say that those who teach a pre-tribulation rapture are just trying to escape having to suffer for the sake of Christ. However, Jesus is the one who commanded us to pray so that we can escape the tribulation! Jesus *did not want His children to endure it*. Praying to escape the tribulation isn't evidence of weakness. Instead it's obedience to the command of Christ.

It's important to understand that the tribulation is a time when God pours out His wrath upon the world to punish it for its sins. That's entirely different than suffering persecution for the



sake of Christ. The church is indeed called to suffer for the sake of the gospel, but we're *not* called to suffer the wrath of God. The tribulation isn't intended for us.

There are others who teach that “watch and pray” means that only the worthy will escape the tribulation, and all backslid or carnal Christians will have to endure it. That's not what Jesus is talking about. The Lord isn't going to leave part of His Bride behind for any reason. Jesus is addressing people who think they're saved but aren't. The Lord spent a lot of time warning people to examine themselves to see if they were truly in the faith. All those who are saved will be included in the rapture, but not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” is saved (Matthew 7:21-23).

The apostle Paul makes the case for a pre-tribulation rapture in 1 Thessalonians 5:

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11:** “But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But **ye**, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live

together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.”

In this passage Paul is talking about the “day of the Lord”. That phrase is used throughout the Old Testament<sup>3</sup> and refers to the time of great tribulation (which Jesus said was a future event, not a past one<sup>4</sup>). Paul was warning the Thessalonian church that the tribulation would catch the world by surprise and they won't escape it. However, the church isn't in darkness and will *not* be surprised. Although the world is going to be caught up in the tribulation, the church will escape it because *it wasn't appointed to wrath*. In this context the word “wrath” isn't referring to the final day of judgment (because that's not what Paul is discussing in this passage), but is the wrath which God will pour out upon the world during the tribulation. The world will have to endure that terrible period of time, but the church will be spared.

In verse 9 Paul mentions the “hope of salvation”. That's not talking about salvation from our sins! Christ has already paid our sin debt with His own blood, so our salvation has been fully accomplished. That means it's not something we're hoping for in the future – and besides, Paul isn't discussing salvation in these verses. The “hope of salvation” is salvation from the wrath that's mentioned in the first verses of this chapter – *the wrath which God will pour out upon the world during the tribulation*.

This passage provides evidence that God hasn't appointed His church to suffer through the tribulation. Instead He will deliver us from that terrible time. Since the tribulation will afflict *everyone* on the *whole earth*, He must be planning to take us *out* of this world before the tribulation begins. The fact that the Marriage of the Lamb takes place in Heaven *before* the tribulation ends (Revelation 19:7) is more evidence that the church is in Heaven during the tribulation – and since the rapture moves the

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3 See Isaiah 2:12-17, 13:6-22; Joel 1:15, 2:1-11; Amos 5:18-20, Zephaniah 1:7-18, Zechariah 14:1-9.

4 Matthew 24:21-22.

church to Heaven it must take place before the tribulation begins.

Another mention of this same idea can be found in Revelation 3:10:

**Revelation 3:10:** “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.”

The hour of trial which will try everyone that dwells upon the Earth is the tribulation. This passage doesn't say the church will be kept *safe* during this hour of trial, but that *it will be kept from the hour of trial altogether!* Given that the verse goes out of its way to explain that the tribulation impacts *all the world* and afflicts *everyone who lives on the Earth*, this is more evidence that the church won't be on the Earth when the tribulation takes place.

Some people claim that this verse only means that the church will be protected from persecution during that period. If you read the rest of Revelation you'll see how wrong that statement is. God gives the antichrist the power to make war with the saints *and overcome them* (Revelation 13:7). The antichrist will kill *millions* of believers during that time. If God has granted the antichrist the power to hunt down and behead Christians then those believers are definitely not “kept safe”! The reason the *church* is kept safe is because it's not on the Earth and is therefore out of the antichrist's reach. However, all those who are saved after the rapture aren't part of the church and therefore aren't kept safe. Millions of them will be hunted down and brutally murdered.

## **Conclusion**

There's a great deal more that can be said about end-times prophecy. This is a large and complex topic, but some things are

clear. One day Jesus is going to return (John 14:2-3). One day there's going to be a terrible time of suffering – the worst time in all of human history (Matthew 24:21). One day the whole world will experience an astonishing time of peace, where nations will no longer wage war with one another (Micah 4:3). One day the devil will be cast into the Lake of Fire and tormented for all of eternity (Revelation 20:10). One day the dead will be judged (Revelation 20:12). One day this universe will be destroyed (Revelation 20:11) and replaced with a better one that will never know sin, or suffering, or death (Revelation 21:1-4). The Bible teaches all of these things – and every prophecy that's ever been fulfilled has been fulfilled *literally*. That gives me confidence the rest of these passages will be fulfilled literally as well<sup>5</sup>.

This is a challenging topic, and it's tempting to ignore it and study something else. However, Jesus repeatedly commanded us to watch for His return (Matthew 24:42, Mark 13:37, Revelation 3:3). It's impossible for us to do that if we don't know anything about the subject!

The author of Hebrews taught that end-times prophecy was one of the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity:

**Hebrews 6:1-3:** “Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit.”

As you can see, the resurrection of the dead and the eternal judgment are said to be foundational doctrines. This

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5 Yes, the Bible does use symbolism. However, the Bible also defines the symbols that it uses. This means if you want to know what a symbol means, all you have to do is check the passage in the Bible which provides the definition for that symbol.

means the other doctrines of Christianity are *built on that foundation!* Rather than ignore this foundational topic and move on, it would be wiser to build upon it and then go from there.