

NOTES ON **THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH**
* * * PART 1: What is it? * * *

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Soli Deo Gloria!

INTRODUCTION. Prophecy in general, and the rapture of the Church in particular, is important doctrine for the Christian! Evidence for this is the fact that two of the Apostle Paul's earliest epistles are largely devoted to prophetic issues related to the rapture (i.e., 1&2 Thessalonians); these letters were written to the church at Thessalonica, a church which Paul was responsible for planting during his 2nd missionary journey, but one with which he spent only 3 weeks (Act17:2). Nonetheless, Paul's letters make reference to the fact that he had extensively instructed these brand new believers on prophetic subjects during the short time he was with them (e.g., 2Thess2:5).

There are 3 central passages on the rapture of the Church in the NT: John 14:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

- 1) **JOHN 14:1-3.** On the night before His crucifixion, the Lord Jesus revealed to His disciples a number of new doctrines/truths pertaining to the coming Church Age (e.g., the Spirit's future ministry of indwelling believers; Jn14:17) in what we know as the Upper Room Discourse (Jn13-17). On this occasion He gave His disciples the promise that at a future time He would return for them for the purpose of taking them to be with Him where He was going. Since Christ was going to heaven following His resurrection and ascension, this promise is that He will come again for believers and take them to be with Him in heaven. This must be a reference to **the rapture**, an event that is distinct from the 2nd coming, for at the 2nd coming Christ comes from heaven to earth to establish the Messianic Kingdom for 1,000 years. **This promise was given to be a source of comfort for believers.**
- 2) **1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18.** Clearly Paul had taught the doctrine of the rapture to the new believers at Thessalonica during the 3 weeks he was personally with them. Since his departure, however, some of the Thessalonian believers had died, and the question arose in the minds of the members as to whether these deceased saints would participate in the rapture. Paul's letter provides additional information to comfort the Thessalonians with the knowledge that their loved ones who had died would be included in the events associated with the rapture.

Paul refers to the believers who had died as those who "sleep in Jesus" (v14). Here, "sleep" is a euphemism used for death, common in the NT (e.g., Jn11:12-13; 1Cor11:30; 15:51); while used for believers, it is never used for unbelievers. The death of a believer is to be feared no more than falling asleep; and while we mourn the loss of our loved ones, we do not grieve as those who "have no hope" (v13).

Having made clear that the believers who have died will be included, Paul lays out the precise sequence of 7 events associated with the rapture.

First, **"the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven"** (v16). The rapture begins with Christ, at some point in the future, coming out of heaven and appearing in the sky above the earth (v17).

Second, the Lord will come **"with a shout"** (v16). The Greek word translated "shout" means the order of a military commander. Thus, the

events of the rapture are set in motion when Christ emerges from heaven and issues a command.

Third, "**the voice of the archangel**" will follow the Lord's shout (v16). Angels are often used to carry out the commands of God, and this will be true at the rapture. Having received the command of the Lord Jesus, the archangel Michael will relay that command to the host of heaven, the elect angels of God.

Fourth, "**the trump of God**" will sound (v16). In the Bible, the sound of the trumpet is used as both a call to battle (1Cor14:8) and a call to worship (Ps81:3). With the command of the Lord Jesus issued and passed on to the LORD's host by the archangel Michael, the sound of the trumpet will be the signal to put the command into action.

Fifth, "**the dead in Christ shall rise first**" (v16). To answer the concerns of the Thessalonian believers over the relationship of their members who have died to the rapture, Paul indicates that they will be resurrected at this time, even slightly preceding the event of the rapture itself. But this is not a general resurrection, or even a resurrection of all believing saints of the past. By using the technical term, the dead "in Christ" (i.e., those who have been Spirit-baptized into the Church, the Body of Christ, which began on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2), Paul limits this resurrection to the saints of the Church Age. Thus, NT saints will be resurrected at the time of the rapture, but OT saints will be resurrected later (cf. Dan12:1-2).

