

## **FOCUS #2—THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH**

The rapture of the church is one of the more debated topics of Christian doctrine. There is very little disagreement among premillennialists over what will take place at the rapture of the church or who will be involved in the rapture, but there is a great deal of disagreement as to the timing of the rapture, when it will take place. As stated previously we will assume agreement with premillennialism, the view that Christ's second coming will precede a literal, physical one thousand-year reign of Christ upon the earth (Cf. Revelation 20). This view is built upon a straightforward reading of the Bible.

### **The Rapture Defined**

The English word, *rapture* comes from the Latin term RAPTURO, which is a translation of the Greek term HARPAZO, translated "*caught up*" as in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The Greek term HARPAZO means, "to steal or take away forcefully." It emphasizes a snatching, stealing or tearing something away quickly and forcefully. The term is often used in the context of stealing or plundering. However, in the context of 1 Thessalonians 4 it carries the sense of catching away speedily, seizing by force, claiming for oneself, rescuing from danger and removing to a new place.

Three other Greek terms are used for the rapture in the Scripture:

- PAROUSIA means, "*presence*" or "*coming*" and refers to the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1; James 5:7-8; and 1 John 2:28.
- APOKALUPSIS means, "*to uncover*," "*to unveil*" or "*to reveal*" and is used of the rapture in 1 Corinthians 1:7 and may refer to the rapture in Colossians 3:4; and 1 Peter 1:7, 13.
- EPIPHANEIA means, "*to appear*" or "*to show*" and is used in reference to the rapture in 1 Timothy 6:14 and 2 Timothy 4:8.

Three key New Testament passages deal with the rapture of the church: John 14:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53; and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

**John 14:1-3**, "*Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for 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 to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."*

**1 Corinthians 15:51-53**, *“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. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.”*

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**, *“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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.”*

When these passages are taken together they provide the following description of the rapture:

- Christ will descend from heaven to earth with sounds that will herald His return (John 14:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).
- The souls of dead church saints, Christians who have passed away, will descend with Christ at this coming (1 Thessalonians 4:14). When these church saints died, their souls left their bodies and went to be with the Lord in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Philippians 1:21-23).
- The bodies of dead church saints will be raised as immortal, incorruptible bodies and will be reunited with their returning souls (1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 52-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-16).
- The bodies of church saints who have not died before this coming of Christ will be changed instantly into immortal, incorruptible bodies (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).
- Both the resurrected and changed church saints will be caught up together to meet Christ in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17; John 14:3).
- The church saints will return with Christ to His Father’s house in heaven to dwell with Him in living accommodations He has prepared for them beforehand (John 14:2-3).

## **Views Regarding the Timing of the Rapture**

Although there is general agreement among pre-millennial scholars on what will take place at the rapture and who will participate in it, there is significant disagreement as to the timing of the rapture event. When in relation to the tribulation period does the Lord Jesus return and remove His church from the earth? A number of solutions have been proposed and place the rapture in varying relationships to the tribulation period:

### **1. Pre-Tribulationism**

This view teaches that the removal of the entire church (both the dead and living saints) will occur before any part of the seven-year tribulation period; that is before the beginning of the seventieth week of Daniel 9:24-27. It is necessary to say "before the seven-year tribulation period" because some who hold to a mid-tribulation rapture state that the rapture is pre-tribulation, understanding the tribulation to refer only to the last three and one-half years of the seven-year period.

### **2. Mid-Tribulationism**

This view teaches that the rapture of the church will occur at the midpoint of the seven years of tribulation, after the first three and one-half years. In this view, only the last half of Daniel's seventieth week is considered to be the tribulation period. The church will endure the first three and one-half years known as the wrath of men, but will escape the outpouring of God's wrath during the final three and one-half years. According to this view the rapture of the church is said to occur in connection with the sounding of the seventh trumpet judgment and the catching up of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.

### **3. Post-Tribulationism**

This view teaches that the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ are facets of a single event, which will occur at the end of the tribulation period when Christ returns. The church will be on earth during the tribulation to experience the judgment of God. There are four different types of post-tribulationism that emerge out of differing arguments and approaches. In fact, there is such diversity among them that they actually contradict one another.

