

Rapture: When Does it Happen?

When I was 21, I surrendered to the Lord. I began to voraciously take in the Bible and all doctrines connected to it, especially what it said about the end times. I read every book I could find on the end times that promoted a pretribulation rapture. I was convinced the end was coming soon and the rapture would mark the beginning of the last seven years spoken of by Daniel. A few years later, I heard a message from the late Walter Martin, the original “Bible Answer Man.” He was my mentor. He taught me a balance of word and Spirit. He taught me apologetics. Dr. Martin presented a case for a post-tribulation rapture. I was intrigued. I then read a book by George Ladd called *The Blessed Hope*. These two sources convinced me that the Bible teaches that the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation, not the beginning. Once embracing this view, I discovered that those who disagreed became angry; those were fighting words. This took me by surprise. By this time, I was in Bible college studying to be a pastor. I learned that there were many other views concerning eschatology (the study of last things) that were very different from the pre and post views. Pretribulation rapture advocates and post-tribulation rapture proponents were actually very similar in their eschatological views; they were like cousins, with the rest of the views being very distant relatives. Why would cousins be so angry with each other? Isn't this a doctrine that we can agree to disagree agreeably on? I discovered that for some it was not. I have had people leave the church when they learned I didn't believe in a pretribulation rapture. So, I want to present a case for what I believe. All I ask is that you examine it according to the Scriptures. Be like the Bereans who didn't go by their feelings or their traditions, but rather “received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:11)

What does the Bible teach? Does the Bible ever say when the rapture will take place? Does it specifically give any indication for whether the rapture comes before or after the tribulation? When considering the case for a pretribulation rapture, a few passages and ideas are brought up. First, we will examine those passages to see if there is a single Bible verse that ever teaches the rapture takes place before the tribulation. Then we will see if there are any passages that specifically teach that the rapture takes place at the end of the tribulation. Finally, we will look at what the early church believed.

A Case for a Pretribulation Rapture

Revelation 3:10 is usually cited to prove the rapture takes place before the tribulation. It states, “Because you have kept My word of perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of the testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.” This is specifically a promise to the church in Philadelphia. It is a promise only to those in Philadelphia who “have kept My word of perseverance.” The passage says nothing about a rapture. The Greek construction *τηρήσω ἐκ* (to keep from) is only found in one other passage in the New Testament. In John 17:15 we see *τηρήσης αὐτούς ἐκ* (keep them from) in Jesus' great prayer for the church. Jesus specifically prays, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them away from the evil one.” Notice in the prayer “to keep from” specifically does not refer to taking God's people out of the world (rapture), but rather to

protect them from Satan. Revelation teaches us that God will protect His people. Revelation 7:3; 9:4; 14:1 speaks of God sealing the servants of God, before He pours out His punishment on the earth. This is a common practice found in the Bible. Ezekiel 9:4-6 reveals God protecting His faithful with a mark or seal before He judges the unfaithful in Jerusalem. In Exodus 12:7,13 we see God protecting His people with a mark on their doorposts when He poured out judgment on Egypt. 2 Corinthians 1:22 describes the seal of God as the Holy Spirit. In the cases of the flood in Genesis 6-8, the Ten Plagues in Exodus 7-11 and the punishment of His own people using the Babylonians, we see God protecting His people in the midst of judgment without taking them out or rapturing them. It appears by these examples and the prayer of Jesus in John 17 that it is highly unlikely that Revelation 3:10 teaches a pretribulation rapture.

Some have turned to Luke 21:36 to prove their point. It states, "But stay alert at all times, praying that you will have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." The "all these things that are going to take place" points back to the tribulation described in verses 10-28. But in this chapter Jesus says of the same people He is talking to in verse 36 that they will see all these things. He states that in verse 16-18 some of them will be put to death (16), they will be hated by all people (17) and then gives the promise that "not a hair of your head will perish." Notice the people Jesus gives the promise of verse 36 to are also promised they will suffer. Also, notice that the promise that not a hair on your head will perish does not necessarily mean they won't be killed. *To escape* does not mean they will be raptured; it simply means they will be protected by God if they pray. The passage says nothing about the rapture.