Sixth, "**then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds**" (v17). Immediately following the resurrection of "the dead in Christ", believers still alive on earth will be "caught up" into the "clouds". The Greek word translated as "caught up" is **harpazo** (from which we get the English word 'harpoon'), and it has the idea of the snatching away of the subjects and bringing them to the location of the one doing the snatching (Cp., Jn14:2-3). Our word 'rapture' comes from the Vulgate, which translated *harpazo* using the Latin verb **rapturo** (therefore, those who raise the objection that "rapture" is not found in the Bible are incorrect—it is found in the Latin Bible!). Thus, the rapture is the translation of living believers from the earth to the sky.

Seventh, "**to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord**" (v17). This detail of the rapture necessitates that it be an event distinct from the 2nd coming. At the 2nd coming, Christ comes from heaven to earth, returning to the very Mount of Olives from which He ascended to heaven (Act1:11), and at the moment His foot touches the earth the mountain will cleave in two (Zech14:4); then Christ inaugurates His Messianic Kingdom and personally remains on earth for 1,000 years. At the rapture, Christ does not return to the earth, but only to the "air" (i.e., the sky). Believers will be caught up to meet Him there, then return with Him to heaven (Jn14:3). Believers will be with Christ at both the rapture and the 2nd coming, but their destinations are different in each case; at the rapture believers accompany Christ to heaven, whereas at the 2nd coming believers accompany Christ to the earth.

FINALLY, it is reiterated that the expectation of the rapture and the reunion of living and dead Christians is intended to comfort believers.

- 3) **1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-58.** This final passage concerning the rapture deals with the change in believers' bodies that will take place. The sin nature we inherit from Adam (Rom5:12) remains with our human bodies, even after the believer is born again (which is why even believers die); this body, subject to corruption and mortality, is not fit for existence in the eternal state (v50)—it must be changed into a body that is incorruptible and immortal.

This change normally occurs for believers at the time of their resurrection. But what about that generation living at the time of the rapture? For them, their bodies will be "changed" into glorified bodies without experiencing death (vv51-53). This change will occur "in a moment", "in the twinkling of an eye" (v52). The Greek word translated "moment" is *atomos* (from which we get the English word 'atom') and emphasizes the smallest, most indivisible unit of time imaginable; that is, the transformation of believers' bodies who are raptured will be instantaneous.

The rapture is here said to take place "at the last trump" (v52). Many attempt to equate "the last trump" of the rapture with the 7th trumpet judgment of the Book of Revelation (Rev11:15-19), thus placing the time of the rapture within the Tribulation period (i.e., this is a common argument *against* a pretribulational rapture). However, Paul's use of the definite article in addressing the Corinthian church implies that Paul had a very specific event in his mind, and that they were expected to understand Paul's reference; but since John had not yet written the Book of Revelation, neither Paul nor the Corinthians could have known about the 7th trumpet judgment. Rather, "the last trump" would have been understood by anyone familiar with the OT as a reference to the Feast of Trumpets (Lev23:23-25; Num29:1), an annual festival which was concluded at "the last trump". This would suggest that the events associated with the rapture are in some sense part of the fulfillment of the Feast of Trumpets.

Finally, Paul makes clear that this doctrine of the rapture is a "mystery" (v51), as is the very formation and existence of the Church (Eph3:4-10). When used in the NT, "mystery" means a doctrinal truth that had been kept secret (i.e., it was not revealed in the OT), but is now divinely revealed in the NT (cf. Rom16:25-26). Thus, **we cannot find teaching on the rapture of the Church in the OT.**

SUMMARY. The present Church Age will close with the rapture of the Church, an event in which every Christian alive on earth will be simultaneously "caught up" to meet Christ in the air, then return with Him to heaven. This entire generation of "raptured" Christians will not experience physical death, but will be instantaneously transformed into their eternal, glorified bodies. Christians who have died prior to this event will also be resurrected at this time. The rapture is a mystery doctrine first hinted at by the Lord Jesus to His disciples the night before His crucifixion (Jn14:1-3) and revealed in full by the Apostle Paul (1Thess4:13-18; 1Cor15:50-58). The promise of the rapture is intended to provide the believer with comfort and hope (Jn14:1; 1Thess4:13,18).

