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REVIEWING FIVE RAPTURE POSITIONS*

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The rapture of the church is not an incidental but a fundamental doctrine of the New Testament. It is the greatest hope that Christ gave to the church. The biblical writers speak of it as a blessed hope (Tit 2:13), a purifying hope (1 Thess 4:18), a comforting hope (1 Thess 4:18) and a sure hope (2 Pet. 1:19).

Since there is much confusion among Christians concerning the rapture, the following study should be helpful in clarifying the subject. This article will briefly examine five views regarding the rapture, including each position, its proponents, supposed proofs, and any problems associated with each view.

I. The Partial Rapture View

The first view that we will examine is the Partial Rapture View, which states that only those faithful believers who are “watching” and “waiting” for the Lord’s return will be taken in the rapture. The rapture is seen as a reward for being faithful to Christ. As believers are purged during the tribulation, they are raptured in groups, as described in Rev 7:9–14; 11:2; 12:5 and 16:15. Well-known Bible scholars such as G. H. Pember and J. A. Seiss advocated the partial rapture view. Illustrative of this position are the words of W. H. Hubbard, “Are you, reader, among the lukewarm whom the Lord will spew out of His mouth to pass through the tribulation, or the loyal who are faithfully performing the tasks and utilizing the privileges of grace, thus showing yourself ‘worthy to escape it’?” (Does the Church Go Through the Tribulation? St. Petersburg, FL, n.d., 18). Proponents of this view turn to passages emphasizing waiting and watching, as in Mt 24:40–51, 25:1–13; Lk 20:34–36, 21:36; 1 Cor 9:27; Phil 3:10–12; 1 Thess 5:6–10; 2 Tim 4:8; Tit 2:13; Heb 9:24–28 and Rev 3:3–10, 12:1–6.

Four problems with this view are as follows:

- 1.) The translation and resurrection are part of the believer’s salvation, not a reward for faithfulness.
- 2.) The Scriptures plainly teach that all believers will be included in the rapture. Paul declares in 1 Cor. 15:51 that “we shall all be changed,” including the carnal Corinthians whom he rebukes most sternly.
- 3.) Paul asserts that God has not appointed believers unto wrath (1 Thess. 5:9–10) but will remove us before the tribulation “that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” The term asleep is not a reference to the dead believers. Rather, *katheudo* refers to one who is not being watchful or alert.
- 4.) This view divides the body of Christ. It is unthinkable that the unity of the body of Christ, so emphatically taught in the New Testament, could be severed.

II. The Midtribulation Rapture View

A second view is the Midtribulation Rapture View, which argues that the rapture will occur at the midpoint of the seven years of tribulation. Because only the last half of Daniel’s 70th Week is tribulation, proponents of this view believe they are really espousing a pretribulation rapture of the church. Like the pretribulationists, midtribulationists distinguish between the rapture and second coming and insist on a removal of the church to heaven prior to the time of the wrath of God. Among scholars espousing this position are G. H. Lang, Norman B. Harrison, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. and Gleason Archer. Archer succinctly states his position as follows: “This interpretation makes a clear division between the first half as the period of the wrath of man, and the second half as the period of the wrath of God . . . the final generation of the pre-Rapture church will be subject to the

wrath of man, but spared from the wrath of God” (The Rapture: Pre,- Mid,- or Post-Tribulational? Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, 139).

Adherents to the Midtribulational view rely on two so-called proofs. First, both Daniel and the book of Revelation portray the last half of the 70th Week of Daniel as being a time of tribulation and terror, with the Antichrist ruling over the world from Jerusalem and the severest judgments poured out upon the earth (cf. Dan 7:25; 9:27; 12:7, 11; Rev 11:2; 12:6, 14; 13:5). Second, some significant event at the midpoint of the 70th Week has drastic consequences for this planet. It is surmised that this event is the rapture, that the blowing of the seventh trumpet in Rev 10:7 and 11:15 relates to the “last trump” of 1 Corinthians 15:52, and that the removal of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 is a symbolic description of the rapture. The earlier judgments in the book of Revelation, including the seal judgments and six trumpet judgments, are not seen as God’s wrath but as the wrath of man. This view teaches that the believer must endure the wrath of man but is exempt from the wrath of God.

