The Rapture

What is it?
Who will it affect?
When will it most likely occur?

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The Rapture is a glorious event which God has promised to the Church.

The promise is that someday very soon, at the blowing of a trumpet and the shout of an archangel, Jesus will appear in the sky and take up His Church, living and dead, to Heaven.

The Term

The term, Rapture, comes from a Latin word, ***rapio***, that means to catch up, to snatch away, or to take out. It is, in turn, a translation of the Greek word, *harpazo.*

So, rapture is a Biblical word that comes right out of the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible. The word is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In the New American Standard Version, the English phrase, "caught up," is used. The same phrase is used in the King James and New International Versions.

A Promise to the Church

The concept of the Rapture was not revealed to the Old Testament prophets because it is a promise to the New Testament Church and not to the saints of God who lived before the establishment of the Church. Jesus will return as a bridegroom for His bride, and that bride consists only of Church Age saints.

The saints of Old Testament times will be resurrected at the end of the Tribulation and not at the time of the Rapture of the Church. Daniel reveals this fact in Daniel 12:1-2 where he says that the saints of that age will be resurrected at the end of the "time of distress."

Biblical References

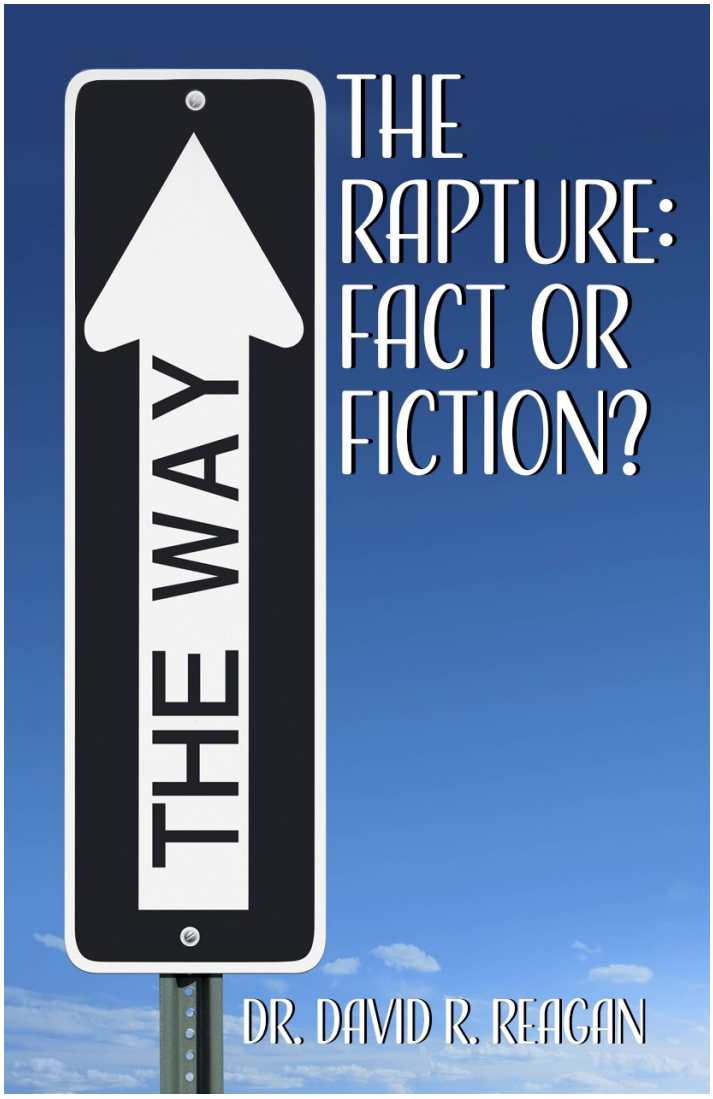
The first clear mention of the Rapture in Scripture is found in the words of Jesus recorded in John 14:1-4. Jesus said, "I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

The most detailed revelation of the actual events related to the Rapture is given by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. He says that when Jesus appears, the dead in Christ (Church Age saints) will be resurrected and caught up first. Then, those of us who are alive in Christ will follow them "to meet the Lord in the air."