NOTES ON **THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH**
* * * PART 2: When is it? * * *

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WHEN WILL THE RAPTURE TAKE PLACE? This question has been the source of much debate/controversy for almost 200 years. Scripture is clear that the day and the hour of the rapture cannot be known (cf. Matt24:36; 25:13; Mk13:32; 1Thess5:1-3), so the debate centers on when the rapture occurs relative to the 7-year Tribulation period (i.e., Daniel's 70th Week of Dan9:27). Scripture makes very clear what defines the Tribulation period: it begins with a peace treaty with the nation of Israel enforced by the Antichrist (Dan9:27; Rev6:1-2), it ends exactly 7 years later with the 2nd coming of Christ (Dan9:27; Rev19:11-20), and the 3.5 year mid-point is marked by the "abomination of desolation" in which the Antichrist defiles the Temple in Jerusalem (Matt24:15; 2Thess2:3-4; Rev13:15).

Four major views are currently held today: **Pre-Trib, Mid-Trib, Pre-Wrath** (better termed "3/4-Trib") and **Post-Trib**. A fifth view, the Partial Rapture position, was proposed in the latter part of the 19th century (i.e., 1800's), but has few if any serious advocates today.

[See RAPTURE CHART]

NOTE: The Tribulation period does not begin with the rapture, even in the case of the pre-trib view.

ARGUMENTS FOR A PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE: In Walvoord's *The Rapture Question*, he includes an appendix that lists 50 reasons the rapture will occur before the Tribulation. Seven of the most significant ones are summarized below.

- 1) **The Church is not seen on earth in Revelation 6-19.** The Book of Revelation is divided into 3 sections according to Rev1:19. The third section of the book, "the things which shall be hereafter" (i.e., after the Church Age), begins in Revelation 4. This section starts with a catching up of John into heaven (Rev4:1), the rapture *in type*. Then Revelation 4-5 is a scene in heaven, with the symbol for the churches used in Rev1:20 (i.e., 7 lampstands) now located in heaven; the implication is that the Church, previously on earth, has been caught up to heaven with John.

The Antichrist is revealed in Rev6:2, and the 2nd coming of Christ takes place in Rev19:11-20; thus, Revelation 6-19 is an elaborate expansion of Daniel's 70th Week (Dan9:27), the 7-year Tribulation period. Though the Church is mentioned 19 times in Revelation 1-3, not a single reference to it occurs in Revelation 6-19 (neither the word "church" nor the Church concept of Jew and Gentile united in one body without distinction). Even the exhortation "he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches", repeated 7 times in Revelation 2-3, is altered to omit reference to "the churches" when used in Revelation 6-19 (e.g., Rev13:9).

The prominence of the Church in Revelation 1-3, which deals with the Church Age, and the total absence of the Church on earth in Revelation 6-19, which is an account of the Tribulation period, is only consistent with a pretribulational rapture. While this is an argument from

silence, and cannot be definitive by itself, it provides powerful support when used in conjunction with the multitude of other arguments.

- 2) **The purpose of the Tribulation relates to the nation of Israel and the world (i.e., Gentile nations), not the Church*.** In Scripture, God gives two clear purposes for the Tribulation.

For Israel, the Tribulation is a time when God is refining the Jewish nation (Jer30:1-11), purging it of unbelievers (Ezek20:33-38), and bringing the remnant to faith in Jesus as Messiah (Deut4:27-31; Jer24:6-7; 31:33-34; Hos5:15-6:2; Zech12:10; 13:8-9), so that at the end of the 7-year period "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom11:26). The Tribulation is called, "the time of **Jacob's** trouble" (Jer30:7) and said to be especially for the Jews and Jerusalem (Dan9:24).

