

The Rapture, Introduction

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The timing of the “rapture” is a divisive and contentious subject in the world of Evangelical Christianity. Churches typically do not like controversy, and will do much to avoid it altogether. Evangelical churches in the United States seem to fall largely into two camps, being either staunchly pretribulationist, or avoiding the subject altogether. The former group typically considers no other view worthy of a hearing. The latter group seems to think eschatology is too complicated for Christians to be bothered with, and completely unnecessary to the Christian life. These are commonly called “pantribulationists,” (it will all “pan out” in the end, no need to concern yourself).

What if pretribulationists are wrong?

If pretribulationists turn out to be wrong, the consequences will be devastating as millions of Christians who expected a pretribulation rapture find themselves in the midst of the end time drama, facing the Antichrist! Indeed, the evidence against the pretribulation view is staggering if people would simply allow themselves to be exposed to it. Yet, most refuse to even take a peek, and are constantly assured by their pastors and self-appointed TV prophecy experts that all is well. What are the shepherds going to say to the sheep if they have failed to prepare them for the roaring lion's brutal attack?

What if “pantribulationists” are wrong?

The New Testament contains a great deal of teaching on the tribulation, and the spiritual preparation necessary for it. Jesus indicated most Christians living through this time would abandon the Faith (Matt. 24:9-15). Is that not worth investigation to find out why? How does one avoid such a fate if he knows nothing about Bible prophecy?

DESCRIPTION OF THE POSTTRIBULATION RAPTURE VIEW

The “posttribulation” rapture view is the belief that Jesus will return visibly and bodily to raise the dead and gather together living Christians at the end of a period of intense tribulation called by Jesus, “great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21). The posttribulation view is unique in that it recognizes only a single future coming of Jesus. All other rapture views, pretribulation, midtribulation, and pre-wrath, claim the rapture and resurrection will occur prior to the second coming of Jesus by months or years. While these views see the “rapture” as a means to take the Church to heaven to escape God's wrath, the posttribulation view sees the rapture as the necessary mechanism for gathering together all believers, from both heaven and earth, to participate in Christ's revelation to the

world in power and glory at His coming. Therefore, in a posttribulation scenario, the rapture is an integral part of the second coming. Upon Jesus' descent from heaven to the clouds, the angels will be dispatched by the trumpet blast and gather together Jesus' elect to join Him in the air. The whole gathering will be revealed to the world in a blaze of glory. In Titus 2:13, Paul equated our "blessed hope" with the "glorious appearing" of Christ. He did the same in several other passages.

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." (Matt 24:29-31 NKJV).

The posttribulation view was actually named by Jesus in the above passage. The words, "after the tribulation" (verse 29) in the Latin Bible are literally rendered, "post tribulationem."

Holding the correct view of the timing of the rapture is more than academic, because one's beliefs dictate his actions. Those who believe they will escape the severe hardship and persecution of the tribulation have no incentive to prepare themselves spiritually and emotionally for that possibility. Both Jesus' and Paul's first warning regarding the timing of Jesus' return was the same, "Take heed that no one deceives you," (Matt. 24:4 NKJV), and "let no one deceive you by any means," (2 Thess. 2:3).

HISTORY OF THE POSTTRIBULATION RAPTURE VIEW

Despite a variety of millennial views in Christian history, the posttribulation view had no rival for the first seventeen centuries after Christ. Historic premillennialists and amillennialists have always been posttribulationary. Only within modern dispensational premillennialism do we find the idea of a "rapture" distinct from the second coming. The evidence from early Christian literature is exclusively posttribulationary. A few popular contemporary authors have claimed otherwise. They are mistaken, or they are intentionally misleading their readers. And many Christians repeat these false claims without investigation.

THE RAPTURE QUESTION IN MODERN TIMES

In many parts of the western world, especially the USA and western Europe, the pretribulation view supplanted the posttribulation view in the last two centuries. This was due largely to the Christian seminary movement, with large schools like Dallas

Theological Seminary leading the way in promoting this view. But, probably the single most important reason for the widespread acceptance of pretribulationism was the Scofield Reference Bible, which incorporated the dispensational, pretribulation scheme in the reference notes.

In the last several decades, there has been a considerable trend away from pretribulationism back to the ancient view. No doubt, there are several reasons for this. One reason seems to be the effective use by posttribulationists of the early Church writings, showing a unanimous posttribulationism in the early Church. George Ladd, Robert Gundry, and Dave MacPherson have led the way in exposing the recent roots of pretribulationism. This author has done considerable work in this area as well.