The problems with the Midtribulational Rapture View, as with the Partial Rapture View, are fourfold:

- 1.) It is impossible to espouse a midtribulational view of the rapture and hold to the concept of imminency. According to this view, the appearance of the Antichrist, his covenant with Israel, and the destruction caused by the four horsemen must occur before Christ can return. Therefore, the rapture cannot happen today.
- 2.) The last trumpet of 1 Cor 15 and the seventh trumpet are not identical. The last trumpet of 1 Cor 15 (the same as that of 1 Thess 4:16) signals the completion of the believer’s salvation as he meets his Lord. The seventh trumpet is the last one in a series announcing divine judgment on the earth. There is even a later trumpet sounded during the tribulation to gather the elect of the Second Advent (Mt 24:31). Similarity does not prove identity.
- 3.) Even the first part of the tribulation reveals God’s wrath, not simply human or satanic wrath. The earthlings of Rev 6:16–17 recognize that the seal judgments are the “wrath of the Lamb.” In Revelation 5 it is Christ Who breaks the seals and releases judgment on the earth.
- 4.) The two witnesses of Revelation 11 could not possibly be the church. The witnesses are literally killed and lie in the literal streets of literal Jerusalem for three days. Besides, some Bible scholars prefer to see the prophets’ ministry begin at the mid-point of the tribulation and conclude prior to the Second Advent. The seventh trumpet ushers in not the second half of the tribulation but the messianic kingdom.

III. The Pre-Wrath Rapture View

A third perspective on the rapture is the Pre-Wrath Rapture View. This relatively recent view is espoused by Marv Rosenthal in his book *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (1990) and his periodical *Zion’s Fire*. It is a variation of the mid-tribulational position and has similarities to the post-tribulational position.

The basic thesis of this view is that the church will be removed from the earth by the rapture just before the fourth quarter of the 70th Week of Daniel. This view proposes first that the tribulation involves three distinct periods: the beginning of sorrows, lasting 3 1/2 years; the Great Tribulation, lasting 21 months; and the Day of the Lord, spanning the final 21 months. The church, therefore, would need to go through three-fourths of the tribulation. Second, this view teaches that believers will endure the time of man’s wrath and Satan’s wrath but will be delivered before the Day of the Lord, the time of God’s wrath, which begins with the opening of the seventh seal (Rev 8:1). And, third, this view holds that the church must endure the Antichrist (who is the resurrected Hitler) and the Great Tribulation, but after 64 months into the 70th Week will be raptured.

Five major problems with this view are as follows:

- 1.) This view totally destroys the doctrine of imminency, which Rosenthal calls “untenable.” However, passages like 1 Thess 5:6, 1 Cor 1:7, Tit 2:13 and 1 John 3:2,3 speak of the blessed hope as an imminent event.
- 2.) Rosenthal has no clear explanation of where the church will be for 21 months after the rapture. He totally ignores the promise of Christ in John 14:1–4 that the church will be taken to heaven after Christ’s

return.

3.) The Day of the Lord is clearly longer than 21 months, covering the judgments of the tribulation and blessings of the Millennium (Zeph 3:8-13; Hag 2:6-23; Zech 14:1-10), including a total of 1007 years.

4.) The judgments in the first half of the tribulation are clearly divine judgments. It is Christ Who opens the seals and uses various means to judge a Christ-rejecting world.

5.) Contrary to Rosenthal's claim that the word tribulation is never used for the first half of Daniel's 70th Week, Christ clearly refers to the first half of the seven-year period when He says in Matthew 24:9 that "they will deliver you to tribulation."

IV. The Post-Tribulational View

The fourth view to be considered is the Post-Tribulational view, which teaches that the rapture and the second coming are aspects of a single event occurring at the end of the Tribulation period. Christ returns to the clouds, the church meets him in the air, and together they return to the earth. Perhaps the best known contemporary post-tribulational writer is Robert Gundry. His main argument is that, "Direct, unquestioned statements of Scripture that Jesus Christ will return after the tribulation and that the first resurrection will occur after the tribulation, coupled with the absence of statements placing similar events before the tribulation, make it natural to place the rapture of the Church after the tribulation" (The Church and the Tribulation, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation. 1973, 10).

