

Defending The Pre-Trib Rapture

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Somebody asked me a great question the other day. "Does Scripture actually promise a Pre-Tribulation Rapture, or is it just an opinion passed along from teacher to student?" Then he challenged me to cite even one Bible verse that would lead a person to believe the Pre-Trib position if they hadn't already heard about it from some Bible teacher. He said that in all his studies he's not been able to find one. Let's see if he's right.

First, Some General Points

The Rapture is not another name for the Second Coming. As 1 Thes. 4:15-17 and John 14:1-3 explain, the Rapture is an unscheduled secret event where Jesus comes part way to Earth to meet His Church in the air and take us to be with Him where He now is. I say unscheduled and secret because its specific timing will remain unknown until it actually happens. On the other hand, The Second Coming is a scheduled public event where Jesus comes all the way to Earth with His Church to establish a Kingdom here. I say scheduled and public because the general time of His coming will be known on Earth over 3 1/2 years in advance, and public because everyone on Earth will be able to

witness His arrival. Matt. 24:29-30 says it will happen shortly after the Great Tribulation has ended and all the nations will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds in the sky.

Membership in the Church and therefore participation in the Rapture is contingent upon having personally accepted the Lord's death as payment in full for your sins. While His death actually purchased full pardons for everyone, we each have to personally ask to have ours activated. Everyone who asks for salvation receives an unconditional, irrevocable "Yes!" (Matt. 7:7-8, John 3:16, Ephes. 1:13-14) For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. (2 Corinth. 1:20)

It's Greek To Me

And finally, although cynics can truthfully say that the word Rapture doesn't appear in any passage of Scripture, the statement is not correct in its intent. Rapture is a word of Latin origin, not Hebrew or Greek, the languages of the Bible. (One of the earliest translations of the Bible was into Latin, and the word rapture comes from there.) Its Greek equivalent is *harpazo*, which is found in the Greek text of 1 Thes. 4:17. When they're translated into English, both words mean "to be caught up, or snatched away." *Harpazo*, the word Paul actually used, comes from roots that mean, "to raise from the ground" and "take for oneself" and hints that in doing so the Lord is eagerly claiming us for Himself. So while the Latin word doesn't appear in our Bibles, the event it describes certainly does. There's a similar situation with the word Lucifer, also of Latin origin. It doesn't appear in any of the original texts either, but no one would be naive enough to deny the existence of Satan on such a flimsy basis. With that introduction, let's go first to the best known of the Rapture passages.

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thes. 4:15-17)

Most of us are very familiar with these verses. But notice they don't tell you when the rapture happens, only that it does. Notice also that the Lord doesn't come all the way to Earth. We meet Him in the clouds and then according to John 14:1-3 go back with Him to where He came from. If this was the 2nd coming, He would be coming here to be where we are, not coming to take us there to be where He is. Paul described the same event in 1 Cor 15:51-52. In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye the dead in Christ will rise and the living will be transformed. There he said that he was disclosing a secret, but the resurrection of the dead was not a secret. It can be found through out the Old Testament. The secret was that some would not die, but would be taken alive into the Lord's presence following an instantaneous transformation. The rapture happens fast. In one instant we're walking on Earth and in the very next, we're in the Kingdom.

By the way, don't try to use the trumpet reference in verse 52 to pin the timing of the rapture to some other event. Since both the Corinthian passage and the one from

Thessalonians describe the same things, it's safe to assume that the term last trump refers to the fact that the trumpet call of God from 1 Thes. 4:16 will signal the end of the Church Age, at which time the Church will disappear from Earth. So these two references both say that one generation of humans won't die but will be suddenly changed from our earthly form to our heavenly one. And since both Matt. 24:31 (they'll gather His elect from one end of the heavens to the other) and Rev. 17:14 (with Him will be His called, chosen, and faithful followers) say that we'll be with the Lord when He returns, this has to happen sometime before the 2nd Coming. And it can't be just the resurrected believers coming back with Him because the Rapture passages above say that we'll be changed at the same time as the dead are raised.

So When Does This Happen?

In the New Testament, the clearest indication we get in the timing department is found in 1 Thes. 1:9-10. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

The Greek word translated “from” in this passage is “apo.” Translated literally, it means we're to be rescued from the time, the place, or any relation to God's wrath. It denotes both departure and separation. This is supported by 1 Thes. 5:9 that declares, “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Some folks are fond of pointing out that you can't use God's wrath interchangeably with the Great Tribulation. They're not the same, they say. And they're right, the two terms are not synonymous. The Great Tribulation is 3 1/2 years long and begins in Rev. 11-13. God's wrath is much longer, beginning in Rev. 6, as verse 17 explains. Post-trib. and pre-wrath rapture advocates try to deny this but the Scripture is clear. The time of God's wrath begins with the Seal Judgments. The Bowl Judgments that come later don't begin the time of His wrath, they conclude it. (Rev. 15:1) Being rescued from the time, the place and any relation to God's Wrath means the Church has to disappear before Rev. 6, and that's why we believe the Rapture takes place in Rev. 4 and the Church is the group of believers in view in heaven in Rev.5.

