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Why I Believe The Bible Teaches Rapture Before Tribulation by Thomas Ice

Churches today often neglect the study and preaching of biblical prophecy because they consider it a controversial and impractical topic. At the same time, many bemoan the apathy of believers and struggle to encourage people toward holy living. Churches caught in this trap need to consider that the teaching of the Rapture, woven throughout the fabric of the New Testament, addresses these issues and can provide motivation for godliness. No single Bible verse says precisely when the Rapture will take place in relation to the Tribulation or the Second Coming in a way that would settle the issue to everyone's satisfaction. However, this does not mean that the Scriptures do not teach a clear position on this matter, for it does. As we shall see later, the Bible does promise that the church will not enter the time of God's wrath, which is another term for the tribulation. Many biblical passages teach the pretribulational rapture of the church.

Many important biblical doctrines are not derived from a single verse, but come from a harmonization of several passages into systematic conclusions. Some truths are directly stated in the Bible, such as the deity of Christ (John 1:1; Titus 2:13). Other doctrines, like the Trinity and the incarnate nature of Christ, are the product of harmonizing the many passages that relate to these matters. Taking into account all that the Bible says on these issues, orthodox theologians, over time, concluded that God is a Trinity and that Christ is the God-Man. Similarly, a systematic, literal interpretation of all New Testament passages relating to the Rapture will lead to the pretribulational viewpoint: that, at the Rapture, all living believers will be translated into heaven at least seven years before Christ's Second Coming. This is what I believe the Bible teaches.

Foundational Issues

Four affirmations provide a biblical framework for the Pretribulational Rapture: They are (1) *consistent* literal interpretation, (2) Premillennialism, (3) futurism, and (4) a distinction between Israel and the church. These are not mere suppositions, but rather are important biblical doctrines upon which the doctrine of the Rapture is built.

Literal Interpretation

Consistent literal interpretation is essential to properly understanding what God is saying in the Bible. The dictionary defines *literal* as "belonging to letters." Further, it says literal interpretation involves an approach "based on the actual words in their ordinary meaning . . . not going beyond

the facts.”¹ “Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usage of its language.”² How is this done? It can only be accomplished through the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), contextual (in accord with its context) method of interpretation.

Literal interpretation recognizes that a word or phrase can be used either plainly (denotative) or figuratively (connotative). As in our own conversations today, the Bible may use plain speech, such as “Grandmother died yesterday” (denotative). Or the same thing may be said in a more colorful way, “Grandmother kicked the bucket yesterday” (connotative). An important point to be noted is that even though we may use a figure of speech to refer to Grandmother’s death, we are using that figure to refer to an event that literally happened. Some interpreters are mistaken to think that just because a figure of speech may be used to describe an event (i.e., Jonah’s experience in the belly of the great fish in Jonah 2), that the event was not literal and did not happen in history. Such is not the case. A “Golden Rule of Interpretation” has been developed to help us discern whether or not a figure of speech was intended by an author.

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.³

The principle of consistent, literal interpretation of the entire Bible logically leads one to the pre-trib position. This means that the prophetic portions of the Bible are interpreted like any other subject matter in Scripture. The prophetic sections of the Bible use the same conventions of language found throughout the Bible.

Premillennialism

The next biblical principle foundational to Pretribulationism is Premillennialism. Premillennialism teaches that the Second Advent will occur before Christ’s thousand-year reign upon earth from Jerusalem (Revelation 19:11—20:6). It is contrasted with the Postmillennial teaching that Christ will return after He has reigned spiritually from His throne in heaven for a long period of time during the current age, through the

¹ *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Unabridged, Second Edition, p. 1055.

² Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 29.

³ David L. Cooper, *The World’s Greatest Library: Graphically Illustrated*, (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), p. 11.

Church, and the similar Amillennial view that also advocates a present, but pessimistic, spiritual reign of Christ.

Biblical Premillennialism is a necessary foundation for the PreTrib position since it is impossible for either the Postmillennial or Amillennial view of Scripture to support a PreTrib understanding of the Rapture.