- *Classic Post-tribulationism* is a view within post-tribulationism that holds that the church has always been in the tribulation because, during its entire existence, it has suffered persecution and trouble. The tribulation is not seen as a future

event, but as a present reality. Since the church has always been in the great tribulation then the tribulation has been largely fulfilled. This form of post-tribulationism still believes in the imminent return of Christ.

- *Semi-classic Post-tribulationism* also sees the tribulation as a contemporary event, but it also posits that some events are future and await fulfillment. Since there are still some unfulfilled prophecies, this view does not hold to an imminent return of Christ.
- *Futurist Post-tribulationism* considers the tribulation as a future seven-year period prior to the second coming of Christ. It is believed that the church would pass through this tribulation period and be removed at the rapture, which would occur at the second coming of Christ. In other words, Christ will descend from heaven and rapture the church up to meet Him in the air, and then immediately return to the earth with His church.
- *Dispensational Post-tribulationism* is a futurist approach with a different twist. It puts forth an odd combination of dispensationalism and post-tribulationism as it seeks to maintain a distinction between Israel and the Church in the tribulation. However, it denies the concept of the imminent return of Christ.

#### **4. Pre-wrath Rapture Theory**

This view teaches that the rapture will occur sometime after the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation but before the second coming. It serves as a variation of the mid-tribulation view with many similarities to post-tribulationism. It divides the tribulation period into three distinct periods of time: 1) The Beginning of Sorrows; 2) The Great Tribulation and 3) The Day of the Lord. The church endures the first two periods, but will be removed prior to the third period, viewed as God's wrath.

#### **5. The Partial Rapture Theory**

This view teaches that only those who are faithful and spiritual will be raptured prior to the tribulation. Those who are prepared for the Lord's return and are found waiting and watching will escape the terrors of the tribulation by being taken in the rapture. Those who are not taken and enter into the tribulation period because of their worldliness and carnality will be raptured progressively during the tribulation period as they become more faithful and spiritual, while still others will entirely miss the rapture. The tribulation is seen as a time of purging these believers from their sin and carnality.

### **Compelling Reasons to Believe in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture:**

These various views place the rapture in varying relationships to the tribulation period. While no rapture view is without some difficulties, the pre-tribulational rapture is clearly the strongest and most consistent with a literal understanding of the Scriptures. The following are the major reasons that support a pre-tribulational rapture of the church.

### **1. There is a biblical distinction between Israel and the church**

The position of a pre-tribulational rapture depends largely on maintaining a clear distinction between Israel and the church. While some similarities certainly exist, the Scripture clearly maintains a distinction between the two. Israel is not the church and the church is not Israel. God is dealing with two different programs for two distinct groups.

The church began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and is made up of both believing Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-22). God has given the church some great and precious promises. However, God also gave the nation of Israel many unconditional promises in the covenants of the Old Testament. These covenant promises were made and ratified with Israel and must be fulfilled by Israel.

The church has not replaced the covenant promises given to the nation of Israel. It is during the tribulation period that God returns His focus on the nation of Israel and the fulfilling of these covenant promises. While the covenants find their ultimate fulfillment during the millennial kingdom, the tribulation is a necessary period of preparation. God will first complete His program with the church, remove the church at the rapture, and then resume His program with national Israel.

Furthermore, according to Romans 11:25-27, the apostle Paul clearly teaches that a partial hardening of Israel is presently in effect and that this spiritual blindness will continue until the fullness of the Gentiles is completed. The fullness of the Gentiles refers to the period of Gentile blessing and opportunity during this present age, which came about as a result of the failure and unbelief of Israel. It is best understood that at the rapture of the church the fullness of the Gentiles will be completed and this spiritual blindness of Israel will be removed.

Only the pre-tribulational rapture position effectively deals with this distinction between the church and Israel. This clear contrast in Scripture between the church and Israel makes the pre-tribulational rapture the most logical position to hold. For more on the distinction between the Church and Israel, see our paper on The Christian's Obligation to the Law of Moses.

