

Rapture: 101
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Everything in the Bible is important. This book is the written revelation of God. The God who made the heavens and the earth is inherently mysterious. He's hidden in plain sight, if you will. G.K. Chesterton, the English Catholic writer, said God is like the sun: you can't look at him, but without him you can't see anything else. So, to know God we need him to make himself known; we need him to reveal himself to us. And he's done that a variety of ways and one of the most important ways is through the scriptures. From the most seemingly insignificant detail to the grandest of revelations, the scriptures are all meant to lead us to see the truth about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and how we can relate to him. That would mean, then, that everything in the scriptures should be given its due attention and respect.

Yet, at the same time, I would argue, not everything is equally important. Some things are really clear; other things are not as clear. Some of the things that are really clear are the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins, salvation by grace through faith, that God is the Creator of all the earth, the inspiration and reliability of the scriptures, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit just to name a few. These things are critical to know and understand. Without these core doctrines the very essence of our faith is misunderstood. In fact, you can't even be saved without knowing some of them and embracing them in faith.

And then there are other issues or topics that are important, but maybe not quite as clear and central to our faith; that's why you see wider disagreement throughout the centuries from people who follow Jesus on such things. How do the spiritual gifts operate in the church today and which ones? What's the relationship between the church and the state (we're going to be talking more about that soon)? How should a Christian today regard the Law given to Moses? These are important things to consider, but they are not essential. Believers will disagree and can still call each other brothers and sisters and enjoy communion together in the body of Christ.

Today's topic, the Rapture, I would argue fits in the latter category: important, but not as essential or critical as these other foundational doctrines. That alone, my brothers and sisters, should tell us something about our task this morning. Our goal is to study what the Bible says about the rapture of his church, but in a way, friends, that doesn't get overly committed and earnest on a particular position or view like we would for the essential doctrines of the faith. Or to put it another way: I hope we'd sacrifice life and limb for the gospel of the Lord Jesus to save those who do not believe, but I also hope we'd not bet dinner at Happy Joes over who's right about the Rapture.

To begin, I think it's important to ask, "What is the Rapture?" I know some of you are newer to faith, you're newer to following Jesus (maybe you'd say you're still seeking) and you don't know what I'm talking about; you have really ever heard the word rapture. The word rapture means "to be carried off" or "to be caught up" - some would say "snatched." The word *Rapture* is not in your Bibles. It's a word used to describe the snatching, the carrying off we learn about in the text. In the

key text that we will read in a moment, we're told that God's church is carried off to meet the Lord in the air. When theologians and Bible scholars speak of the rapture 1 Thessalonians 4 is usually the first passage mentioned since it spells out this snatching in the clearest form. So, let's turn there and read it together (READ 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

You can see that God's snatching up those who are alive in Christ isn't the main point in this passage. Vs. 13 makes clear what Paul is trying to do; he's trying to help keep the church body informed about their friends and family who passed away. They were confused, apparently. What's going to happen to them? Where are they? And if Jesus comes back, will they be left behind? So, he says, "Let me tell you about what's going to happen to our deceased brothers and sisters in the Lord so we don't mourn and grieve our loss of them with no hope." He then assures this church that their dead brothers and sisters in the Lord are not and will not be forgotten. If the Lord comes back, Paul says, the dead in Christ won't be separated from the Lord or from them. In fact, Paul says, they will precede us, the living. When the Lord descends from heaven the dead in Christ will rise first; he states that explicitly in vs. 16, "the dead in Christ will rise first" when Jesus comes back in his glory. Then after that (vs. 17), "we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." You can see from this passage that this is a good thing; Paul is encouraging the church saying, "Those who are dead in Christ will be with the Lord; we, too, will be carried off with the Lord when he comes back. Be of good cheer!" Other places in the gospels Jesus speaks of the gathering all of his elect, all of his people in the end, from the four winds of the earth. Again, that's good news! God will bring his people home with him. The is the first reason why the teaching of the rapture is important: it's meant to be an encouragement to followers of Jesus that someday the Lord will come back and bring us home with him.