Paul mentions the Rapture again in 1 Corinthians 15 — his famous chapter on the resurrection of the dead:

> Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. (verses 51 & 52)

Paul's reference here to being changed is an allusion to the fact that the saints will receive glorified bodies that will be imperishable, immortal and perfected (1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 50-55 and Isaiah 35:5-6).



A Summary

To summarize, these passages teach that the shout of an archangel and the blowing of a trumpet will herald the sudden appearance of Jesus in the heavens (1 Thessalonians 4:16). The dead in Christ will be resurrected and rise up to meet the Lord in the sky. Then, those saints who are alive will be "caught up" to the Lord. Paul concludes his description in 1 Thessalonians 4 by encouraging his readers to "comfort one another with these words."

And truly the Rapture is a comforting thought! Consider the promises contained in the concept of the Rapture. Jesus will bring with Him the spirits of those who have died in Him (1 Thessalonians 4:14). He will resurrect their bodies in a great miracle of re-creation; He will reunite their bodies with their spirits; and He will then glorify their bodies, making them immortal. And those believers who are living will not even taste death. Rather, they will be caught up to the Lord, and in transit, they will be translated from mortal to immortal.

All my life I have heard that there are two things no one can avoid: taxes and death. Well, that is not true. According to 1 Thessalonians 4, a whole generation of believers will escape deat h. Taxes appear to be the only inevitability!

The Timing

The most controversial aspect of the Rapture is its timing. Some place it at the end of the Tribulation, making it one and the same event as the Second Coming. Others place it in the middle of



"The Rapture" A painting by Ryan Heshka

the Tribulation. Still others believe that it will occur at the beginning of the Tribulation.

The reason for these differing viewpoints is that the exact time of the Rapture is not precisely revealed in scripture. It is only inferred. There is, therefore, room for honest differences of opinion, and lines of fellowship should certainly not be drawn over differences regarding this point, even though it is an important point.

Post-Tribulation Rapture

Those who place the timing at the end of the Tribulation usually base their argument on two parables in Matthew 13 and on the Lord's Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24.

In Matthew 24 the Lord portrays His gathering of the saints as an event that will take place "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (Matthew 24:29). This certainly sounds like a post-Tribulation Rapture. But it must be kept in mind that the book of Matthew was written to the Jews, and therefore the recording of Jesus' speech by Matthew has a distinctively Jewish flavor to it as compared to Luke's record of the same speech.

Note, for example, Matthew's references to Judea and to Jewish law regarding travel on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:15-20). These are omitted in Luke's account. Instead, Luke speaks of the saints looking up for deliverance "to escape all these things" when the end time signs "begin to take place" (Luke 21:28, 36). The saints in Matthew are instructed to flee from Judea and hide. The saints in Luke are told to look up for deliverance.

It appears, therefore, that Matthew and Luke are speaking of two different sets of saints. The saints in Matthew's account are most likely Jews who receive Jesus as their Messiah during the Tribulation. The saints in Luke are those who receive Christ before the Tribulation begins. Most of those who accept the Lord during the Tribulation will be martyred (Revelation 7:9-14). Those who live to the end of the Tribulation will be gathered by the angels of the Lord (Matthew 24:31).

The parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30) and the parable of the dragnet (Matthew 13:47-50) can be explained in the same way. They refer to a separation of saints and sinners that will take place at the end of the Tribulation. The saints are those who receive Jesus as their Savior during the Tribulation (Gentile and Jew) and who live to the end of that awful period.

The Bible clearly teaches that the Rapture is an event that is separate and apart from the Second Coming. The two simply cannot be combined into one event.

