

The Rapture of the Church

The Rapture of the church of Jesus Christ is an important doctrine in scripture. The classic passage on the subject is I Thessalonians 4:13-18. The Apostle Paul went to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, spending just three Sabbath days. In that time, many people became Christians and Paul spent most of his time discipling the new believers. The subject of this classic passage reveals that Paul must have taught them many things about the coming of Christ. They were expecting Christ's coming in their day (I Thessalonians 1:10). About ten years had passed since Paul's visit to Thessalonica. In that time, some of the believers had died and there was some concern as to whether or not they would be included in the Rapture of the church.

The Rapture is not mentioned in the Old Testament and was not mentioned by Christ until those intimate moments with His disciples just prior to His crucifixion (John 14:1-3). It is a mystery, which is to say that it is a church age truth. It was the responsibility of the Apostle Paul to explain the mystery of the church from Pentecost (Acts 2) to the end of the age, climaxing with the Rapture of the church (I Thessalonians 4:13-18). The church began with a miracle and will end with a miracle.

ARGUMENTS FOR A PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE

1. The purpose of the Tribulation Period argues for a Pre-Tribulation Rapture.

- The events of the Tribulation Period are described as *Jacob's Trouble* in Jeremiah 30:6-7. The tribulation period will relate to Israel in two ways. 1) This will be their final judgment for rejecting Jesus Christ as their Messiah (Daniel 9:24; Zechariah 13:8-9; Romans 9-11). The Scriptures dealing with the Tribulation Period note particular reference to the Jews (Matthew 24:1-31; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:36). 2) To prepare Israel for the receiving of their Messiah.
- The Tribulation Period is called the seventieth week in Daniel 9. The previous sixty-nine weeks were directly related to Israel. It is logical that the last week of the prophecy
- To pour out God's wrath on the rebellious, unbelieving nations of the world.

2. A Post-Tribulation Rapture would be meaningless.

It is difficult to understand the purpose of a post-tribulation rapture for the church. God has a purpose for everything He does. If God would preserve His saints through persecution, plagues, famine, war and other tribulation events, why would it be necessary to remove them at the very end? Why couldn't believers simply be gathered to meet Him on the earth?

Some who take a post tribulation position claim that the saints will be gathered together in the air to provide Christ with an escort as He returns. However, Revelation 19:14 and 19 indicate that He has an escort already.

It is also difficult to understand how the sheep-and-goat judgment takes place in Matthew 25:31-46 at the end of Christ's Second Coming. The sheep will already have been separated from the goats by the rapture.

Another problem with a post tribulation rapture concerns where the living people will come from to populate the Millennium (Isaiah 65:17-25). If all the believers are raptured and all the unbelievers are judged, there is no one left to go into the Millennial Reign of Christ. If the rapture occurs before the tribulation, there will be many saved during the period of tribulation who will be ushered into the Millennium.

3. The church is promised deliverance from the Tribulation Period.

The *hour of temptation* in Revelation 3:10 refers to the Tribulation Period, that period of time described in detail in Revelation 6 – 19. Note also: I Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9.

4. The Order of prophetic events. What is in the text itself is important.

The church is noted nineteen times in Revelation 1-3. It does not appear at all in the chapters detailing the Tribulation Period.

In I Thessalonians 4:13 -18, Paul gives a sequential order of events which does not include the Tribulation period or the Second Coming of Christ. The rapture is presented by Paul, not as a climatic event in a series of events, but as an event at the beginning of a series.