## **2. The stated purposes of the tribulation do not include the church**

The stated purposes of the tribulation period do not include the church and therefore support the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture. The greatest purpose of the tribulation period is to prepare the nation of Israel for the Messiah and the Messianic (millennial) kingdom.

A secondary purpose would be to execute judgment upon the wicked. Obviously God does not need seven years, seven days or even seven seconds to execute judgment, so this must be seen as a secondary purpose for the tribulation period, rather than the primary.

The primary purpose of preparing Israel for her Messiah and His kingdom is evidenced in a number of passages. This period is viewed as the "*time of Jacob's trouble*" in Jeremiah 30:7, which implies that Israel is a major focus of the tribulation period. Other passages, which characterize the tribulation period as having a distinct Jewish character, include Deuteronomy 4:30; Daniel 12:1; Ezekiel 20:37; Zechariah 13:8-9 and Matthew 24:15-20.

No passage explains the primary purpose for the tribulation better than Daniel 9:24-27.

*“Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place. “So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. “Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. “And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate.”*

This key passage clarifies our understanding of the purposes for the tribulation period. Daniel 9 records the concerned prayer of Daniel as he viewed his people Israel in their Babylonian captivity, which was brought about by their idolatry and disregard for the law of God.

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In answer to this prayer on these two matters, the Lord sent the angel Gabriel with a message concerning Israel's future (vv. 24-27). Gabriel informed Daniel that God was going to have special dealings with Israel for "seventy units of seven" (which because of the context is commonly understood to mean  $70 \times 7$ , or 490 years). Daniel was told that this 490-year period would be made up of three distinct divisions.

The first unit of seven years (49 years) is the period of time for the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem (v. 25a); the second unit of sixty-two sevens (434 years) covers the time from the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem to the coming of Messiah (v. 25b). This brings the total to sixty-nine sevens (483 years), leaving one last unit of seven (7 years) yet to be discussed in the passage.

After the second division of time, but before the final division (of seven years), two key events will transpire, the death of the Messiah, and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem (v. 26).

Placing these two events after sixty-nine weeks but before the seventieth week seems to indicate a gap in time. This gap allows for the present church age. Since the last week is disconnected from the first sixty-nine weeks the question arises as to when this final week will take place. The answer given is that, when "he" (the Antichrist) makes a covenant with Israel, the last week begins (Daniel 9:26-27).

Most important in Daniel 9 is what God says He will accomplish by the time that the 490 years have run their course. In verse 24, six goals are given:

- (1) to finish the transgression;
- (2) to make an end of sin;
- (3) to make atonement for iniquity;
- (4) to bring in everlasting righteousness;
- (5) to seal up vision and prophecy; and
- (6) to anoint the most holy place.

It is important to remember that all six of these goals are considered earthly as they relate to Daniel's people (Israel) and Daniel's holy city (Jerusalem). The church is not found in the context of Daniel 9:24-27.

Now, the first three goals were accomplished by Christ's work on the cross during His first coming, in which He dealt with the sin issue fully and completely. However these goals have not been applied yet to Israel on a national level.

The fourth goal looks at a time when national Israel will experience everlasting righteousness. Since this did not occur during the first 483 years while Israel was still a

nation, and it must occur during the 490-year period while Israel is still constituted a nation, then it must take place at the end of the Great Tribulation, just prior to the inception of the millennial kingdom.

The fifth goal related to the sealing up of vision and prophecy most likely looks at that time when the glorified Christ is present with His people, fulfilling all prophecies and thus making prophecy and visions unnecessary. This will occur toward the end of the seven-year tribulation period just after Christ's second coming.

The sixth goal is to anoint the most holy. The phrase "most holy" is frequently used in the Bible to refer to the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and the Temple. This anointing is most likely in connection with the great millennial temple spoken of by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 40-48). This anointing of this most holy place will probably take place in connection with the Second Coming of Christ at the very end of the seventieth week of years.

