

The Rapture

The doctrine of the end times advanced in many contemporary Christian circles teaches that just before a supposed future seven-year Tribulation period, the church will be “raptured,” or caught up, and taken out of this world to be with the Lord, while those remaining on earth will be left to undergo the terrors of the Tribulation period. At the end of this purported seven-year Tribulation, it is taught that Christ will return (the Second Coming) and inaugurate a 1000 year Millennial period of peace during which Jesus rules the world from Jerusalem. In this scenario, immediately following the Millennium, the Final Judgment ensues.

*This paper will show that according to the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament writers, the return of Christ, the resurrection of believers, and the judgment of the unbelieving world are not spread out in time over 1007 years. Rather they are simply three ways of describing one and the same day – **the last day**, at the end of the world.*

According to the popular but incorrect teaching one frequently hears, the usual order of eschatology events is taken (with some variation) to be:

- 1. the Rapture, which is “secret” and can occur without warning at any time;*
- 2. the Tribulation, a seven-year period of unprecedented trouble on the earth;*
- 3. the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation, at which time He destroys His enemies and establishes His Kingdom on earth;*
- 4. the Millennium, a 1000-year period of ideal peace during which Jesus reigns over the world from Jerusalem;*
- 5. the Last Judgment (or Great White Throne Judgment) at which time Satan and unbelievers are cast into the lake of fire and (certain) believers receive their rewards; and*
- 6. the re-creation of the world in the form of the new heavens and new earth.*

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate from the Bible that the “Rapture,” the Second Coming, and the Final Judgment are not three distinct events, separated by seven and 1000 years, respectively, but rather that they occur simultaneously and are in fact simply three perspectives on one and the same event, namely, the end of this world

Questions & Answers

Q. What is the meaning of the word “Rapture?”

- A. First, it must be understood that the word “rapture” is found nowhere in the Bible. Passages commonly thought to teach about the “catching up” of the church use language like: “...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52); and “we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). But the word “rapture” is not to be found.

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the word “rapture” is derived from the Latin *raptura*, meaning “ecstasy,” and thus “caught up.” In religious usage, it commonly refers to the (secret) snatching up of the church to join the Lord in heaven, supposedly just prior to the beginning of the Tribulation period.

Q. Where is the doctrine of the Rapture taught in the Bible?

- A. Since the word “rapture” is not a biblical word, it is better to refer to this event as “the resurrection day,” the day when “the dead in Christ shall rise,” the day when “we will meet the Lord in the air,” the moment believers “change in the twinkling of an eye,” “the blessed hope,” or some other more biblical phrase. Given this provision that we use biblical terminology, 1 Corinthians 15:51-53, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, and Matthew 24:40-42 are considered key “rapture” passages.

Q. Don’t these passages plainly teach that believers will be transformed and caught up into the clouds to be with the Lord forever?

- A. Certainly. The issue at question here is not whether the church will be caught up by the Lord. It is rather when this event takes place in relation to the other key eschatological events (eschatology is the study of the “last things” or end times), such as the Second Coming and the Final Judgment. Does the resurrection of “sleeping” believers and the snatching up of living believers really take place seven years before the Second Coming and 1007 years before the Last Judgment? That is the real issue, and that is the issue answered in these questions.

Q. OK. Just about every Christian I know believes in the Rapture, the seven-year Tribulation, the 1000 year Millennium, etc. How could everybody be wrong about this?

- A. Actually, the vast majority of Christians in the world today do not hold to the “pre-tribulation rapture” theory. In fact, for the first 18 centuries of church history, no one believed it or had even heard of it. It wasn’t until the publication of *The Scofield Reference Bible* in the late 19th century that this newly conceived view became widespread. The notes at the bottom of the pages of the *Scofield Bible* (*not* the Bible text itself!) promoted this “dispensational” teaching of the “pretrib” Rapture.

Besides, it is not what the majority thinks which determines biblical truth. One should make sure he derives his doctrine from the Bible, not merely from the latest, most popular best-selling book about the “last days” or the opinions of certain teachers, which they insert onto the pages of the Bible in order to advance their theories.

Q. But the Pre-Tribulation Rapture must be true. What do all those verses mean if not this?

- A. A few minutes of careful Bible study will enable the reader to answer this question for himself. **Open your Bible** and follow the passages carefully.

