

## The Pretribulational View of the Timing of the Rapture

*Introduction:* This morning we are going to spend our time looking at the first of the other two major views evangelicals hold to concerning the timing of the rapture. I thought it would be good for us to ease into this issue by quoting Ogden Nash. Ogden Nash was a writer known for his witty poetry. As a quick example, and since next week is Father's Day, here's some advice for us men from Ogden Nash.

To keep your marriage brimming,  
With love in the loving cup,  
Whenever you're wrong, admit it,  
Whenever you're right, shut up!

Some of you are probably familiar with his description of the four blind men from India who are brought into an elephant's cage and they all start to run their hands over the elephant and describe it to the other blind men. One of the men is holding the elephant by the tail and he dogmatically declares to the other men that an elephant looks like a rope. The man holding the elephant by the trunk berates him and says, "No it isn't, the elephant looks like a boa constrictor." The third blind man who is running his hands along the broad side of the elephant says they are both crazy, because an elephant looks like a house. And the final blind man who has squatted down and is running his hands around the elephant's leg says they are all fools because an elephant resembles a tree.

After this description, Nash makes this little rhyme:

"How oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on and on in ignorance,  
'Bout things they've never seen."

That is about the best assessment of eschatology I've ever come across! By virtue of the fact that no one has experienced what we are talking about (after all, it is called the doctrine of future things), and even those given prophetic insight into the future by the Holy Spirit had that message conveyed using apocalyptic language which is not forthright and literal, we have to admit that in spite of our most diligent research and our most ardent efforts to create timelines and speak authoritatively about the events of the future, there remains a certain amount of speculation in everything we say.

Now, this doesn't mean we just walk away from the issue and say, "Well, what's going to happen is going to happen." No, the reason the future is talked about in the Bible is because it is designed to give us hope. This is what Paul is talking about in 1 Th. 4:16-18, where after talking about the rapture of the church, he says, *"Therefore comfort one another with these words."*

We are concerned about eschatology and study it because it reminds us that ultimately, good triumphs. Evil is destroyed. The sacrifices and difficulties of earthly life are redeemed and rewarded. We are vindicated. That is the message of prophecy, and it is thoughts like that that keep us going. So even though we approach this entire issue tentatively, we do it eagerly and with expectations of being edified and encouraged.

So with this in mind, let's think about the other two views concerning the timing of the rapture in relationship to the tribulation that are prominent in Christianity today. The most popular perspective has been given the label *pretribulationism*. In other words, the rapture will take place before the tribulation starts. God's true children will be watching the events of Revelation unfold on earth from the safety of heaven.

Now, there are entire books written about this viewpoint, and some of them are in our library, but I'm going to try to summarize it for you and give you my perspective. And keep in mind that this is my understanding of the position. I'm probably not the best person to be teaching this because I haven't studied it to the depth its adherents have, but, as I see it, pretribulationism is based on three planks: 1) an attempt to harmonize two different sets of verses, 2) a very specific interpretation of the words "wrath" and "hope," and 3) the absence of references to the church in the majority of the book of Revelation.

1. **The harmonization of two divergent truths.** In the New Testament, there is a series of verses that predict a sudden and unexpected coming of Christ. I will give you just three. In Mt. 24:42-44 we read,

"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.<sup>43</sup> "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into.<sup>44</sup> "For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think *He will*.

Then, in Mark 13:32-33 we read, "But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father *alone*. Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the *appointed* time is."

Finally, in 1 Th. 4 we read, "<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord."

There are many other verses that convey the same idea, Jesus could return at any moment to take His children home to heaven.

But on the other hand, what do you do with verses that indicate there are several important events that must occur before Jesus comes back? Let me give you three. What

do we do with Mk. 13:10 where in the context of “wars and rumors of war,” and “nation rising against nation,” and “famines and earthquakes” you read, *“And the gospel must be first preached to all nations”* before these events take place? There are hundreds of ethnic groups who have not heard the gospel yet.