Futurism

The third contributing principle is Futurism. As if understanding the different millennial positions are not complicated enough, diversification is compounded when we consider the four possible views which relate to the timing of when an interpreter sees prophecy being fulfilled in history. The four views are simple in the sense that they reflect the only four possibilities in relation to time—past, present, future, and timeless. The *Preterist* (past) believes that most, if not all, prophecy has already been fulfilled, usually in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The *Historicist* (present) sees much of the current Church Age as equal to the Tribulation Period. Thus, prophecy has been and will be fulfilled during the current Church Age. *Futurists* (future) believe that virtually all prophetic events will not occur in the current Church Age, but will happen in the future Tribulation, Second Coming, or Millennium. The *Idealist* (timeless) does not believe either that the Bible indicates the timing of events or that we can know before they happen. Therefore, idealists think that prophetic passages mainly teach great ideas or truths about God to be applied regardless of timing.

Pretribulationism can only be built upon the futurist understanding of prophetic events. Such a conclusion is the result of the application of a *consistent* literal interpretation of prophecy as future historical events that are yet to occur.

Distinction between Israel and the Church

The final principle related to the pre-trib position is the biblical truth that God's single program for history includes two peoples, Israel and the Church. This view has been systematized into what is known as dispensationalism. While the basis of salvation (God's grace) is always the same for Jew and Gentile, God's prophetic program has two distinct aspects. Presently, God's plan for Israel is on hold until He completes His current purpose with the Church and Raptures His Bride to heaven. Only pretribulationism provides a purpose for the rapture. That purpose is to remove the Church via the Rapture so God can complete His unfinished business with Israel during the seven-year Tribulation period. Therefore, if one does not distinguish between passages which God intends for Israel from those intended for the church, then there results an improper confusion of the two programs.

It should not be surprising that God's single plan for history has a multi-dimensional aspect (Ephesians 3:10) that we know as Israel and the Church. If human novelists can weave multiple plots throughout their stories, then how much more can the Great Planner of the universe and history not do the same kind of thing?

Those commingling God's plan for Israel and the church destroy an important basis for the pre-trib rapture. The Bible clearly teaches that the church and Israel have in many ways different programs within the single plan of God even though both are saved on the same basis.

SPECIFIC PRETRIBULATIONAL ARGUMENTS

The fact of the Rapture was first revealed by Christ to His disciples in John 14:1-3. It is most clearly presented in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 which encourages living Christians that, at the Rapture, they will be reunited with those who have died in Christ before them. In verse 17 the English phrase "caught up" (NASB) translates the Greek word *harpazō*, which means "to seize upon with force" or "to snatch up." This is the Greek word from which the English word "harpoon" is derived. The Latin translators of the Bible used the word *rapere*, the root of the English term *rapture*. A debate swirls around *when* this takes place relative to the Tribulation. At the Rapture living believers will be "caught up" in the air, translated into the clouds, in a moment of time.

An interesting tie between the revelation of the rapture by our Lord in John 14:1-3 and Paul's expansion in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 has been observed by commentator J. B. Smith. Smith has observed a "thought for thought" parallel between the two passages:

Let us now compare two passages of Scripture which, by the words employed, clearly show that they refer to the same event. . .

<i>John 14:1-3</i>		<i>1 Thessalonians 4:13-18</i>	
trouble	verse 1	sorrow	verse 13
believe	verse 1	believe	verse 14
God, me	verse 1	Jesus, God	verse 14
told you	verse 2	say to you	verse 15
come again	verse 3	coming of the Lord	verse 15
receive you	verse 3	caught up	verse 17
to myself	verse 3	to meet the Lord	verse 17
be where I am	verse 3	ever be with the Lord	verse 17

Observe:

The words or phrases are almost an exact parallel. The follow one another in both passages in exactly the same order. Only the righteous are dealt with in each case. There is not a single irregularity in the progression of words from first to last. Either column takes the believer from the troubles of earth to the glories of heaven. It is but consistent to interpret each passage as dealing with the same event—the rapture of the church.⁴

Such a comparison bodes well for the pretribulational rapture of the church, as we shall see below.