You Be The Judge

Now let's apply my questioner's litmus test. Could a believer, sitting alone on the proverbial desert isle with nothing but a Bible and with no pre-conceived ideas, conclude that there's a pre-trib Rapture just from reading about it, or could he only be led into this position by first hearing someone teach him about it? Well, From Isaiah 13:9-13 and Amos 5:18-20, he would have learned that God is going to judge the Earth for it's sins in a terrible time called the Day of the Lord when He'll pour out His wrath on mankind. Reading Matt. 24:21-22 would have told him that this time of judgment would be so bad that if the Lord didn't put a stop to it no one would survive. But the Lord will put a stop to it by returning in power and glory. Since he would know that the Lord hasn't returned yet, he would know that God's wrath is still in the future.

When he got to 1 Thes. 1:9-10 he would see a pretty clear statement. Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath. In the “who, what, where, when, and why” methodology of the investigative reporter he would have the Who, (Jesus) the what, (rescues us) and the when (the time of the coming wrath). Reading on he would come to 1 Thes. 4:15:17 and get the where (from Earth to the clouds) and in 1 Thes. 5:9 the why (because we’re not appointed to wrath). From there he would logically conclude that since we’ll be rescued around the time of the coming wrath and since we’re not appointed to wrath, our rescue has to precede it.

He could also answer another of the investigative reporter’s questions in 1 Thes. 4:15:17 and that’s how it would happen. The Lord himself will come down from Heaven into our atmosphere and suddenly snatch us away from Earth to join Him there. In chapter 5 he would learn that he would never know the exact timing of this event but only that it would precede the coming wrath. Of course there are many more passages I could reference but I think I’ve made my point and answered the question. In fact I’ll go one step further.

I believe that since our hypothetical reader has no one to persuade him differently, he would assume that what he’s reading is to be taken literally. And if that’s the case, then the pre-trib position is the only conclusion he could logically come to, because every other position requires a moderate to massive re-interpretation of Scripture. I contend that left alone to work this out with only the Holy Spirit as his guide he would expect to be raptured before the wrath of God begins in Rev. 6. You see, God didn’t write the Bible to confuse us, but to inform us. It’s mankind that’s gotten everything all mixed up. If you give the Holy Spirit a clear minded student, uncontaminated by man’s opinions and prejudices, He would bring that person to the understanding of the rapture that’s most consistent with a literal interpretation of Scripture. And that requires a pre-trib rapture.

But Wait, There’s More

While we’re on the topic, there’s another issue that points to a pre-trib Rapture and it comes to us in the form of a clue in 1 Thes. 4:15, right at the beginning of the Rapture passage. Verse 15 opens with the phrase “According to the Lord’s own word.” There simply is no place in the New Testament where Jesus speaks of some being resurrected and some others being transformed to meet the Lord in the air. He never said anything like that, nor does he even imply such a thing. Those who believe they see it in Matt. 24:40-41 first have to ignore the fact that Jesus was explaining events on Earth on the actual day of His return, which would place the Rapture after the 2nd Coming, something no one believes. They also have to ignore the fact that in Matt. 24:40-41 both believers and non-believers are sent somewhere, believers being received unto Him, while non-believers are sent away. You have to research the Greek words translated “taken” (paralambano) and “left” (alphiemi) to realize this, but when you do you’ll see that the English is misleading. No Rapture view includes the disposition of non-believers, nor does it even mention them.

By the way, this is a great example of why the literal, historical, grammatical interpretation is so important. Our Bible was mostly written in Hebrew and Greek. Every translation relies on the movement of words from one language to another. This process doesn't always produce a perfect fit, and so learned men have to make allowances for this and exercise their own judgment from time to time. But men are not perfect. We all have our biases. When it's an important issue where you want an exact meaning it's always a good idea to double-check their work. Fortunately we have an incredible tool in the Strong's Concordance. It contains every Hebrew and Greek word in the Bible with their primary and secondary meanings, how often each word appears in the Bible and what meanings are used in each appearance. You can compare these with the meaning the translators used and see if you agree with their treatment of the passage. By doing this with Matt. 24:40-41, you'll find that the primary meaning of *paralambano* is to receive and the primary meaning of *alphiemi* is to send away. People with a post-trib disposition read 1 Thes. 4:15, and then turned to Matt. 24:40-41 where they saw one group being "taken" and another group being "left" after the end of the Great Tribulation. Assuming that these were the Lord's own words Paul was referring to, they stopped there. They had seen what they wanted to see.