Or how about Mk. 13:24-26 which tells us:

<sup>24</sup> "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup> "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

Finally, in 2 Thess. 2:1-10, we have an extended passage where Paul is addressing the events of the future and he tells the church that Christ will not return unless “the man of sin” is first revealed; and then, Jesus will destroy him at his coming. This “man of sin” is usually identified with the beast of Rev. 13, and is sometimes called the antichrist. *“Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed . . . and takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”*

When you take verses of this nature, you can’t conclude anything differently than that there are certain things that still need to take place before Jesus returns. So we are faced with this dilemma, how do we reconcile these two divergent sets of verses – one that says Jesus could return this afternoon, and the other that says Jesus can’t return until these specific things take place?

The pretribulationist reconciles these two issues by saying there are two returns of Christ, or two second comings of Christ. Or they would say there is only one return, but it has two aspects – a secret coming at which Christ takes Christians out of the world (the rapture of 1 Thess. 4, “meeting the Lord in the air,” He doesn’t actually come all the

way down to the earth, a coming *for* His saints), and then, after seven years of tribulation, a **public** coming at which Christ *with* His saints (Mk. 13, 2 Th. 2).

So that's the first plank in the pretribulationist's platform – reconciling, or harmonizing, these two different sets of verses. Now, the second plank concerns the meaning of the word “wrath,” and closely aligned with that is the concept of hope. Again, let me give you a series of verses, and then comment on them.

1 Th. 5:9 – “For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Th. 1:10 – speaks of waiting “for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Rom. 2:5 – “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

So the pretribulationist says that even though God punishes sin in the here and now, God has not yet poured out His wrath and destruction on an unbelieving world. That is still to come, and it is described for us in the book of Revelation. And these verses promise us that we are going to be delivered from that period of time. And dovetailing with these promises of escaping the wrath of God you have verses like Titus 2:13, “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” Or in 1 Jn. 2:28 we read, “And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.”

The pretribulationist says you can't look forward to the return of the Lord or not shrink away from him at his coming if you are going to have to endure the horrors of the

book of Revelation. The great “hope” of the believer is that we are going to be delivered from these events, we are not going to suffer the same fate of the unbeliever.

Now, the final major plank in this perspective of the timing of the rapture has to do with the absence of the word “church” from Rev. 4 through Rev. 19. In other words, at the end of chapter 3 we have the message to the church in Loadicea, and then in 4:1 we read, *“After this I had a vision of an open door to heaven, and I heard the trumpetlike voice that had spoken to me before, saying, “Come up here and I will show you what must happen afterwards.”* The pretribulationist says the phrase “come up here” is a reference to the rapture of the church, which is why the word “church” isn’t mentioned again until chapter 22. The reasoning here is that we would expect the church to be mentioned often throughout the book if it were here on earth during the tribulation.

So those are the three primary reasons behind a pretribulation perspective on the timing of the rapture. As I mentioned earlier, I am sure there are other men who could explain it and defend it much more convincingly than I have, but I think you get the general idea. In a couple of weeks, we will look at the final view, that of mid-tribulation.

*Conclusion:* I want to close by telling you something I learned years ago when I was in seminary. I was taking a class that dealt with eschatology, and I’ve forgotten most of what we talked about. But the one thing that did stick with me all this time is the four cardinal rules of eschatology.

1. Walk humbly.
2. Pray fervently.
3. Read widely.
4. Dialogue charitably.

God knows exactly what He is doing, and He is going to accomplish His plans concerning the future regardless of how you think it is going to play out. So we'll follow these four rules and trust the future to Him.

*Prayer:* Father, we thank You that history is being played out exactly as You have it planned. We wonder about the future, and in particular, we are frightened by what we see in Revelation as Satan unleashed his final, all-out assault against you – and you pour out your wrath on this world. We trust that however it all comes to pass, you will give grace to your children. And we thank you that our eternity is secure with you in heaven. What a privilege it is to take the time now to reflect on the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf so that we can one day stand in your presence.