Operating consistently upon the foundation of these four biblical foundations, we will survey six specific biblical arguments for Pretribulationism. These are not all the reasons for a PreTrib Rapture, but are simply a summary of some of the basic arguments.

Contrasts Between Comings

The Rapture is characterized in the New Testament as a “translation or resurrection coming” (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:15-17) in which the Lord comes *for* His church, taking her to His Father’s house (John 14:3). On the other hand, Christ’s Second Advent *with* His saints (the Church=Rev. 19)

⁴ J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1961), pp. 312-13.

descends from heaven and arrives on earth to stay and set up His Messianic Kingdom (Zech. 14:4-5; Matt. 24:27-31). The differences between these two events are harmonized naturally by the pre-trib position, while other views are not able to comfortably account for such differences.

Paul speaks of the Rapture as a “mystery” (1 Cor. 15:51-54), that is, a truth not revealed until it was disclosed by the apostles (Col. 1:26). Thus the Rapture is said to be a newly revealed mystery, making it a separate event. The Second Coming, on the other hand, was predicted in the Old Testament (Dan. 12:1-3; Zech. 12:10; 14:4).

The New Testament teaches about the Rapture of the church and yet also speaks of the Second Coming of Christ. These two events are different in a number of ways. Note the following contrasts between the translation at the Rapture and Christ's Second Coming to establish the kingdom.

Rapture/Translation	2nd Coming/ Estab. Kingdom
1 Translation of all believers	1 No translation at all
2 Translated saints go to heaven	2 Translated saints return to earth
3 Earth not judged	3 Earth judged & righteousness established
4 Imminent, any-moment, signless	4 Follows definite predicted signs including tribulation
5 Not in the Old Testament	5 Predicted often in Old Testament
6 Believers only	6 Affects all men
7 Before the day of wrath	7 Concluding the day of wrath
8 No reference to Satan	8 Satan bound
9 Christ comes <i>for</i> His own	9 Christ comes <i>with</i> His own
10 He comes in the <i>air</i>	10 He comes to the <i>earth</i>
11 He claims His bride	11 He comes with His bride
12 Only His own see Him	12 Every eye shall see Him
13 Tribulation begins	13 Millennial Kingdom begins

Dr. John Walvoord concludes that these “contrasts should make it evident that the translation of the church is an event quite different in character and time from the return of the Lord to establish His kingdom, and confirms the conclusion that the translation takes place before the tribulation.”⁵

Both events mention clouds symbolizing a heavenly role in both, but other differences demonstrate that these are two distinct events. At the Rapture, the Lord comes for His saints (1 Thes. 4:16); at the Second Coming the Lord comes with His saints (1 Thes. 3:13). At the Rapture, the Lord comes only for believers, but His return to the earth will impact all people. The Rapture is a translation/resurrection event; the Second

⁵ John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955), p. 88. The quotation and the first six contrasts in the comparison above are taken from pp. 87-88 of Walvoord's *The Return*.

Coming is not. At the Rapture, the Lord takes believers from earth to heaven "to the Father's house" (John 14:3); at the Second Coming believers return from heaven to the earth (Matt. 24:30).

The best harmonization of these two different events supports a pretribulational Rapture (which is signless and could happen at any moment), while the many events taking place during the Tribulation are best understood as signs leading up to the Second Coming.

A Time Interval Needed Between Comings

An interval or gap of time is needed between the rapture and the second coming in order to facilitate many events predicted in the Bible in a timely manner. Numerous items in the New Testament can be harmonized by a pre-trib time gap of at least seven years, while other views, especially posttribulationists, are forced to postulate scenarios that would not realistically allow for a normal passage of time. The following events are best temporally harmonized with an interval of time as put forth by pretribulationism.⁶

2 Corinthians 5:10 teaches that all believers of this age must appear before the judgment seat of Christ in heaven. This event, often known as the "Bema Judgment" from the Greek word *bema*, is an event never mentioned in the detailed accounts connected with the second coming of Christ to the earth. Since such an evaluation would require some passage of time, the pre-trib gap of seven years nicely accounts for such a requirement.