The pretribulation establishment has taken this thinning out of their ranks very seriously. The Pre-trib Research Center, founded by Tim LaHaye, and currently headed by Thomas Ice, was established to counter this trend, and to deal with the powerful historical evidence that posttribulationists have offered. Rather than taking a more scholarly approach, they have responded with a blitz of propaganda in the form of fictional novels and prophecy films, like LaHaye's "Left Behind" series, in order to shore up their base. But, despite this effort, there remains a steady exodus of Christians from the pretribulation camp.

We insist that the earliest Christian view is the correct one, because the earliest view is necessarily "Apostolic." The articles that follow are dedicated to providing the biblical and historical reasons for adopting the ancient rapture view of the Church. It is our contention that the pretribulation view is not explicitly taught anywhere in Scripture and is based solely on incorrect inferences and a faulty dispensational system. It was not what Jesus commanded to be preached in all the world until the end of the age. Neither was it the view handed down by the Apostles to the next generation of Christians. The view presented here is essentially the same as what was held by the earliest Christian writers contiguous with the time of the Apostles. We are not suggesting that anyone should hold to the posttribulation view simply because of its history or antiquity. We aim to show that it is the only biblical view of the rapture timing. The historical information is just further confirmation that the early Church trained by the Apostles understood the Scriptures in a similar way. And it should prod the reader to take another look at the Biblical data.

METHODOLOGY IN BUILDING OUR BIBLICAL CASE

Underlying our approach is the realization that the Bible is a progressive revelation of God to mankind. All of the information available to us in Scripture was not available to everyone in history. Some things were revealed through Moses, others through the

prophets many generations later. More was revealed by Jesus, and still more through the writings of the Apostles. Finally, the book of Revelation was given through John as the capstone of prophetic truth. The totality of biblical prophetic truth was progressively given over thousands of years.

Because of the progressive nature of Bible prophecy, when interpreting a given passage, we cannot assume things (known from later prophecy) that had not yet been revealed to mankind when that particular prophecy was written or spoken. For example, when examining what Jesus taught His disciples about His coming and the end of the age, we need to place ourselves in their shoes. We should take into account what they already knew from their Jewish training in the Old Testament Scriptures. They were certainly not aware of later prophecy, such as the book of Revelation given six decades later! When Jesus taught His disciples, He was quite aware that their understanding was limited to PAST revelation. Jesus built on and added to their current foundational understanding with more detailed revelation. This is clear in the Olivet Discourse, where Jesus referred the disciples to what Daniel had written about the “abomination of desolation,” (Matt. 24:15). Many other passages could be cited in the New Testament where the writer or speaker quoted or alluded to Old Testament prophecy when teaching about eschatology.

In our study, we have tried our best to understand a passage in the way the original audience would have understood it given their current level of learning. This assumes that Bible prophecy was first and foremost intended for the audience to whom it was first given. Of course, all Bible prophecy is beneficial to us who live thousands of years later. But, it was not originally written specifically to us. Therefore, we need to resist the temptation to interpret earlier prophecy in light of later revelation. The original hearers of that prophecy did not have the benefit of later revelation. When giving new revelation, which was obviously meant to be properly comprehended by the intended audience, we assume the writer was fully aware of what his audience knew and did not know. He expected his hearers or readers to interpret the prophecies correctly, given their limited understanding of prior revelation.

As you read the articles in the first section, you will notice they follow a sequential path through the New Testament. When appropriate, we will look at Old Testament prophecy and consider its implications regarding the knowledge of the original audience of the New Testament prophetic Scriptures. By using this format, we will build our case sequentially, and demonstrate a strong reliance on previous prophecy, as well as examine new revelation when given. By default, we will assume that prophetic details given have a foundation in past prophecy. Where unique details are given that have no apparent basis in past prophecy, we can assume that this is new revelation.

Often, the text itself tells us when new revelation is being given and when old revelation is being reiterated. For example, when Paul wrote, “*behold I show you a mystery,*” (1 Cor. 15:54), we can conclude he was about to reveal something not previously understood by his readers. But, when Peter wrote that he was reminding his readers of “*the words of the prophets*” (2 Peter 3:1,2), we can conclude he was referring to previous prophecy.