Others have pointed to the "no wrath" promises of God to the church. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 it says Jesus "rescues us from the wrath to come." There are many other passages like this. I fully agree that this is a promise to all God's people. If you are a believer, you will not experience God's wrath. But the promise is to *all* believers, not just those who believe before the rapture. Those who get saved during the tribulation have this promise just as much as us today, which means protection from God's wrath does not mean taken out of world before the tribulation. The mark God gives ensures us this protection. Revelation 9:4 is an example of how the demon locusts can't harm believers who have God's mark on them.

Others have appealed to the idea that the church is not mentioned in Revelation after chapter 3. An argument from silence is a very precarious argument, especially since we see the saints are mentioned in chapter 13 where the beast overcomes them. John always uses the word *saint* for believers in Christ in the book of Revelation (e.g. 9:4; 19:9). It makes sense that the church would have to go underground once heavy persecution began. Others have appealed to the Jewish wedding as proof. But the wedding of the Lamb isn't mentioned until chapter 19, which does not mention exactly when it takes place; it just says it has come and it is a blessing to be invited to. All of God's saints are the bride of Christ, not just those saved before the tribulation. All believers will take part in the wedding. A marriage tradition by some in Judaism is not a Biblical proof for a pretribulation rapture.

One last argument is that Jesus comes like a thief in the night. It would not be unexpected if we were around to see the antichrist, etc. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 helps us to understand this. Verse two states, "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord is coming just like a thief in the night." Notice it refers to the Day of the Lord, which speaks of the final judgment of God on the world (Zephaniah 1; Amos 5:18-20). Verse 4 tells us what Paul means: "But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, so that the day would overtake you like a thief." Notice it only comes like a thief to those who are not watching and alert. I don't know of any other evidence used widely by pretribulation advocates. None of the above examples ever state that the rapture takes place before the tribulation. They are all inferences, which I think I have shown are not actually inferences. Let's see if there are any Bible passages that teach the rapture will take place at the end of the tribulation.

A Case for a Post-tribulation Rapture

First, I want to compare five passages that seem to be referring to the same event. Two of these passages are talking about the rapture according to those who believe in a pretribulation rapture; therefore, if the other three are referring to the same event, we can see actual Scripture that states when the rapture takes place. Let's examine 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; Matthew 24:1-51; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Revelation 14:14-20. When all of these passages are compared, we see several things in common with them. There are angels, trumpets, shouts, Jesus coming in the clouds, and the gathering of believers to be with Jesus. Let's observe the passages one at a time.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, which is the classic passage on the rapture, which everyone who believes in a rapture (both posttrib and pretrib), believes this passage is referring to the rapture, states:

...For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will 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 will rise first. Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we will always be with the Lord.

Notice the coming of the Lord in the clouds. The word for "coming" is *parousia* (παρουσία); this is a technical, eschatological term used to refer to Christ's second coming, *second parousia*. Either this passage is not referring to the second coming and is not really a "coming," though it uses the word "coming," or it is the second coming of Christ. Notice also that the coming of the Lord is accompanied with a shout (it is not a secret, silent rapture), angels, the trumpet of God, the clouds, and the gathering of believers to be with the Lord. Finally, notice the passage does not give any indication of whether the rapture comes before or after the tribulation.

The second passage to consider is 1 Corinthians 15:51-57. It states:

Behold, I am telling you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will 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 will be changed...