For the Gentile nations, the Tribulation is a time of judgment for their rebellion against God (2Thess2:11-12), their rejection of Christ (Jn3:36), and their persecution of Israel (Jer30:11,16; Joel3:2; Cp., Gen12:3). Remember the common refrain after the judgments in the Book of Revelation, speaking of "those that dwell upon the earth", that they "repented not" (Rev9:20; 16:9).

Thus, God's two stated purposes for the Tribulation are 1) to bring Israel as a nation to repentance and faith in Jesus as Messiah, and 2) to judge the Gentile nations for refusing to repent and believe in Christ. Neither of these purposes involve the Church, so there is no reason for the Church to be present on earth. In fact, since the Church is (by definition) comprised of those who have put already repented and believed in Christ, there is every reason for her to be exempted from the Tribulation. The Church may be (certainly is) guilty of many sins, but not the sins God is judging during the Tribulation (Rom8:1).

***What is the Church?** The Church did not exist in the OT or even in the period covered in the Gospels; Jesus first revealed that He would build His Church in Matthew 16:18, but spoke of it as still future at that time. The Church is a unique entity in which individual Jews and Gentiles are united into the Body/Bride of Christ (Eph3:4-10) without distinction (Gal3:26-28). Formation of the Body of Christ, the Church, began on the day of Pentecost (Act2), individual members are added by Spirit baptism (Act1:5; 1Cor12:13), and it will be completed at the rapture (Rom11:25); it is distinct from both Israel and the Gentiles (1Cor10:32). The NT uses the expressions "in Christ", "in Jesus", "in Jesus Christ", "in Him", "in the Lord" and "Christian" as technical terms referring to the Church, which are believers between Pentecost and the rapture.

- 3) **The Tribulation period is a time of God's wrath poured out, but the Church is promised exemption from the wrath of God.** The Tribulation period is a major subject of revelation in the OT prophets as well as the NT. It is synonymous with "the day of the LORD". The principal characteristic of the day of the LORD is that it is a time of judgment when God pours out His wrath upon the earth (Isa13:6-16; Zeph1:7-18). Consistent with this, Revelation 6-19 repeatedly emphasizes that the seal, trumpet and bowl judgments are the wrath of God (Rev6:16-17*; 11:18; 15:1,7; 16:1,19). Revelation 6:16-17 is particularly important. It makes clear that the wrath of God starts with the seal judgments at the very beginning of the Tribulation. In Isaiah's major passage on the day of the LORD (Isa13:6-16), he includes events of the first-half of the Tribulation (vv8,13) as the wrath of God (Cp., Matt24:8; Rev6:14). This is important, since rapture positions other than the pretribulation view must argue that the judgments of the first half of the Tribulation are not the wrath of God.

***Greek Note on Rev6:17.** After the 6th seal judgment is executed, John indicates that "the great day of [the Lamb's] wrath is come" (Rev6:17). Much debate has ensued regarding the tense of the verb "is come". The Greek verb is *elthen*. It is in the aorist tense, which normally has no time significance, but here it is in the indicative mood; when this occurs it always refers to a past action and not a future one. Thus, John's statement that "[the Lamb's] wrath is come" is a summary of the preceding 6 seal judgments—they are the wrath of God.

Thus, the entire 7-year Tribulation period is God pouring out His wrath upon the earth. However, the Church is promised exemption from the wrath of God (Rom5:9; 1Thess1:10; 5:9; Rev3:10). Revelation 3:10 is particularly clear, the Lord Jesus giving the promise that "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", where "from" is the Greek preposition *ek*, meaning 'out of' (from which we get our English prefix 'ex'); the promise is to keep the Church 'out of' the very "hour" (i.e., time of) the Tribulation; this will be accomplished by rapturing the Church before the Tribulation begins. For this reason, the NT teaches that the coming of the day of the LORD cannot be predicted (1Thess5:2; 2Pet3:10).