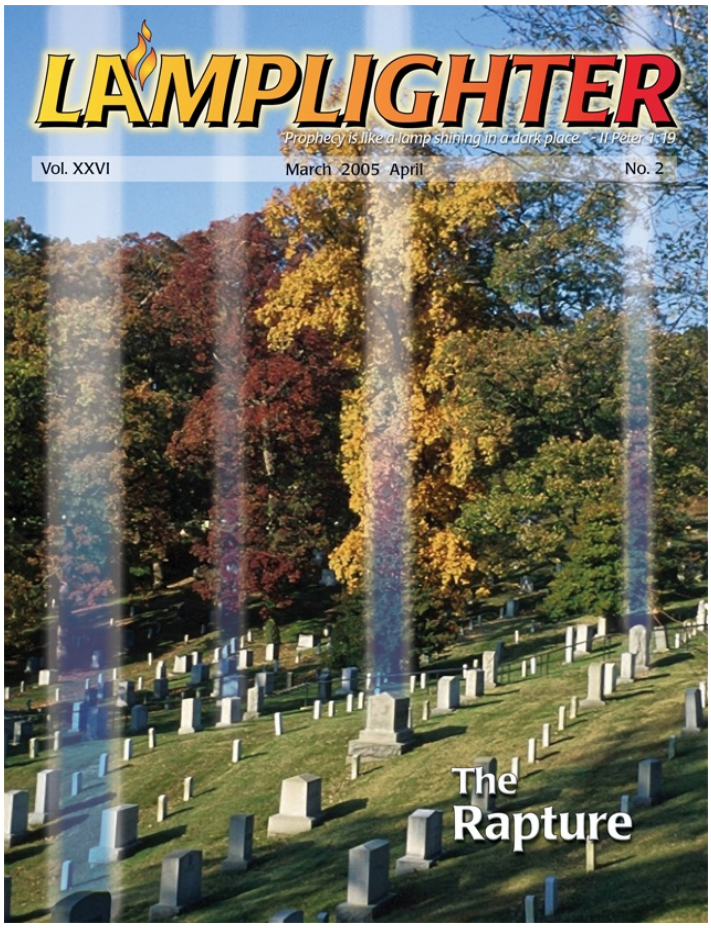
Mid-Tribulation Rapture

There are variations of the mid-Tribulation Rapture concept. The most common is that the Church will be taken out in the exact middle of the Tribulation, at the point in time when the Antichrist is revealed.

This concept is based upon a statement in 1 Corinthians 15:52 which says that the Rapture will occur at the blowing of "the last trumpet." This trumpet is then identified with the seventh trumpet of the Trumpet Judgments in the book of Revelation. Since the blowing of the seventh trumpet is recorded in Revelation 11, the mid-point of the Tribulation, the conclusion is that the Rapture must occur in the middle of the Tribulation.

But there are two problems with this interpretation. The first is that the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15 is blown for believers whereas the seven trumpets of Revelation 8, 9 and 11 are sounded for unbelievers. The Revelation trumpets have no relevance for the Church. The last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15 is a trumpet for the righteous. The last trumpet for the unrighteous is the one described in Revelation 11.

Another problem with this interpretation is that the passage in Revelation 11 that portrays the sounding of the seventh trumpet is a "flash forward" to the end of the Tribulation. Flash forwards are very common in the book of Revelation. They occur after something terrible is described in order to assure the reader that every-



thing is going to turn out all right when Jesus returns at the end of the Tribulation.

Thus, the eighth and ninth chapters of Revelation, which describe the horrors of the Trumpet Judgments, are followed immediately by a flash forward in chapter 10 that pictures the return of Jesus in victory at the end of the Tribulation. The mid-Tribulation action resumes in chapter 11 with a description of the killing of the two great prophets of God by the Antichrist. Then, to offset that terrible event, we are presented with another flash forward, beginning with verse 15. The seventh trumpet is sounded and we find ourselves propelled forward to the end of the Tribulation when "the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord."

The point is that the seventh trumpet of Revelation relates to the end of the Tribulation and not the middle. It is the same trumpet that is referred to in Matthew 24:31, the trumpet that will be blown to announce the Second Coming of Jesus. It is therefore no basis for an argument in behalf of a mid-Tribulation Rapture.

Pre-Wrath Rapture

A variation of the mid-Tribulation Rapture is the pre-wrath Rapture concept that places the Rapture at the beginning of the last quarter of the Tribulation, about five and a half years into the Tribulation.

The argument for this view is that the Church is promised protection only from the wrath of God and not the wrath of Man or of Satan. It is then argued that only the bowl judgments in the last quarter of the Tribulation (Revelation 16) represent the wrath of God.

But the argument for this view disintegrates when you consider two facts. First, it is Jesus Himself who breaks the seals that launch each of the seal judgments recorded in Revelation 6. These judgments occur at the beginning of the Tribulation. Second, the seven angels who blow the trumpets that initiate each of the trumpet judgments are given their trumpets at the throne of God (Revelation 8:2).