First, read Revelation 11:15-18. What event is described in this passage? Note that it takes place at the sounding of the seventh trumpet (v.15) and that that trumpet signals the time in which "...Thy wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to give their reward to Thy bondservants the prophets and to the saints and those who fear Thy name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth" (v.15).

This passage describes they day the dead, both the righteous and the wicked, face God in His wrath. Reward is given to those who fear His name, and the others are destroyed. What day is being foretold? There is no doubt that this is the Judgment Day at the end of the world. This is the day Daniel described when he wrote "...those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). Note that at the Last Judgment there is the sounding of a trumpet and a gathering together of God's people for reward (and of unbelievers for condemnation).

Now turn to Matthew 24:29-31. Here we read that "after the tribulation of those days...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 and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (vv.29-31).

What great event is being described in these verses? Virtually all will agree that this is the classic passage describing the Second Coming of Christ.

Note that at His coming there is the sounding of a great trumpet and that there is a gathering of God's people from around the world to receive their reward. As we shall see, it is also important to note that the New Testament Greek word used to describe this Second Coming in v. 30 is **παρουσία** (parousia).

Now read 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. This is the passage, partially quoted above, which begins, "...we who are alive and remain until the coming (**παρουσία!**) of the Lord shall 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 shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air..." (vv.15-17).

What event is described here? Of course, this is one of the classic "Rapture" passages. Note that at this event, once again we read of the sounding of the "trumpet of God" and the gathering together of God's people for their reward. It is especially important to note that exactly the same Greek word, **παρουσία**, is used to define both this event and the one described in Matthew 24 (above).

Q. So what does all this mean?

- A. The reader can see that in these passages three future “events” are described: the Last Judgment, the Second Coming, and the Rapture. At each “event” we note that a trumpet is blown and a gathering together of God’s people is brought about. We also see that both the Second Coming (Matthew 24) and the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4) are called the **παρουσία** (parousia).

Q. So maybe there are three different trumpets and three different gatherings!

- A. To assert such a position would indicate a very poor procedure in interpreting the Bible. But fortunately, arguing over whether or not there are three different trumpets and gatherings is unnecessary. 1 Corinthians 15 resolves the issue.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 reads: “Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep but we shall 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 shall be changed.”

What event does this passage envision? It is the transformation of living believers and the raising of the dead in Christ which, as also described in 1 Thessalonians 4, is commonly called the Rapture. Note that once again a trumpet is sounded and there is a gathering together of believers to be with the Lord. But in this text Paul adds a crucial phrase to enhance our understanding. He says that this event will take place at the last trumpet. The last trumpet.

Q. But how can the Rapture trumpet be the last one, if the Second Coming and the Final Judgment and their trumpets are still to come?

- A. Good question. According to the pretrib rapture timetable, the trumpet at the Rapture would have to be the first one, not the last. The Rapture trumpet would come first, then seven years later the Second Coming trumpet, and then 1000 years later would come the trumpet at the Final Judgment. How, then, can what Paul calls “the last trumpet” in 1 Corinthians 15, be in fact the first trumpet? If words mean anything, there is only one way the “first” trumpet can also be the last one: All three trumpets are one and the same.

This means, of course, that all three “events” – the Rapture, the Second Coming, and the Final Judgment – are simply three perspectives on the same occurrence, the end of the world. From the perspective of Christians, we are “caught up” to be with the Lord. From the perspective of Jesus, He returns in His Second Coming. And from the perspective of the unbelieving world, it is Judgment Day. But these are simply three ways of describing the last day, the end of the world.

Q. Hmmm...Are there any other passages in the Bible which put the Rapture at the same time as the Last Judgment?

- A. Yes, there are. In the Gospel of John, chapter 6, Jesus is addressing a mixed group of both believers and unbelievers. In describing His mission in the world, He speaks four different times about what He will do on “the last day.”

Verse 39 says, “And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.”

Verse 40 says, “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day.”

Verse 44 says, “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”

Verse 54 says, “He who eats My flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day.”