This passage in Daniel 9:24-27 clearly communicates God's intentions with the nation of Israel. Since the fulfillment of these six goals were made possible by Christ on the cross, but have not been fulfilled to national Israel yet, there remains one week (seven years) for the fulfilling of these goals.

It is clear that God's primary purpose for the tribulation period is focused on the nation of Israel, not on the church. This also holds true for the second purpose of the tribulation period in that of bringing judgment on evil people and nations for their unbelief and sin. Since, the church has been redeemed and is made up of believers; this purpose for the tribulation period does not involve the church either. The church does not need to be brought into judgment since the Lord took our judgment upon Himself (John 5:24).

The conclusion is that since the church does not fit into the declared purposes for the tribulation period then the church will not be a part of that period of time. Thus the pre-tribulation rapture best fits with the purposes of God for the tribulation period.

### ***3. The church is exempted from the wrath of God***

While there is general agreement among all the rapture views that God has promised the church exemption from the future wrath of God, there is not agreement as to what the wrath of God pertains to and exactly how the church is exempt.

Some have suggested that the first three and one-half years of the tribulation is best understood as the wrath of man and the last three and one-half years is the wrath of God. Some have suggested that the church will be protected from the wrath of God while still going through the seven-year tribulation period.

The wrath of God is best understood as God's controlled passionate feeling against the sin and rebellion of His creatures. It is a future outpouring of God's wrath during the tribulation period. The Scripture teaches that the tribulation is an absolutely unique period of time in that the world experiences the wrath of God as never before (Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 12:2; Joel 2:2; Matthew 24:21).

There will be worldwide death and destruction; unprecedented supernaturalism such as signs, wonders and other supernatural phenomenon; and an unrivaled number of deaths in a short period of time. In light of this unique future time of wrath, God's promise of exemption for His children is highly significant and extremely comforting.

When is the wrath of God poured out on the earth? It will be poured out during the seven years of tribulation often referred to as Daniel's seventieth week. It is important to note that God the Father has given all judgment and the authority to execute judgment to the Son (John 5:22, 27).

In Revelation 4-5, the Father sits on the throne and it is the Lamb (Jesus Christ) who is given the authority and who is found worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll of judgment unleashing God's wrath upon the earth. God's wrath is seen through a series of judgments in the book of Revelation referred to as the seals, trumpets and bowls.

These judgments include direct supernatural acts (i.e. great disturbances in the heavens or one hundred-pound hailstones) as well as those forces, elements, and individuals that God uses in an indirect way (i.e. war, famine, the Antichrist, and Satan).

Since these judgments are poured out during the entire seven-year tribulation and are unleashed by the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ, then the wrath of God must include the entire seven-year period not just a portion of it. This is in keeping with the direct statements "the wrath of the Lamb...has come" (Revelation 6:16-17) and "Your wrath came" (Revelation 11:18).

Therefore, the rapture of the church would have to take place prior to this time period in order to be exempt from the outpouring of God's wrath. Several passages point to the protection and removal of the church during these days of the wrath of God.

- 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, "*For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, {that is} Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.*"

In this first passage, the apostle Paul praises believers at Thessalonica for, among other things, their patient, confident looking for the coming of the Lord. Paul states that when Jesus returns from heaven, He "*delivers us from the wrath to come.*"

The term, *deliver* [RHUOMAI] carries with it the idea of rescuing from something by a forcible act. The term, *from* [EK] emphasizes the completeness of our rescue **out from** the coming wrath.

The wrath must be understood in light of the fact that we are waiting for the coming of Christ. Christ will come and deliver believers out from the world and the coming tribulation, which is the best understanding of "*the wrath to come.*"

- 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, "*For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.*"

In this second passage, the apostle Paul speaks of God's sovereign determination of the believer's future. It is not God's intention for the believer to experience His wrath. This clear guarantee of protection from wrath certainly agrees with other portions of Scripture (John 5:24; Romans 5:9-10; Colossians 1:13).

Paul's assertion here seems clearly to assure that believers will not have any part in the coming seven-year tribulation period, when God's wrath falls upon a Christ-rejecting world (Revelation 6:15-17; 14:10; 19:15). Paul makes a sharp distinction in the context of this passage between believers ("you," "we") and unbelievers ("they," "them").