- (13) – Brethren – It is God’s will that we (Christians) understand His prophetic Word.
- (13) – There is no reason to sorrow as those who have no hope sorrow. Philippians 3:12 indicates that we should understand our salvation – past (justification), present (sanctification) and future (glorification).
- (14) – Paul presents this sequence as a certainty – as certain as if it had already taken place.
- (14-16) – We shall not all sleep. The rapture of the church will take place before all believers sleep (**dead in Christ**).
- (16) – Jesus will descend from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise to meet Him in the air (not on the earth). This refers to the resurrection of those Christians already in the graves. Christ will bring with Him the souls that are already in heaven (the dead in Christ) which will be reunited with their bodies in this resurrection.
- (17) – We (the Christians) who are still alive at this moment will then be caught up to **meet the Lord in the air** and we shall **forever** be with the Lord. We will not meet the Lord in the air in the Second Coming. The rapture will occur just seconds or moments after the dead are raised. It is from the word **caught up** (harpazo - αρπάζω) in the Latin translation that we get the word **rapture** and literally means to catch up, *snatch, pluck* or *seize*, which speaks of a sudden taking away or sweeping away. Our time here on earth remains short (I Corinthians 7:29; Philippians 4:5; James 5:8; Hebrews 10:37). Christ’s coming is imminent and while the dead in Christ experience a resurrection, we who remain alive will **just as quickly be translated into glory for a great reunion in the air**. I Corinthians 15:52 speaks of suddenness with which the rapture will occur. The trumpet sound will signal the end of the church age.
- (18) – Paul expected the rapture of the saints to be comforting. We can assume that Paul had earlier taught the Thessalonians that Christ’s coming for them was before the Tribulation.

The Rapture

Christ comes in the air (4:16)
 Christ comes for His saints (4:15-17)
 Living saints are translate (4:17).
 A movement from earth to heaven.
 Instantaneous (I Cor. 15:51-52)
 No mention of attending hosts.
 Announced by archangel (16)
 This is a resurrection (4:16)
 Affects only believers – secret (4:16).
 Invisible: Seen only by church (1:10)
 He comes to rescue church (1:10)
 No preceding events (imminent)
 Not dated. – Prior to God’s wrath.
 Time of Blessing (4:18)
 To bring to pass the Blessed Hope.
 Great joy in meeting the Lord.

Second Coming

Christ comes to the Earth (Zech. 14:4-5; Acts 1:11)
 Christ comes with His saints (Rev. 19:6-14)
 No saints are translated.
 A movement from heaven to earth.
 Timing of many hours (Revelation 19:11-16)
 A great procession – millions of saints and angels.
 Comes with myriads of angels (Jude 14).
 No resurrection in the Second Coming.
 Affects everyone – Public (Revelation 19:15).
 Seen by the whole world (Revelation 1:7).
 Comes to rescue Israel (Matthew 23:37-39).
 The Tribulation Period precedes this event.
 Dated: At the end of the Tribulation.
 Time of Judgment (Revelation 19:15).
 To establish Christ’s Millennial Kingdom
 Mourning on the earth (Matthew 24:30).

5. Biblical Instruction

If the church were to go through the Great Tribulation, Paul would have provided some tribulation instruction in the Thessalonian epistles for believers in the area of persevering and witnessing. If there ever was a place for it to be dealt with, I Thessalonians 4:13-18 would have been ideal. It is the absence of the church that sets the stage for 144,000 Jews who will be commissioned to evangelize both Jews and Gentiles (Revelation 7:3, 4, 9, 14).

6. Subjection to Government

Believers are instructed to be subject to governments that are over the church (Romans 13). During the tribulation, Satan will control the government. It does not make sense to believe that God would expect the church to submit to Satan's control.

7. The Church is to watch for the imminent return of Christ.

Imminent means that it could occur at any moment (John 14:1-3; Colossians 3:4; I Timothy 6:14; Titus 2:13; James 5:8). The first century Christians expected Christ to return at any moment (I Corinthians 15:51-52; Philippians 3:20; I Thessalonians 1:9-10).

8. The rapture is distinct from the Second Coming of Christ.

This is not two comings of Christ but two phases of His coming. It seems that the pre-tribulation position carries with it less confusion. It is difficult to fit the Rapture in with the Second Coming based on what takes place in the two events.

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9. There are Biblical illustrations serving as types of God protecting His people from judgment.

- Enoch was translated prior to the judgment of the flood.
- Noah and his family were in the ark prior to judgment.
- Lot was taken out of Sodom before the judgment (II Peter 2:6-8).
- The firstborn among the Hebrews in Egypt were saved by the blood of the lamb.
- Rahab was saved from judgment prior to the fall of Jericho.