- 4) **Previous divine judgments teach that God always removes His righteous people before bringing His judgment.** In 2 Peter 2:5-9, Peter speaks of the judgment that God is to bring upon the ungodly. In doing so, however, he calls attention to the important truth that, "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" (v9).

To illustrate this principle, Peter cites both God's world-wide judgment by means of the Flood in the days of Noah (vv4-5) and His destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv6-8). In God's judgment of the Flood, two groups of people were delivered: Noah and his family were divinely preserved through the Flood in the safety of the ark, and Enoch was translated to heaven (Gen5:23; Heb11:5) prior to the beginning of the Flood (note that Enoch was "raptured" *pre-Flood*). By analogy, Israel will be divinely preserved through the Tribulation period, with the 144,000 being divinely sealed (Rev7:1-8) and the believing remnant being hidden in the safety of Bozrah (Isa63:1-6; Rev12:13-17), and the Church will be raptured to heaven before the Tribulation begins. In the case of the destruction of Sodom, the angels charged with carrying out God's judgment pleaded with "righteous Lot" (v7) to depart from Sodom, and finally had to physically drag him out of the city, informing him that they could not carry out God's judgment until he was removed (Gen19:22).

- 5) **The Spirit-indwelt Church presently restrains the Antichrist, such that he cannot be revealed until the Church is removed.** Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians was written as a response to a query that church had sent to the Apostle. The Thessalonians were troubled by a letter they had received, purportedly from Paul (but actually a forgery), alleging that they had entered into "the day of the LORD" (2Thess2:2). They were troubled by this since Paul had previously taught them that the rapture of the Church would happen before the Tribulation period (1Thess4:13-5:9); if this allegation were true, and the day of the LORD had indeed begun, that meant the believers in Thessalonica had been **left behind!** It should be noted that the believers in Thessalonica were undergoing intense (albeit local) persecution (1Thess3:2-4), so that it was no doubt tempting for them to believe that the Tribulation had begun.

Paul's reply was to immediately remind them of what he had previously taught them (2Thess2:5); namely, that the Antichrist cannot even be

"revealed", which begins the Tribulation (Dan9:27), until after an event he calls "the falling away" (2Thess2:3). The Greek noun translated "falling away" is *apostasia*, transliterated as 'apostasy' in some English versions. The correct translation of *apostasia* is 'departure'; exactly what kind of departure is in view depends upon context, and can just as likely mean a physical departure as it does a departure from the faith (i.e., apostasy). It is interesting that all English translations before the KJV rendered *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as "departure", whereas most after the KJV render it "falling away" or something which similarly implies the departure is religious in nature. There is nothing in the context of 2 Thessalonians 2, however, that demands the departure be non-physical.

Furthermore, in the Greek text there is an explicit definite article in conjunction with *apostasia*, so that the best translation is not "a falling away", but "the departure". The use of the definite article means that Paul is referring to a specific event that is clearly known to the Thessalonians. Since Paul's first epistle to them included the most detailed revelation of the rapture of the Church in the NT, and in fact mentions the rapture in every chapter (1Thess1:9-10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-17; 5:1-11), while not one reference to an apostasy or departure from the faith occurs, contextually demands that the specific departure to which Paul is referring is the rapture. The context of 2 Thessalonians 2 also supports this, since the rapture, referred to as "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto him", introduces the chapter (v1). Thus, the evidence is overwhelming that the departure Paul holds out as necessarily taking place **before** "the day of the LORD" and the revealing of the Antichrist is the rapture of the Church. Thus, 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is the most explicit teaching of the Pre-Trib rapture in the Bible.