All the judgments of Revelation are clearly superintended by God. That is the reason we are told in Revelation 15:1 that the bowl judgments at the end of the Tribulation will finish the wrath of God, not begin His wrath.

The Pre-Tribulation Rapture

I believe the best inference of Scripture is that the Rapture will occur at the beginning of the Tribulation. The most important reason I believe this has to do with the issue of imminence.

Over and over in Scripture we are told to watch for the appearing of the Lord. We are told "to be ready" (Matthew 24:44), "to be on the alert" (Matthew 24:42), "to be dressed in readiness" (Luke 12:35), and to "keep your lamps alight" (Luke 12:35). The clear force of these persistent warnings is that Jesus can appear at any moment.

Only the pre-Tribulation concept of the Rapture allows for the imminence of the Lord's appearing for His Church. When the Rapture is placed at any other point in time, the imminence of the Lord's appearing is destroyed because other prophetic events must happen first.

For example, if the Rapture is going to occur in mid-Tribulation, then why should I live looking for the Lord's appearing at any moment? I would be looking instead for an Israeli peace treaty, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the revelation of the Antichrist. Then and only then could the Lord appear.

Focus

This raises the issue of what we are to be looking for. Nowhere are Christian believers told to watch for the appearance of the Antichrist. On the contrary, we are told to watch for Jesus Christ. In Titus 2:13 Paul says we are to live "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus." Likewise, Peter urges us to "fix our hope completely on the grace to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13). John completes the apostolic chorus by similarly urging us to "fix our hope on Him" at His appearing (1 John 3:2-3).

Only Matthew speaks of watching for the Antichrist (Matthew 24:15), but he is speaking to the Jews living in Israel in the middle of the Tribulation when the Antichrist desecrates the rebuilt Temple.

Wrath

Another argument in behalf of a pre-Tribulation Rapture has to do with the promises of God to protect the Church from His wrath. As has already been demonstrated, the book of Revelation shows that the wrath of God will be poured out during the entire period of the Tribulation.

The Word promises over and over that the Church will be delivered from God's wrath. Romans 5:9 says that "we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him [Jesus]." First Thessalonians 1:10 states that we are waiting "for His Son from heaven . . . who will deliver us from the wrath to come." The promise is repeated in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 — "God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Deliverance

Some argue that God could supernaturally protect the Church during the Tribulation. Yes, He could. In fact, He promises to do just that for the 144,000 Jews who will be sealed as bond-servants at the beginning of the Tribulation (Revelation 7:1-8).

But God's promise to the Church during the Tribulation is not one of protection, but one of deliverance. Jesus said we would "escape" the horrors of the Tribulation (Luke 21:36). Paul says Jesus is coming to "deliver" us from God's wrath (1 Thessalonians 1: 10).

Symbolism

There are several prophetic types that seem to affirm the concept of deliverance from Tribulation.

Take Enoch for example. He was a prophet to the Gentiles who was raptured out of the world before God poured out His wrath in the great flood of Noah's time. Enoch appears to be a type of the Gentile Church that will be taken out of the world before God pours out His wrath again. If so, then Noah and his family are a type of the Jewish remnant that will be protected through the Tribulation.

Another Old Testament symbolic type which points toward a pre-Tribulation Rapture is the experience of Lot and his family. They were delivered out of Sodom and Gomorrah before those cities were destroyed.



The Apostle Peter alludes to both of these examples in his second epistle. He states that if God spared Noah and Lot, then He surely "knows how to rescue the godly from trial and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment" (2 Peter 2:4-9).

Another beautiful prophetic type is to be found in the Jewish wedding traditions of Jesus' time. After the betrothal, the groom would return to his father's house to prepare a wedding chamber for his bride. He would return for his bride at an unexpected moment, so the bride had to be ready constantly. When he returned, he would take his bride back to his father's house to the chamber he had prepared. He and his bride would then be sealed in the chamber for seven days. When they emerged, a great wedding feast would be celebrated.

Likewise, Jesus has returned to Heaven to prepare a place for His bride, the Church. When He returns for His bride, He will take her to His Father's heavenly home. There He will remain with His bride for seven years (the duration of the Tribulation). The period will end with "the marriage supper of the Lamb" described in Revelation 19. Thus the seven days in the wedding chamber point prophetically to the seven years that Jesus and His bride will remain in Heaven during the Tribulation.