Since Revelation 19:7-10 pictures the church as a bride who has been made ready for marriage (illustrated as "fine linen," which represents "the righteous acts of the saints") to her groom (Christ); and the bride has already been clothed in preparation for her return at the second coming accompanying Christ to the earth (Rev. 19:11-18), it follows that the church would already have to be complete and in heaven (because of the pre-trib rapture) in order to have been prepared in the way that Revelation 19 describes. This requires an interval of time which pretribulationism handles well.

The 24 elders of Revelation 4:1–5:14 are best understood as representatives of the church. Dr. Charles Ryrie explains: In the New Testament, elders as the highest officials in the church do represent the whole church (cf. Acts 15:6; 20:28), and in the Old Testament, twenty-four elders were appointed by King David to represent the entire Levitical priesthood (I Chron. 24). When those twenty-four elders met together in the temple precincts in Jerusalem, the entire priestly house was represented. Thus it seems more likely that the elders

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955), p. 88. The quotation and the first six contrasts in the comparison above are taken from pp. 87-88 of Walvoord's *The Return*.

⁶ Many of the points in this section are taken from John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 274-75.

represent redeemed human beings, . . . the church is included and is thus in heaven before the tribulation begins.⁷

If they refer to the church, then this would necessitate the rapture and reward of the church before the tribulation and would require a chronological gap for them to perform their heavenly duties during the seven-year tribulation.

Believers who come to faith in Christ during the tribulation are not translated at Christ's second advent but carry on ordinary occupations such as farming and building houses, and they will bear children (Isa. 65:20-25). This would be impossible if all saints were translated at the second coming to the earth, as posttribulationists teach. Because pretribulationists have at least a seven-year interval between the removal of the church at the rapture and the return of Christ to the earth, this is not a problem because millions of people will be saved during the interval and thus be available to populate the millennium in their natural bodies in order to fulfill Scripture.

It would be impossible for the judgment of the Gentiles to take place after the second coming if the rapture and second coming are not separated by a gap of time. How would both saved and unsaved, still in their natural bodies, be separated in judgment, if all living believers are translated at the second coming. This would be impossible if the translation takes place at the second coming, but it is solved through a pretribulation gap.

Dr. John F. Walvoord points out that if "the translation took place in connection with the second coming to the earth, there would be no need of separating the sheep from the goats at a subsequent judgment, but the separation would have taken place in the very act of the translation of the believers before Christ actually sets up His throne on earth (Matt. 25:31)."⁸ Once again, such a "problem" is solved by taking a pre-trib position with its gap of at least seven years.

A time interval is needed so that God's program for the church, a time when Jew and Gentile are united in one body (cf. Eph. 2-3), will not become commingled in any way with His unfinished and future plan for Israel during the tribulation. Dr. Renald Showers notes that "[A]ll other views of the Rapture have the church going through at least part of the 70th week, meaning that all other views mix God's 70-weeks program for Israel and Jerusalem together with His program for the church. A gap is needed in order for these two aspects of God's program to be harmonized in a non-conflicting manner."⁹

The pretribulation rapture of the church fulfills a biblical need to not only see a distinction between the translation of Church Age saints at the rapture, before the second coming, but it also handles without difficulty the necessity of a time-gap which harmonizes a number of future biblical

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), pp. 35-36.

⁸ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 274.

⁹ Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1995), p. 243.

events. This requirement of a seven-year gap of time adds another plank to the likelihood that pretribulationism best reflects the biblical viewpoint.

The Imminent Coming of Christ

The New Testament speaks of our Lord's return as imminent, meaning that it could happen at any moment. Other events *may* occur before an imminent event, but nothing else must take place before it happens. Imminency passages instruct believer to *look, watch, and wait* for His coming (1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thes. 1:10; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28; 1 Peter 1:13; Jude 21). If either the appearance of the Antichrist, the Abomination of Desolation, or the unfolding of the Tribulation must occur before the Rapture, then a command to watch for Christ's coming would not be relevant. Only pretribulationism teaches a truly imminent Rapture since it is the only view not requiring anything to happen before the Rapture. As required by the above mentioned passages, the New Testament indicates that the believer's hope is to look, watch, and wait for a person and that is Jesus. Only pretribulationism enables a believer to look for Christ and yet at the same time give full meaning to Second Coming passages and the signs that lead up to our Lord's return to the earth. Imminency is a strong argument for the pre-trib Rapture and provides the believer with a true "blessed hope."