This passage doesn't mention Jesus or angels, but once again, all believers who believe in a rapture (both posttrib and pretrib), believe this passage is referring to the rapture. It mentions what happens to our bodies at His coming. Our bodies are transformed into new, indestructible bodies. Not everyone will sleep; sleep is a euphemism for death. Not all believers will die, because some will get raptured at the second coming of Christ and receive new bodies without dying. This passage does give an indication of when the rapture will take place; it occurs at "the last trumpet." Remember that there is a trumpet mentioned in the 1 Thessalonians 4 passage. The trumpet is the last one. But what trumpets are being referred to if this one is the last one? Revelation 8-11 refers to seven trumpets in the tribulation period. Revelation 11:15-19 speaks of the seventh or last trumpet, bringing us right to the end where "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever." Revelation is not strictly chronological, though it follows the basic idea of moving from the beginning of the tribulation to the end. It seems to move to the end at each cycle of seals (5-8), trumpets (8-11) and bowls of God's wrath (15-16), with interludes in between each cycle, seeming to circle back at each new cycle (see the end at 6:12-17; 11:15-19 and 16:17-21 each mentioning flashes of lightning, sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake – 8:5; 11:19; 16:18). Whatever one believes about the chronology of Revelation, the last trumpet does not take place before the tribulation; it at the very earliest takes place before the final bowls of God's wrath, which appear to only last a day. The seven bowls of wrath cannot be too long, because of the devastation they bring (everything in the sea dies), and because 18:8 says the plagues come "in one day." 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 strongly indicates that the rapture doesn't take place until the end of the tribulation. Remember, there are no passages that say the rapture takes place before the tribulation, and this is the first (more to come) to indicate it comes at the end.

Matthew 24:1-51 is perhaps the strongest indicator of when the rapture takes place. This passage is the end times according to Jesus. He probably knows what He is talking about. Many pretribulation rapture advocates state that this passage is not talking about the rapture. Let's look at the passage, comparing it with the first two passages, and see what it says. It is helpful to outline Matthew 24:

- I. Introduction 1-3: Preliminaries in understanding
- II. Events leading up to the end 4-14: birth pains
 - A. Catastrophes 4-8
 - B. Persecution 9
 - C. A falling away 10-13: due to persecution, false prophets or selfishness
 - D. Gospel preached to the whole world
- III. Events of the end 15-28
 - A. Abomination of Desolation 15-20: Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; 2 Thess 2:1-12; Rev 13.
 - B. Great tribulation 21-22

C. Coming of Christ 23-28: *parousia* also in v.3, 30, 37 and 42.

IV. The very end 29-31

V. Discerning the times 32-41: You can know the times, but not dates 1 Th 5:1-4

VI. Be ready 42-51

Matthew 24:29-31 describes the rapture:

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet blast, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Notice the coming of Jesus (*parousia*) in the clouds, with angels, a trumpet, and the gathering of the elect. This passage describes the same events as the 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 passages. The detail is too specific. The *parousia* is mentioned throughout this passage to refer to the same event – this one. The *parousia* is mentioned in vss. 27, 30, 37, 39, 42, and 44. Verses 40-41 describe the coming mentioned in verse 39: “At that time there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left.” It is special pleading to say this *parousia* is not the *parousia* mentioned in the rapture, when it is described exactly like it. Who hasn’t read or seen the Left Behind series where some are taken and others left behind? Of course this passage is referring to the rapture. But notice how the passage begins: “But immediately after the tribulation of those days...” What tribulation is it referring to? The same one described in verse 21: “For then there will be a great tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will again.” Matthew 24 specifically describes the rapture as taking place after the great tribulation. The *parousia* refers to the second coming of Christ. Some go to great lengths to find a possible loophole, but why are they looking for a loophole? Is it because they are basing their beliefs on clear passages and attempting to smooth out unclear ones, or is it the opposite? This passage seems very clear. It specifically states the rapture takes place at the end of the tribulation. No passage specifically speaks of the rapture taking place before the tribulation. Why not embrace what seems to be obvious?

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is our next passage that declares when the rapture takes place. This passage tells us of the man of lawlessness, also known as the beast in Revelation 13 and the Antichrist in 1 John 2:18. It speaks of the abomination of desolation (Matthew 24:15; Daniel 9:27), the apostasy (Matthew 24:10), and the coming (*parousia*) of Christ. Here is how the passage begins: “Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, regarding the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him...” Paul states that he is going to tell them about the *parousia* and the rapture – our gathering together to Him. He comforts them, because they were told by some that they missed it. Paul’s point is that they did not miss it because it will not come until the apostasy, the revealing of the antichrist and the abomination of desolation

comes first (3-8). He concludes with verse 8: "Then that lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will eliminate with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming." Notice the Antichrist is destroyed at the *parousia* of Jesus. The *parousia* that Paul associated with the rapture in verse 1 takes place at the end of the tribulation.