Quite clearly it is God's sovereign intention to keep His children safe not only from the terrible penalty of eternal damnation, but also from the wrath of God poured out during the tribulation.

- Revelation 3:10, "*Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that {hour} which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.*"

In this third passage, the apostle John records the words of Christ to the church at Philadelphia. Christ promises believers that they will be kept from the hour of testing. Some have suggested that the words "keep you from" suggests that the church will be protected through the tribulation period, but upon close examination of the language, it seems best to understand that the church will be protected by being removed out of the tribulation period.

Notice that as John writes this promise of Christ that the test is a future test, the test is for a definite period of time, the test is worldwide in scope and the test will be given to those who dwell on the earth. Clearly, this "hour of testing" is referring to the future seven-year tribulation period.

It is significant that the phrase, "*those who dwell on the earth*" is consistently used throughout the book of Revelation to refer to unbelievers (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8). It is also necessary to note that the phrase "*keep from*" [TEREO EK] is best understood to mean, "to be kept completely out of."

In fact, if the idea of "kept from while going through" was meant here, it seems that a different preposition would have been used. Christ is promising the church in Philadelphia that they will be kept completely out of the "*hour of testing*," which is none other than the future seven-year tribulation period outlined in Revelation 6-18. This passage offers hope to all believers that they will be removed from the earth before the coming tribulation period.

#### **4. The concept of the imminent coming of Christ.**

The word *imminent* is not found in Scripture, but it has become the word used to express the theological idea of an any moment coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. An imminent event is one that is certain, that is always hanging over head, that is always close at hand in the sense that it could happen at any moment. Other things may happen before the imminent event, but nothing else must take place before it happens. If something else must take place before an imminent event, then that event is no longer imminent. The imminent coming of Jesus Christ means that there are no signs or events that must take place prior to His return. He could return at any moment. Although He may return at any moment, it may not be soon.

The New Testament writers used terms that anticipated the any moment (imminent) return of Christ. They did not view any other events necessary prior to Christ's return. However, the Scripture clearly teaches that the second coming of Christ in Revelation 19 is indeed preceded by a number of signs and other events and therefore is not considered to be an imminent event.

The rapture on the other hand is considered to be an imminent event as the church is consistently exhorted to look for the Lord's appearance and to live in light of this any moment coming of Christ.

Therefore, passages demanding imminence refer to the rapture, whereas passages demanding a sign refer to Christ's second coming.

There are many New Testament passages that support the idea of Christ's coming as imminent. It was the consistent belief and anticipation of the New Testament writers that Jesus might well return within their lifetime.

- James 5:7-9, "*Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brethren, against one*

*another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door."*

James exhorts his Jewish Christian readers to live righteously in light of the Lord's return, because it is at hand. He could return at any moment.

- 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, "*For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and **to wait** for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, {that is} Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.*"

The apostle Paul commends the Thessalonian Christians for continually, expectantly looking for the Lord's return. The term *wait* is a word that carries with it the suggestion of waiting with patience and confident expectancy. It was the Lord they were waiting for, not certain signs or events.

- 1 Corinthians 1:7, "*so that you are not lacking in any gift, **awaiting eagerly** the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,*"

The Corinthian believers were anticipating the coming of the Lord, not signs or events. Their eager anticipation of the Lord's return points to their belief in the idea of imminency.

- Philippians 3:20-21, "*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also **we eagerly wait** for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.*"

Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to have a heavenly mind-set as they eagerly wait for the Lord's return. The phrase *eagerly wait* emphasizes an intense anticipation. Paul includes himself among those who have this eager anticipation.

Paul honestly believed that the Lord's return could be at any moment even possibly during his own lifetime (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15). He taught an imminent coming of Christ. Clearly this passage refers to the rapture, as it is at the rapture that believers will be transformed into a glorified body.