- 6) **Because the NT teaches that the return of the Lord is an imminent, the rapture must take place before the Tribulation begins.** The NT teaches the believer that the day of the Lord's return cannot be predicted (Matt24:36; Mk13:32) and may happen at any moment (Philip4:5; Jas5:7-9); for this reason we are exhorted to be ready and watching for it at all times (Matt24:44; Mk13:33; Luk12:40; 21:36; 1Thess5:6; 1Pet4:7; Rev22:20). This is the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ. Imminency does not mean that the return of the Lord will occur soon, but that it can occur at any time. Even Paul, when teaching on the rapture, always counted himself as one who would be included in the rapture—he believed it could (and likely would) occur during his own lifetime (cf. 1Cor15:51-52; 1Thess4:17).

For imminency to be true, there can be no event prophesied in Scripture that must occur before the return of the Lord. For this reason, when the NT speaks of the imminent return of the Lord, it cannot have the 2nd coming of Christ (which happens at the end of the 7-year Tribulation) in mind. We are at least 7 years away from the 2nd coming (Dan9:27), so there is no sense in which it can be 'imminent'. Thus, when the NT speaks of the imminent return of the Lord, it must refer to the Lord's return to rapture the Church (Jn14:3; 1Thess4:16-17)—but the rapture is only imminent if it is to take place before the Tribulation begins.

Consistent with this, believers in the NT are always exhorted to look for the coming of Christ (Philip3:20; 1Thess1:10), not Antichrist.

- 7) **Expectation of an imminent return of the Lord is intended to comfort Christians and motivate holy living.** The Lord Jesus gave to His disciples (Jn14:1), and the Apostle Paul gave to the persecuted believers at Thessalonica (1Thess4:13,18), the hope of the rapture to be a source of comfort to them. Elsewhere Paul referred to it as "our blessed hope" (Tit2:13). Only if the rapture is pretribulational can it be a source of comfort for the Christian. On the other hand, if the

rapture takes place after a minimum of 3.5 years of tribulation and suffering the likes of which the world has never before experienced (Matt24:21-22), and possibly as many as 7 years, what comfort would the Christian receive from knowing the time of the rapture was drawing near? Such knowledge would not comfort the Christian, it would terrify him! All rapture views other than the Pre-Trib position would cause the believer to dread the return of the Lord, whereas the Bible teaches us to long for it (Rev22:17).

Finally, knowing the rapture can occur at any time is powerful motivation for the believer to live moment-by-moment a holy, sanctified life (Matt24:48-50; 1Jn3:2-3). The doctrine of the rapture of the Church was not given to merely satisfy our intellectual curiosity about future events, but to change the way we live today in light of our knowledge of future events. If the rapture does not even enter into the thinking of the Christian, he has not understood or taken seriously God's purpose in the revelation of it to us.

HOW CLOSE IS THE RAPTURE? The NT is clear that no man knows the day or the hour of the Lord's return (Matt24:36), and even that it will occur at an unexpected time (Matt24:44; 1Thess5:2; 2Pet3:10). Since the rapture is an imminent event, there is no direct sign that it is near (i.e., no prophecy that must be fulfilled prior to it). However, there can be many signs that the Tribulation period is near, since it is the subject of a great deal of very specific prophecy in both the NT and OT. Such signs of the rapid approach of the Tribulation period include: 1) Jews from throughout the world being regathered to the land of Israel (Isa11:11-16; Ezek20:33-38; 22:17-22; 37:11-14); 2) an effort by them to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Matt24:15; 2Thess2:3-4; Rev11:1-2); 3) revival of the ancient Roman empire (i.e., a united Europe) to world dominance (Dan2:40-45; 7:7-8,19-28) with Antichrist as its leader (Dan9:26); 4) a global economy (Rev13:16-17); and 5) world efforts to broker a peace treaty with Israel (Isa28:14-22; Dan9:27). Since the rapture of the Church precedes the start of the Tribulation period, signs that these events are near imply that the rapture is even nearer!