

When Will Our Lord Jesus Return, and When Will the Church Be Raptured?

The apostle Paul tells the Thessalonians of the great reunion of all believers when together they meet Christ as He descends from heaven: "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" (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

This is our blessed hope—the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the rapture of the church to meet Him!

Many evangelicals, for reasons that we will examine, believe that seven years *before* the glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ, faithful Christians will be raptured, caught up to heaven. This understanding is known as the "*pretribulation rapture*." A major concern about the pre-tribulation rapture is that, historically, it found its way into the evangelical mainstream only in the mid-1800s.

Millions of godly believers for almost 1,800 years did not believe in a pretribulation rapture. Among these were the reformers of the 1500s and the revivalists of the 1600s-1700s. George Mueller, who lived in the mid-1800s, is reported to have stated, "If you can show me a trumpet *after the last* (1 Cor. 15:52) and a resurrection *before the first* (Rev. 20:4-5), then I can believe this new doctrine."

As far as the post-apostolic church fathers go, they apparently did not believe in a pretribulation rapture either. They write: "Then shall the race of men come into the fire of proving trial and many be made to stumble and fall. But *those who remain established in their faith* shall be saved *under the very curse*" (*Didache*; 16:5). "Happy ye who *endure the great*

tribulation that is coming on ..." (Hermas; chapter II, Vision II).

Irenaeus, disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John the Beloved, comments in his *Against Heresies* () concerning the reign of the Antichrist, that "this tyranny shall last, during which *the saints* shall be put to flight." And Augustine, commenting on Daniel 7:21, states, "He who reads this passage even half asleep cannot fail to see that the kingdom of Antichrist shall fiercely, though for a short time, *assail the church*."

Gerhard Pfandi, Ph.D., associate director of the *Biblical Research Institute*, in an excellent article titled "The Rapture—Why It Cannot Occur Before the Second Coming," traces the roots of the pretribulation rapture teaching:

John Nelson (J.N.) Darby (1800-1882) is regarded as the father of dispensationalism. ... Darby asserted that Christ's coming would occur in two stages. The first was an invisible "secret rapture" of believers, which would end the great "parenthesis," or church age, which began when the Jews rejected Christ. Following the rapture, the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel would be literally fulfilled, leading to the great tribulation, which would end with the Second Coming of Christ in glory. The doctrine of the pretribulation rapture was disseminated around the world, primarily through J.N. Darby and men of God such as Arno Gabelein, Harry Ironside, James Gray and C. I. Scofield ..." (Adapted from Ministry, September 2001).

What Did Our Lord Jesus Teach?

Jesus' final teaching on His Second Coming, given on the Mount of Olives, and recorded in Matthew 24 and 25, is extremely clear. In Matthew 24, there is *no* Second Coming and *no* rapture until "*after* the tribulation of those days ... [for] *then* shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven with

power and great glory. And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and *they shall gather together His elect* from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:29-31).

Mark 13 and Luke 21 teach the same, but Luke, in 21:36, gives one additional charge: "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape [translated as "pass safely through," in the Living Bible margin and in the ., and translated by J.B. Phillips as "come safely through"] all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." Our Lord sought to prepare His disciples for His coming, "*after* the tribulation of those days," and how not to be caught unawares, that they might "*come safely through*" all these things to stand before Him.

What Were the Apostles' Understandings?

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, places the rapture of the church "at the *last* trumpet," as does John in Revelation 11:15-18: "The *seventh* angel sounded his trumpet [the *last* one], and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ and He will reign forever and ever ... *The time has come* for judging the dead, and *for rewarding Your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence Your Name*, both small and great"

Obviously, all of this takes place at the rapture at the end of the tribulation period, after the blowing of the seven trumpets of judgment. A study of Revelation reveals that the seven seals and the seven trumpets and the seven bowls run concurrently and end in the Second Coming of Jesus. Concurrent visions are not new to the prophetic Scriptures. The visions of Daniel run concurrently, each ending in the Second Coming, as well.

In Revelation 3:10, Jesus had already promised: "I will keep

you *from* the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” (The Greek preposition used here, according to the NIV and Living Bible footnotes, can also mean “keep you *through* the hour of trial.”

In Revelation 20:4-6, the *first* resurrection is clearly described. And we need to remember, as George Mueller pointed out, that there *cannot* be a resurrection seven years *before* the *first* resurrection, or the first resurrection would not be the *first*. In this *first* resurrection are found “those who had been beheaded because of their testimony ... for they had not worshipped the beast [the Antichrist] or his image” So the rapture and the first resurrection apparently are at the *end* of the great tribulation, after the reign of the Antichrist and *not* seven years *before*!

From the book of Revelation, an argument for a pretribulation rapture has been advanced by some, because the word “church” *per se* is not used by John between chapters 4 and 21; their reasoning being that the church is not present in the Earth during these chapters. The facts are that chapters 4 through 21 are *highly symbolic chapters*, abounding in figures of speech for both Jesus and His church, and that the church *does* appear in the symbolism of these chapters as the “saints,” the “kingdom of priests,” the “great multitude,” the “candlesticks,” the “firstfruits,” God’s “people,” the “bride,” the “armies of heaven,” the “new Jerusalem” and so on, even as Jesus Himself appears with numerous symbolic names also—the Lamb, the Lion, the Man-child, the Word of God and so on. The suggestion that the “saints” of Revelation 4-21 are the Jews, rather than the many-membered, Jewish-Gentile Body of Christ violates the revelation of God’s “one new man” (Eph. 2:15) and undercuts Paul’s understanding of *Israel’s re-inclusion* into that “one new man” in these last days.

Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8, also clearly taught that the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the rapture (the

gathering, or “mustering,” literally) of the saints to Jesus *cannot* take place *until* the great apostasy has *first* happened and the man of sin (the Antichrist) is *first* revealed (verse 3). Paul also taught that the church will get “relief” from persecution and tribulation only “*when* [and not seven years before] the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven *in blazing fire with His powerful angels to punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel ...*” (2 Thess. 1:6-8). {eo}

For part two of this series, tune in Wednesday.

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