- Titus 2:13, "***looking for** the blessed hope and the **appearing** of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus;*"

Believers are reminded to have a glad expectancy as they anticipate the glorious appearing of the Lord Himself. This verse falls within the context of an exhortation to godly living. Paul is once again exhorting believers to live in light of the Lord's imminent return.

- 1 Corinthians 16:22, "*If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Maranatha.*"

The term *Maranatha* is of interest and importance here. It is made up of three Aramaic words that mean, "*Our Lord Come.*" The fact that this Aramaic term was used in a letter written to a Greek speaking church suggests that at the time Paul wrote it was already a well known term in the Christian church. It conveys the theology and hope of the early Christians that the Lord Jesus could return at any time.

Many other passages also suggest that the New Testament writers and recipients did anticipate the imminent return of the Lord. They were eagerly looking for the return of Christ not signs or any other events. They were motivated to live in light of Christ's any moment return. The concept of imminency is a strong argument for the pretribulational rapture of the church.

#### **5. *The distinction between the events of the rapture and second coming.***

There are obviously some similarities between the rapture and the second coming especially in that they both deal with the same Christ coming from heaven to deal with human beings.

However, similarities between events do not make them the same event. There are enough differences between the rapture and second coming that require us to understand them as two separate events occurring at different times.

When comparing the main passages dealing with the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53; John 14:3) with those of the second coming (Joel 3:12-16; Zechariah 14:1-5; Matthew 24:29-31; Revelation 19:11-21), several differences are clear. These eight differences support the belief of a pretribulational rapture and raise some serious questions regarding the posttribulational view of the rapture of the church.

- At the rapture, the saints meet Christ in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17), while at the second coming the Lord descends to the Mount of Olives and there is no reference to any meeting in the air (Zechariah 14:1-5).
- At the rapture, the Lord comes to bless His people with the final aspect of their salvation. No judgment is found in any of these passages. At the second coming, the emphasis is on judgment that will fall on the unbelievers of the world.

- At the rapture, there is no mention of the millennial kingdom being established, while the passages that regard the second coming *emphasize* the establishing of Christ's millennial kingdom.
- Both the dead and living saints will receive glorified bodies at the rapture (1 Corinthians 15:51-53), while at the second coming no one is said to receive a glorified body.
- The rapture occurs before the wrath of God is poured out on the world, while the second coming follows the pouring out of God's wrath on the world.
- Christ's coming at the rapture is viewed as imminent, while there are numerous signs and events that must unfold prior to the second coming.
- At the rapture the Lord returns to heaven with His saints to the Father's house (John 14:1-3), while at the second coming, Christ descends and remains on the earth.
- At the rapture, believers will be removed from the earth leaving for the time only unbelievers, while at the second coming with its accompanying judgments all unbelievers will be removed from the earth and only believers will enter into the millennial kingdom.

#### **6. *The lack of evidence for the church's presence in the tribulation.***

The Scripture passages that deal with the tribulation period have no specific references to the church at all. Both Old and New Testament passages that deal with the tribulation speak of Israel, Gentiles and those who are saved during the period, but never is a reference made to the church.

The Greek word for church (EKKLESIA) is not used in the tribulation passages and neither are other terms that are often used to refer to the church (i.e. the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, etc.). If no evidence exists that the church is in the time of the tribulation, then there is a strong probability that it is absent. If the church is not present in the tribulation period, then the Lord Jesus at the rapture must have suddenly and supernaturally removed it.

Daniel 9:24-27 emphasizes that the tribulation period is focused on Daniel's people, Israel and Daniel's city, Jerusalem. The church does not appear in the context at all. It is also important to observe that the church is mentioned more than 20 times in Revelation 1-3 and once in Revelation 22:16, but it is not mentioned at all in Revelation 6-18.

Since Revelation 6-18 gives an amazing amount of detail about the tribulation period, one would expect that if the church were present it would be mentioned. Since the

church is not identified as being present, we must assume that it will not be present and the only reasonable explanation would be that of a pretribulation rapture.

**7. There must be an interval of time between the rapture and the second coming.**

There are certain events found in the Scripture that necessitate an interval of time between the rapture and the second coming. These events take place after the rapture but before the second coming. The pretribulation rapture of the church provides the necessary amount of time for these events to take place.