One last passage needs to be looked at. The book of Revelation is the most complete book on the end times in the Bible. It gives incredible details concerning what happens in the last seven years before the second coming of Jesus in chapter 19, where Jesus throws the antichrist and false prophet into the lake of fire. Since Revelation is the most complete book on eschatology, you would expect it to mention the rapture. Some say it can be found in 4:1 where a voice calls John to "come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things." Obviously, this passage says nothing about the rapture and is only referring to John receiving revelations from God. There is no rapture mentioned at the seals, but at the end of the trumpets and before the bowls we see something that could be the rapture. Revelation 14:14-16 seems to describe the rapture:

Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, with a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling out with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe." Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

In this passage we see Jesus (the son of man) in the clouds reaping a harvest. In verses 17-20 we see another reaping of those left and thrown into the wine press of God's wrath. It makes sense that the first reaping is referring to believers (the rapture), and the second reaping is the unbelievers. The final seven bowls of wrath mentioned in chapters 15-16 that appear to take place within a day's time, could be after the rapture or it could be describing the end in a general sense. I think what we see here is that the rapture takes place when Jesus comes in the clouds; He gathers up the believers and then the bowls of wrath are poured out. Once the bowls are complete, He comes down with us to rule for a thousand years on earth. One might ask, "Why the rapture then?" First, we would be avoiding the final bowls of wrath, and second, it fits the ancient practice of when a king arrived at a city. Before the king arrived, the people of the city would fix up the road and go out to meet the king to bring him into the city; that is what we will be doing when we are raptured – meeting the King of kings to bring Him to Jerusalem.

From an examination of the Scriptures, we see five main passages discussing the rapture; four of them strongly indicate that the rapture takes place at the end of the tribulation, and one of them gives no indication one way or the other. Church history bears witness to the view that the rapture takes place at the end of the tribulation. In the first three centuries of the church, if anyone mentioned the rapture and end times, they supported a post-tribulation rapture view. They were premillennial (they correctly believed that Jesus reigns for 1000 years in Jerusalem when He returns), and they believed in a post-tribulation rapture (the rapture takes place at the

end of the tribulation and before the 1000-year reign). This is true of Papias (a disciple of John), *The Didache* (probably late 1st century), Justin Martyr (100-165), Irenaeus (130-202), Hippolytus (d.235), Tertullian (160-220), Commodianus (240), and Lactantius (260-330). If anyone is interested, I have all these sources and would love to share them with them; as you know, my Ph.D. is in Historical Theology. With Constantine and Augustine, the church began to believe in a form of amillennialism. We have no record of anyone ever believing in a pretribulation rapture until the 18th century. A good rule of thumb for doctrine is that if it is new, it is probably not true. Are we to believe that no one grasped this idea for almost 1800 years, and then after Darby announced it and Scofield and the prophecy conferences popularized it, we finally discovered the truth, even though there is no Scripture that states a rapture takes place before the tribulation and several passages state it occurs at the end?

I do not believe that Christians should divide over when they think the rapture will occur. Our church has people holding both views, even in the leadership as high up as elders. We can agree to disagree agreeably. We believe very similarly in other aspects of the end times. We believe in a literal Antichrist. We believe God has a plan for Israel, and all Israel will be saved during the tribulation. We believe in the rapture. We believe in a literal 1000-year reign of Christ in Jerusalem. We believe Jesus is coming back, and it could be soon. We simply disagree on whether the rapture comes before or at the end of the tribulation. I challenge you to ask yourself why you believe what you believe. Is it because you are convinced by Scripture, or is it because you don't want to go through the tribulation? God has allowed His people to experience horrendous things in the past including major persecution. The pretribulation rapture sounds too much like an American doctrine rather than a Biblical one. But I admit that I could be wrong. I fully respect other views. I am open to evidence. I simply ask, "Please show me one passage of Scripture that says the rapture takes place before the tribulation."