The Nature of the Tribulation

The Bible teaches that the Tribulation (i.e., the seven-year, 70th week of Daniel) is a time of preparation for Israel's restoration and regeneration (Deut. 4:29-30; Jer. 30:4-11; Ezek. 20:22-44; 22:13-22). Revelation 3:10 notes that the Tribulation will not be for the church but for "those who dwell upon the earth" (Rev. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12, 14 [twice]; 17:2, 8), as a time upon them for their rejection of Christ is His salvation. While the church will experience tribulation in general during this present age (John 16:33), she is never mentioned as participating in Israel's time of trouble, which includes the Great Tribulation, the Day of the Lord, and the Wrath of God. Pretribulationism gives the best answer to the biblical explanation of the fact that the church is never mentioned in passages that speak about tribulational events, while Israel is mentioned consistently throughout these passages.

The Nature of the Church

Only pretribulationism is able to give full biblical import to the New Testament teaching that the church differs significantly from Israel. The church is said to be a mystery (Eph. 3:1-13) by which Jews and Gentiles are now united into one body in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22). This explains why the church's translation to heaven is never mentioned in any Old

Testament passage that deals with the Second Coming after the Tribulation, and why the church is promised deliverance from the time of God's wrath during the Tribulation (1 Thes. 1:9-10; 5:9; Rev. 3:10). The church alone has the promise that all believers will be taken to the Father's house in heaven John 14:1-3) at the translation, and not to the earth as other views would demand.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Second Thessalonians 2:1-12 discusses a man of lawlessness being held back until a later time. Interpreting the restrainer of evil (2:6) as the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit at work through the body of Christ during the current age, supports the pretribulational interpretation. Since "the lawless one" (the beast or anti-Christ) cannot be revealed until the Restrainer (the Holy Spirit) is taken away (2:7-8), the Tribulation cannot occur until the church is removed.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Like all aspects of biblical doctrine, teaching on the Rapture has a practical dimension. Dr. Renald Showers has summarized some of the practical implications of the pre-trib Rapture.

The fact that the glorified, holy Son of God could step through the door of heaven at any moment is intended by God to be the most pressing, incessant motivation for holy living and aggressive ministry (including missions, evangelism and Bible teaching) and the greatest cure for lethargy and apathy. It should make a major difference in every Christian's values, actions, priorities and goals.¹⁰

As John writes, "Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). Our Rapture hope is said to urge a watchfulness for Christ Himself (1 Cor. 15:58); to encourage faithfulness in church leaders (2 Tim. 4:1-5); to encourage patient waiting (1 Thes. 1:10); to result in expectation and looking (Phil. 3:20; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28); to promote godly moderation (Phil. 4:5); to excite "heavenlymindedness" (Col. 3:1-4); to bring forth successful labor (1 Thes. 2:19-20); to experience comfort (1 Thes. 4:18); to urge steadfastness (2 Thes. 2:1-2; 1 Tim. 6:14; 1 Peter 5:4); to infuse diligence and activity (2 Tim. 4:1-8); to promote mortification of the flesh (Col. 3:4-5; Titus 2:12-13); to require soberness (1 Thes. 5:6; 1 Peter 1:13); to contribute to an abiding with Christ (1 John 2:28; 3:2); to support patience under trial James 5:7-8); and to enforce obedience (2 Tim. 4:1).

¹⁰ Showers, *Maranatha*, pp. 255-56.

The pretribulation Rapture is not just wishful “pie-in-the-sky, in the bye-and-bye” thinking. Rather, it is vitally connected to Christian living in the "nasty here-and-now." No wonder the early church coined a unique greeting of "Maranatha!" which reflected the primacy of the Blessed Hope as a very real presence in their everyday lives. Maranatha literally means "our Lord come!" (1 Cor. 16:22) The life of the church today could only be improved if "Maranatha" were to return as a sincere greeting on the lips of an expectant people.