PRETRIBULATIONISM'S FALSE CLAIMS OF “LITERALISM”

Pretribulation writers often claim to be the champions of the “literal” method of interpretation. While literalism necessarily leads to a premillennial understanding of prophecy, it does **NOT** favor the pretribulation rapture view within the premillennial scheme. I realize this is a radical statement in today's eschatological climate. But, I will prove this assertion in the following articles. It is pretribulationists themselves who frequently appeal to non literal interpretations as the primary support for their view. Some common examples of this are:

- Jesus' disciples *represent* the nation of Israel in the Olivet Discourse
- John's being caught up to heaven in Rev. 4:1 *represents* the rapture
- The catching up of the "Man Child" in Rev. 12 *represents* the rapture
- the twenty-four elders *represent* the whole Church in heaven
- the seven letters in Revelation *represent* seven “church ages”
- Enoch's and Elijah's catching up are *types* of a pretribulation rapture

Additionally, all pretribulation arguments depend on inferences. Not one clear pretribulation statement can be found in the Bible, based on a literal reading of the text in context. And none of the inferences used to support pretribulationism are necessary inferences. The articles on this website will prove conclusively that posttribulationists can far surpass pretribulationists in holding to a consistent grammatical – historical (literal) methodology. And a consistent literal methodology will necessarily lead to a posttribulation rapture (within a premillennial framework).

HISTORICAL ARGUMENTS

We do not claim perfection for the post Apostolic Church, nor any of the early Christian writers. The intent of our historical section is to demonstrate that the second generation Church was solidly posttribulationist, and that no hint of pretribulationism can be found in their writings. While this is a secondary argument, and does not carry the weight of the Biblical arguments, it is the natural extension of our premise. Since we are viewing prophecy progressively, always building on previous revelation, it is logical to conclude that students (or disciples) of the Apostles would largely reflect the view handed down to them by Apostolic oral tradition. The second generation Church was the product of

the lifetime teaching ministries of Jesus' Apostles. The early Church not only possessed the written documents of the New Testament, but also a considerable body of oral personal instruction from their mentors, the Apostles. We will demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that the second generation Church held a well developed posttribulationism. The implications of this fact are enormous. If the pretribulation view is correct, then the entire early Church had departed from the truth even before John wrote Revelation! Hence, the Apostles of Jesus were miserable failures in transmitting sound doctrine to the very next generation of Christians, and grounding them in the Word. That means, all the early local churches succumbed simultaneously to the same false view of the rapture virtually overnight, and no record can be found of any kind of resistance or rebuttal of this alleged massive departure from the supposed pretribulationism of the Apostles. All this despite the fact that the early Christian apologists, like Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, wrote volumes against the contemporary heresies that threatened the Church, appealing to the Scriptures and Apostolic oral tradition. If pretribulationism is true, we are forced to conclude that as soon as the Apostles died (actually while John was still alive), the whole Christian Church abandoned the Apostles' doctrine and substituted a false eschatology that required them to go through the tribulation.

PRETRIBULATION ARGUMENTS ANSWERED

At Answers in Revelation, our approach is to first provide a positive presentation of the biblical view from the Scriptures. Next, we offer our rebuttal of the major pretribulation arguments. Finally, we deal with the historical issues – the view of the early Church and the history of the pretribulation view.

The process of developing our eschatology first and foremost from a progressive handling of Scripture using the grammatical - historical (literal) method, and then adding the testimony of the early Church, leads firmly, logically, and inescapably to a posttribulation understanding of the rapture. One of the reasons the pretribulation view cannot be correct is because it depends exclusively on circular arguments, unnecessary inferences, and ignores the progressive nature of revelation. Arguments are invented and forced upon the Scriptures, rather than building a case progressively on a proper foundation. Because we have built our case progressively, you will benefit most from reading the articles in sequence.

CHALLENGE TO PRETRIBULATIONISTS

All we ask is a fair hearing. As you consider our arguments from Scripture with an open mind, ask yourself the following questions. "If a pretribulation rapture is what Scripture teaches, where was it **introduced** in the progressive revelation of Biblical prophecy?" Such a major concept must have been unveiled to the Christian world at

some point in time. When? Where? What effect did it have on those who first heard it? What passage of Scripture indicates this new radical departure from the rest of Bible prophecy? As you contemplate the historical evidence provided here, ask yourself this question. "Why was the pretribulation rapture only discovered, and documented in the history of Christianity, many centuries after the founding of Jesus' Church?" If it is truly part of "*the Faith once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 1:3), why did the early Church taught by the Apostles know nothing of it?

If you consider yourself a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I would like to ask you a few probing questions, to see if you really are what you claim.

- Is the Great Commission for Christians today?
- Is the Great Commission to "*make disciples of all the nations (gentiles)*" until "*the end of the age*," (Matt. 28:18-20)?
- Does making disciples include baptizing them, and "*teaching them to observe all things that I (Jesus) have commanded you (His disciples),"* (Matt. 28:18-20)?
- Did Jesus command His disciples to be watching for His coming "*after the tribulation*" (Mark 13:24-37)?
- Does obeying Jesus' Great Commission require that we teach gentile disciples to be watching for Jesus' posttribulational coming?
- How can you claim to be a preacher of the Gospel if you refuse to obey Jesus' own command in the Great Commission?