When the Lord returns at the rapture, He promised in John 14:1-3 that He would take believers to the Father's house in heaven. He does not take them immediately back down to earth, because He promised to take them to heaven and because there are important events that must take place first.

First, believers are to be rewarded. There are passages that closely connect the rewarding of believers with the Lord's return (i.e. 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 22:12). This rewarding of believers in the church is commonly referred to as the judgment seat of Christ.

It does not determine one's eternal destiny, but simply rewards believers for their faithful service to the Lord during their time on the earth (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:11-4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10). At the second coming of Christ, it appears that the church has already been rewarded.

In Revelation 19:8, John says, "*it was given to her (the church) to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.*" Clearly the garments represent the rewards of the saints.

Since the church had already received her rewards prior to the second coming of Christ, then the judgment seat of Christ had already taken place and therefore necessitates an interval of time between the rapture and the second coming.

A second event that seems to require an interval of time is the marriage of the Lamb. The text of Revelation 19 places the marriage of the Lamb in heaven, not on earth or in the clouds. Jesus promised that He would take believers back to heaven when He returned (John 14:1-3).

According to Revelation 19:7-9, the marriage of the Lamb has taken place prior to the second coming of Christ and thus an interval of time is required for the marriage of the Lamb in heaven.

The implication is evident that those in heaven who compose the "bride" (the church) are already translated or resurrected, given glorified bodies, and rewarded for their righteous acts. If the church is to be judged, rewarded and joined to Christ in the symbol

of marriage prior to the second coming then it is clear an interval of time is required and the pretribulational rapture allows for it.

A third matter that necessitates some time between the rapture and the second coming is the salvation of those who will enter the millennial kingdom in non-glorified bodies. At the rapture all believers on the earth are removed, leaving no believers at all. Yet, when Christ returns at the second coming, there are large numbers of believers. These believers do not receive glorified bodies, but do enter into the millennial kingdom and repopulate the earth (cf. Isaiah 65:20-25).

The pretribulational rapture has no problem with this reality. At the rapture, all believers will be removed from the earth, the tribulation period will begin, people will be saved and those that survive through the tribulation will enter the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies.

The evidence of Scripture is clear that these three events take place between the rapture and second coming and that a reasonable interval of time is required for their fulfillment. These events, therefore, support a pretribulational rapture of the church.

#### **8. There are substantial doctrinal difficulties with the other positions.**

The last reason to hold to a pretribulational rapture is because of the serious deficiencies of the other rapture views.

##### *Posttribulationalism:*

Posttribulationalism necessarily denies the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ. The church is exhorted in the Scriptures to look for the Lord's return (Titus 2:13), not for signs, and to be comforted by the coming of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

The exhortation to purify ourselves in view of the Lord's return only has significance if His coming is imminent (1 John 3:2-3). These factors are inconsistent with the church going through the tribulation.

One of the most significant problems that posttribulationalism faces is the biblical description of people who are alive in the millennium in non-resurrected bodies. These people can bear children and carry out common occupations (cf. Isaiah 65:20-25; Zechariah 8:5). Since resurrected people do not propagate (Matthew 22:30), there would be no way to populate the kingdom unless some non-resurrected people enter the millennium.

Pretribulationalism teaches that those who believe in Christ at the second coming will enter the millennium in non-resurrected bodies. However, posttribulationalism is forced to have all believers translated at the second coming of Christ. This leaves no one in

non-resurrected bodies to populate the kingdom and leaves no one even to join with Satan at the conclusion of the millennium in rebellion to Christ (Revelation 20:7-10). This is a serious problem for the posttribulationist to overcome.

*b. Midtribulationism:*

While certainly the judgments of God during the tribulation are intensified in the last half of the tribulation, it does not follow that God's wrath is limited to the final three and one-half years.

Revelation 11:18 does not say that the wrath of God on earth is only beginning at the mid-point of the tribulation, but that it has come. Revelation 6:16-17 also says the wrath of the Lamb has come.