The Post-Tribulational view claims three additional proofs, the first of which says that, since identical terms are used for the rapture and second coming, this single event must refer to the coming of Christ after the tribulation. The terms *parousia*, usually translated "coming," *apokalupsis*, translated "revelation," and *epiphaneia*, translated "appearing," must relate to the same event. Second, this view objects to the recent origin of the pretribulational rapture view. J. N. Darby formulated the pretribulational position in the 1830's, at least partially based on Margaret MacDonald's revelations. Since the view is recent, the post-tribulational view claims that it must be wrong. Third, because the church is promised persecution and tribulation this view claims that it is impossible to say that believers will be raptured prior to the tribulation. Rather, the view claims that believers will be protected and preserved in the tribulation.

Four problems with this view are as follows:

1.) The three words used in connection with the Lord's return, coming, revelation, and appearing, are not technical terms but can refer to either the rapture or the second coming. As stated before, similarity does not prove identity.

2.) The rightness or wrongness of a position does not depend on how recent it is but on whether it is scriptural or not. Although the systematic study of prophecy, including the rapture, is fairly recent, evidence can be found throughout church history of a belief in a pretribulational removal of Christians from the earth. For example, Pseudo-Ephraim, in his Sermon on the End of the World, wrote before A.D. 627 that "all the saints and elect of God are gathered together before the tribulation which is to come and are taken to the Lord" (Mal Couch, ed., Dictionary of Premillennial Theology, 329).

3.) Although the church must endure tribulation in a general sense, the New Testament clearly teaches that it will be delivered from the future tribulation which is world-wide in scope (Rom 5:9, 1 Thess 1:10, 5:9). Indeed, Christians are promised not protection in the tribulation (when numerous believers are martyred, Rev 20:4), but deliverance from the very time of tribulation (Rev 3:10).

4.) As all the other aberrant rapture views, post-tribulationism denies that Christ's coming is imminent. Truly, it could be today. To deny that is to deprive the church of the blessed hope—a serious matter indeed.

V. The Pretribulational Rapture

The fifth and final view that we will examine is the Pre-Tribulational Rapture View, which espouses the return of Christ to the atmosphere to resurrect the dead church age believers and to translate the living saints before the 70th week of Daniel. In accordance with Scripture, this view teaches that the rapture is the next event on God's prophetic calendar. No prophecy needs to be fulfilled before it occurs. The rapture is therefore the imminent or

any-moment return of Christ for His own.

This view points to two applicable Scripture passages containing predictions concerning the Rapture. First, Christ's return is promised in John 14:1–6. The night before His crucifixion, Christ made the first disclosure of the rapture to His disciples. He promised to return for His own and take them to the Father's House. In the post-tribulational scheme of things, believers would meet the Lord in the air at the end of the tribulation and then immediately return with Him to earth. Christ would thus have uttered a falsehood in John 14. Second, His return is pictured in I Thessalonians 4:13–18. The Apostle Paul graphically portrays a series of events surrounding the return of Christ: the resurrection of the dead, the rapture of the living, the reunion with the Lord and our loved ones in the air, and finally the blessed reassurance, "And so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess 4:17b–18). In the immediate context Paul assures believers that God has not appointed them unto the wrath of the tribulation but unto salvation (1 Thess 5:9, cf. 1:10; Rom 5:9).

The Proof for the Pretribulational Rapture is found in Revelation 3:10, in the Lord's clear promise: "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, 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." It should be observed that the believers are not promised preservation in or during the hour of trial, but protection out of (ek) it. On the other hand, tribulation saints are not promised exemption from suffering (Rev. 6:9–11; 7:9–14; 14:1–3, et cetera). As Charles Ryrie observes, "If the church will not be raptured before the hour begins, then the promise will not be fulfilled because many saints simply will not be preserved in the tribulation but will suffer and die along with unsaved people" (Revelation , 1996, 34).

*Kober, M. E., Th.D. (2005, March). Reviewing Five Rapture Positions, Part 1. Faith Baptist Theological Seminary. <https://faith.edu/faith-news/reviewing-five-rapture-positions-part-1/>

and

Kober, M. E., Th.D. (2005, March). Reviewing Five Rapture Positions, Part 1. Faith Baptist Theological Seminary. <https://faith.edu/faith-news/reviewing-five-rapture-positions-part-2/>