In each of these verses Jesus tells His listeners that those who believe in Him will be raised up (resurrected) by Him on the last day. John was there on that day when Jesus spoke these words, so let us use John as our example. John heard Jesus, believed in Him, and died. According to the pre-tribulation rapture perspective, when will John be raised up from the dead? It will be on the day of the Rapture, when “the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). But this is the day which Jesus calls “the last day.” According to the pre-tribulation rapture view, it is 1007 years before the last day!

Q. But when He says “the last day,” couldn’t Jesus really mean “the last day before the Tribulation begins?”

- A. First of all, notice what this question really asks. It asks the student of the Scriptures not to read what is really in the Bible but rather to “read into” a passage what is not there, that addition which is required by a particular doctrinal position. This is a very dangerous practice, known in scholarly circles as “eisegesis”, or reading into the biblical text teachings not found there.

But there is a definite answer to the above question: No, Jesus could not have meant “the last day before the Tribulation.” How can we know that?

In John 12:48, Jesus is concluding his last public sermon, delivered to a crowd of both believers and skeptics. He says to them, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges Him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.”

Here Jesus teaches that unbelievers will be judged at “the last day.” In John 6, He teaches that believers will be raised up on “the last day.” What is the inescapable conclusion? Believers are raised up on the same day unbelievers are judged – on the “last day,” at the end of the world. The day of the Rapture and the day of the Last Judgment are not 1007 years apart. They take place on the very same day.

Q. But what about the verses that say, “One will be taken, and one will be left?” Don’t they show that Christians will be suddenly “raptured,” leaving the unbelievers behind to face the Tribulation?

- A. Matthew 24:40-41 is often thought to teach that believers will be “taken,” leaving unbelievers behind to endure the seven-year Tribulation. Films based on these verses have been made depicting what the Rapture and its aftermath might be like. But a careful reading of the text will show that the rapture of Christians is not at all what is being taught here.

Beginning in Matthew 24:37, Jesus makes a comparison between the days of Noah and the time of His Second Coming: “For the coming (**παρουσία**) of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah.” He then summarizes those days, indicating that in spite of the warnings preached by Noah, people continued living life with a “business as usual” attitude: “...they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the Ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Then 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. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (24:38-42).

In the above text, the pronouns are very important. To whom do they refer? For example, who were the “they” who were “eating and drinking...marrying and giving in marriage?” They were not Noah and his family, but the unbelievers.

Who were the “they” who “did not understand until the flood came...?” The unbelievers.

Who were the “them” in the phrase, “the flood came and took them all away?” Once again, the unbelievers.

So in the very next verse (24:40), to whom is Jesus referring when He says “one will be taken?” We see that like in the days of Noah, it is not the believer but the unbeliever who is taken. Just as in the days of Noah, at the Coming of the Son of Man it is the unbelievers who are taken away in judgment, while Christians are left to inherit the earth. Far from teaching the sudden rapture of believers, these verses describe the sudden judgment which will fall on unbelievers at the Return of Christ – the **παρουσία** – which is also the day of the Last Judgment and the end of the world, “just like the days of Noah.”

Summary: *In this brief paper, we have shown that while according to the “pre-tribulation rapture” theory, the Rapture, the Second Coming, and Judgment Day are three distinct events separated by 1007 years, a careful reading of Revelation 11, Matthew 24, 1 Thessalonians 4, and 1 Corinthians 15 shows them to be different viewpoints of the same event, which takes place at the end of the world.*

We have also seen that according to Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of John, chapters 6 and 12, He will both raise up believers and judge unbelievers by His word on the “last day.” Thus the “last day” is the day of both the “Rapture” and the Judgment.

Finally, we have seen that in Matthew 24, it is not believers who are taken away in the Rapture, but unbelievers who are taken away in judgment at the Coming of Christ. Thus we see that the Second Coming and the Judgment are on the same day.

Conclusion

Since (1) the Rapture, the Second Coming, and the Last Judgment are three perspectives on the same event, since (2) the Rapture and the Judgment are on the same day, and since (3) the Second Coming and the Judgment are on the same day, we conclude that the theory of the “Pre-tribulation-rapture” is false. Furthermore, we conclude that on a single day yet to come, the Lord Jesus Christ will return to raise the dead and catch His people up to meet Him in the clouds, to judge all those who have ever lived on the earth, and to create the new heavens and new earth in which His people will dwell in His presence eternally.