In actuality Matt. 24:40-41 is most likely a preview of the Sheep and Goat judgment of Tribulation survivors. The word taken (received) refers to believers going live into the Kingdom, and the word left (sent away) applies to non-believers who are sent to the place prepared for the Devil and his angels. (Matt 25:31-46) Of course none of this pertains to our desert island reader above. The verses I used there are clear enough that they don't require any research into the original language. So he wouldn't need a Strong's Concordance, just his Bible.

What's Your Point?

So if Jesus never taught about the Rapture, to which of the "Lord's own words" was Paul referring? Some dismiss the phrase, saying that Paul was speaking of a conversation he had with the Lord that doesn't appear in Scripture. But I think we deserve a better answer than that. Remember, 1st Thessalonians was probably Paul's first written communication, undertaken in 51AD. Depending on whose opinion you accept, Matthew's Gospel was either just being written or was still nearly 10 years away. Those who give it an early date say it was written to the Jews in Jerusalem and may even have been written in Hebrew. In any case neither it nor any other Gospel was yet in wide distribution. (Mark's Gospel, the other candidate for earliest one written, doesn't contain an equivalent to Matt 24:40-41.) So if Paul was referring to Scripture, as I believe he was, it had to be the Old Testament. Yes, like everything else in God's plan, you'll find hints of the Rapture even in the Old Testament.

Look at this passage from Isaiah 26:19-21. But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead. Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by.

See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins.

Notice how the pronouns change from second person when God speaks of His people to third person when He speaks of the people of the Earth. It means the two groups are different. Those called “my people” are told to “enter your rooms” (the rooms of John 14:1-3?) because the others, called “the people of Earth” are going to be punished for their sins in a period of time called His Wrath. Sound familiar? (Note: the Hebrew word translated “go” in the phrase “Go my people” is translated “come” in some translations, recalling the command to John in Revelation 4, “Come up here!” But the word has another primary meaning and it’s my favorite. It means vanish. “Vanish, my people!” Yes we will.)

Not by any stretch of the imagination has this passage been literally fulfilled. It’s an End Times prophecy that promises a resurrection of the dead and hiding of God’s people while God’s Wrath is unleashed on the people of Earth for their sins. And it was written 2750 years ago. The hiding of the Jews in the desert on Earth at the beginning of the Great Tribulation (Rev. 12:14) cannot be considered as a fulfillment of this passage because no resurrection accompanies it. (The resurrection of Old Testament believers takes place at the end of the Great Tribulation. (Daniel 12:2)) Of course, no one knows for sure that this is the passage Paul referred to, but as evidence of its influence on him, let’s compare it with what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4-5.

Isaiah : But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.

Paul: The dead in Christ will rise first .

Isaiah : Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by.

Paul: After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Isaiah : See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins.

Paul: While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

The wording is a little different, but it sure looks to me like they’re describing the same event.

And Still More

There are other sound theological reasons why the Church will be raptured before the End Times judgments begin. One is that the Lord seems to keep Israel and the Church separate, never dealing with both at the same time (Acts 15: 13-18) If the primary purpose of Daniel's 70th week is to finish fulfilling the six promises to Israel in Daniel 9:24, then the Church has to disappear.

Another is that the Church was purified at the cross at which time all the punishment due us was born by the Lord Himself. From that time forward the Church is considered by God to be as righteous as He is (2 Cor 5:17 & 21) The idea that the Church needs to undergo some discipline to become worthy to dwell with God is not scriptural and denies the Lord's completed work on the cross.

And third, the stated purpose of the Great Tribulation is twofold, to purify Israel and completely destroy the unbelieving nations. (Jeremiah 30:1-11) The Church isn't destined for either of these outcomes. There are also several subtle clues that on their own can't be used to support the pre-trib position, but which underscore the validity of the clear passages I've just cited. Take for instance the fact that Enoch, who bears a great similarity to the Church, disappeared before the Great Flood, that the angels couldn't destroy Sodom and Gomorrah until Lot and his family were clear, and that Daniel was missing from the story of the fiery furnace, a model of the Great Tribulation.

When the Lord described His coming in Luke 17:26-29 He said that it would be both like the days of Noah (some will be preserved through the accompanying judgments) and the days of Lot (some will taken away before them). And what about the promise He made to the Church in Philadelphia that he would keep us out of the "hour" of trial coming on the whole world. (Rev. 3:10)

But being asked to cite verses that didn't require any prior knowledge I picked two that are clearest to me, 1 Thes. 1:9-10 and Isaiah 26: 19-21. And so by the testimony of two witnesses, one in the Old Testament and one in the New, we see the physical separation of believers from non-believers preceding the time of Judgment. And by the testimony of two witnesses a thing shall be established. (Deut. 19:15) Of course some won't be convinced until we show them a verse that says the rapture will precede the Great Tribulation in those exact words. Obviously, such a verse doesn't exist. I guess we'll just have to wait and explain it to them on the way up. 08-19-06