Therefore, to fit midtribulationism the seal judgments would have to occur in the second half of the tribulation, which does not fit the chronology of Revelation 6-18 nor that of Matthew 24.

The context of all of Revelation 6-18 is that of God's judgment upon a rebellious and unbelieving world. Thus it is impossible to limit just the last half of the tribulation as the wrath of God and consider the first half as the wrath of men.

The argument that the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15:52 is the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11 is debatable. In Jewish literature, the blowing of trumpets occur for a variety of reasons. In 1 Corinthians 15:52 the trumpet is sounded for resurrection and deliverance, it is the last trumpet for the church.

In Revelation 11 the seventh trumpet is of judgment. Also, in Revelation 11 the seventh trumpet is only the last of a series. The true last trumpet is that of Matthew 24:31, which is at the second coming of Christ. Clearly there are some serious problems with the midtribulationist viewpoint.

*c. The Pre-wrath Rapture Theory*

It is impossible to limit the wrath of God to the time frame allowed for in this view. Luke 21:23 shows that divine wrath occurs before the time of this position's definition of the Day of the Lord begins.

This position claims that the Day of the Lord is limited to only a short period between the pre-wrath rapture and the second coming by claiming there are no blessings associated with the Day of the Lord.

However, this is inconsistent with several OT passages (Joel 2-3; Zephaniah 3; Isaiah 34-35; Haggai 2; Zechariah 12-14) and one NT passage (2 Peter 3:10). It also claims that Matthew 24:22 demands that the great tribulation be shortened from three and one-half years to a lesser time period. However, this text does not indicate such a time period.

This view like midtribulationism does not take into account the chronology of Revelation 6-18, nor does it accurately view the entire tribulation period as the wrath of God. This view also does not allow for the imminent coming of Christ and thus has some serious challenges to overcome.

#### *d. The Partial Rapture Theory*

The defense of this view is wrongly based on a few passages which refer to Israel during the tribulation period (Luke 21:36; Matthew 24:41-42; Matthew 25:1-13) and which are based on a false distinction between believers (Hebrews 9:28).

The rapture is never presented as a reward for godly living in the Scripture. The partial rapture view destroys the unity of the body of Christ as well as the imminent hope of the return of Christ for all believers. Lastly, it fails to explain what happens to carnal Christians who died before the rapture.

These alternative rapture views have some serious problems with many challenges to overcome. Surely the burden of proof is on these other views. The pre-tribulation rapture is clearly evidenced by overwhelming support from the Scripture and is the view of choice.

### **Conclusion**

The eight lines of argument for pretribulationism emerge out of a straightforward reading of several key Scripture passages. The distinction between Israel and the church, the stated purposes for the tribulation, the church's exemption from the future wrath of God and the concept of the imminent return of Christ are strong arguments for a pretribulation rapture.

Adding to that the striking differences between the rapture and second coming, combined with the need for an interval of time between the two events, and the lack of evidence for the church's presence during the tribulation, the pretribulation rapture emerges as the strongest position. Furthermore, the serious deficiencies of the other views add further reason to hold to a pretribulation rapture.

In light of this, there are at least three points of a practical nature that must be highlighted:

## *Valley Bible Church – Adult Class*

- First, we must remember that the pretribulation rapture is an event without signs. We should not be looking for signs. It is unwise and unscriptural to be setting dates and seeking to find fulfillment of prophecy in current events. This has caused harm to many people and brought embarrassment to the cause of Christ. Rather we should be looking forward to the any moment return of our Lord.
- Second, the writers of the New Testament always discussed the rapture in the context of godly living. The rapture should bring about changes in the way believers think or live. Belief in a pretribulational rapture should motivate us toward greater godliness in our personal lives. The any moment return of our Lord should energize us to serve faithfully and enthusiastically.
- Lastly, the blessed hope of the imminent return of Christ should bring comfort to believers. We should follow through with Paul's exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 4:18, "*Therefore comfort one another with these words.*" We should seek to bring comfort and hope to each other in light of the imminent return of our Lord at the rapture.