Revelation

Speaking of Revelation, the structure of that book also implies a pre-Tribulation Rapture in a symbolic sense.

The first three chapters focus on the Church. Chapter 4 begins with the door of Heaven opening and John being raptured from the Isle of Patmos to the throne of God in Heaven. The Church is not mentioned thereafter until Revelation 19:7-9 when it is portrayed as the "bride of Christ" in Heaven with Jesus celebrating the "marriage supper of the Lamb." At Revelation 19:11 the door of Heaven opens again, and Jesus emerges riding a white horse on His way to earth, followed by His Church (Revelation 19:14).

The rapture of the Apostle John in Revelation 4 appears to be a symbolic type of the Rapture of the Church. Note that it is initiated by the cry of a voice that sounds like the blowing of a trumpet (Revelation 4:1). Since the Tribulation does not begin until Revelation 6, the rapture of John in Revelation 4 appears to be a symbolic type that points to a pre-Tribulation Rapture of the Church.

Some counter this argument by pointing out that although the Church is not mentioned in Revelation during that book's description of the Tribulation, there is constant mention of "saints" (for example, Revelation 13:7). But that term is not used in the Bible exclusively to refer to members of the Church. Daniel uses it to refer to Old Testament believers who lived long before the Church was established (Daniel 7:18). The saints referred to in the book of Revelation are most likely those people who will be saved during the Tribulation, after the Church has been taken out of the world.

Paul's Assurance

An interesting argument in behalf of the pre-Tribulation timing of the Rapture can be found in 2 Thessalonians. The church at Thessalonica was in a turmoil because someone had written them a letter under Paul's name stating that they had missed the "gathering to the Lord" and were, in fact, living in "the day of the Lord" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

Paul attempted to calm them down by reminding them of his teaching that the day of the Lord would not come until after the Antichrist is revealed. He then stated that the Antichrist would not be revealed until a restraining force "is taken out of the way" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-7).

There has been much speculation as to the identity of this restraining force that Paul refers to. Some have identified it as the Holy Spirit. But it cannot be the Holy Spirit because there will be people saved during the Tribulation, and no one can be saved apart from the testimony of the Spirit (John 16:8-11 & 1 John 5:7).

Others have identified the restrainer as human government. It is true that government was ordained by God to restrain evil (Romans 13:1-4). But the governments of the world are in rebellion against God and His Son (Psalm 2), and they are therefore a contributor to the evil that characterizes the world. Furthermore, the Tribulation will not be characterized by a lack of government. Rather, it will feature the first true worldwide government (Revelation 13: 7).

In my opinion, that leaves only one other candidate for Paul's restrainer — and that is the Church. It is the Church that serves as the primary restrainer of evil in the world today as it proclaims the Gospel and stands for righteousness. When the Church fails in this mission, evil multiplies, as Paul graphically points out in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. Paul says that society in the end times will be characterized by chaos and despair because "men will hold to a form of

religion but will deny its power." When the Church is removed from the world, all hell will literally break loose.

Escapism?

The pre-Tribulation concept of the Rapture has often been condemned as "escapism." I think this criticism is unjustified. The Bible itself says that Christians are to "comfort one another" with the thought of the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Is it a comfort to think of the Rapture occurring at the end of the world's worst period of war instead of at the beginning?

Furthermore, Jesus Himself is recorded in Luke 21:36 as saying that when the end-time signs begin to converge, Christians are to "keep on the alert, praying in order that you mazy have the strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." This statement makes it clear that Jesus saw nothing wrong with "escapism."

Conclusion

Regardless of when the Rapture actually occurs, we need to keep in mind that the Bible teaches that societal conditions are going to grow increasingly worse the closer we get to the Lord's return. That means Christians will suffer tribulation whether or not they go into the Great Tribulation. And that means all of us had better be preparing ourselves for unprecedented suffering and spiritual warfare.

If you are a Christian, you can do that on a daily basis by putting on "the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:13), praying at all times in the Spirit that you will be able to stand firm against the attacks of Satan (Ephesians 6:14-18).

If you are not a Christian, your only hope is to reach out in faith and receive the free gift of God's salvation which He has provided through His Son, Jesus (John 3: 16). ✣