The second reason why the Rapture is important, in my estimation, is because it concerns itself with the end of the Present Age. The Bible says the present age is coming to an end. That, too, is a really good thing. Everything that's wrong with this world, everything in this world that we rightly see as evil with the new eyes God has given us in the New Birth belongs to the present age. Death and pain, suffering and tears. The forces and powers of evil that wreak havoc in our communities, in our homes and in our nation are a part of the present age. The coming age, the coming reign of Christ, will purge and replace the present age. That's really good news. At the end of 1 Corinthians 16 Paul ends that letter with the cry of "Maranatha, Lord," which means, "Come, Lord! Come!" Put an end to the present age, Jesus. Bring your kingdom in all of it's fullness. When we talk about the rapture, we're talking about an event that has significantly tied to the coming of our Lord when makes all things new. Jesus taught his disciples to be ready for the end. Don't be caught napping or unprepared. There are troubles and distress associated with the things of the end, too, and you want to be ready for the Lord at his coming. "So, pay attention!" Jesus says. Coming to better understanding about the time of the Lord's second coming is good because it helps us get ready.

These things aren't very controversial. Most Bible-believing Christians are going to agree with these main ideas or teachings about the end and the rapture. What's more controversial, or at least fodder for disunity and division within the body of Christ, is the timing of such things and possibly the

specific details about what will happen at the culmination of the present age. Spirited debate in the body of Christ is good for us. Iron sharpening iron; it's one of the ways we grow and mature. But when we are proud and refuse to be corrected by a brother or a sister, when we have an unhealthy craving for controversy, such discussions actually hurt the body of Christ and are not helpful. Keep that in mind when it comes to this discussion and others like it. Let me briefly mention two basic views about the timing of the rapture.

The first view, one my home church taught and I grew up believing, is that the rapture takes place prior to a period of great suffering and trouble on the earth. The position maintains that towards the end God will pour out his wrath on mankind on the earth. But because of his love and mercy, Jesus saves his church from this punishment by rapturing them, snatching them from the earth prior to this time of suffering, which proponents of this view call the Great Tribulation. After the Great Tribulation (most often believed to be a time of 7 years), Jesus will come again with his armies from heaven and destroy the rebellious nations and people on the earth. This view is called the pretribulation view, meaning, the rapture of the church happens prior to the Great Tribulation.

The alternate view is called the posttribulation view. Imagine what that means. It means that the church, God's people, are not raptured prior to any time or age of tribulation, but instead the church goes through the same time of trouble like the rest of the world and is only raptured, gathered by Jesus after this period of trouble. God's mercy is found not in the church being relieved of the trouble and hardship of the tribulation according to the pretrib view, but instead God displays his mercy by keeping, guarding, preserving his church during the hardship. While the trouble and tribulation stirs God's enemies to hate him and curse him even more, the hardships and sufferings on the earth refine and purify God's people where their faith becomes more precious than gold that's refined by fire. So, you can see how these two alternative views have a different idea as to how God will care for his church during times of tribulation. In the first, God's mercy keeps his people from suffering the terrible distress of the trouble in the world and the second view God's mercy is revealed in how he guards and keeps his church in the faith in spite of the trouble.

I'm not persuaded by the evidence that the church of Jesus Christ will be raptured prior to any time of tribulation on the earth. Instead, I think the scriptural evidence points to the reality that as unbelievers experience the tribulation and troubles that come on this earth as the wrath of God, which we know from Romans 1 is being revealed from heaven against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (we don't have to wait for it; it's already here and growing), God's people are kept and guarded in the faith while they go through some of the same trouble. The unbelieving experience this trouble as a form of judgment and punishment; the believing experience such troubles as trials the refine and purify their faith. There are several reasons why I believe this, but let me highlight just two of them.

First of all, the evidence for a rapture of God's church prior to any 7 year period of tribulation and suffering is very small in my opinion. As some of you men know, I studied and taught the book of Revelation over a two year period on Thursday mornings a number of years ago (I think we started that 7 years ago). And one of the things that struck me was in the most definitive and comprehensive

book about the end of this present age and the judgment of God on the earth at the end of this age (that's the book of Revelation) the rapture is nowhere to be found; it's not presented at all as an important doctrine in the book. You will look in vain to find an explicit reference and clear teaching on the rapture of God's church in this important apocalyptic book. That strikes me as strangely odd. Odd enough to make me wonder if it's really going to happen that way.

Some believe it is in Revelation, Revelation 7:14, which says, "... 'These are the ones [people saved from every tribe, people, language and nation] *coming out* of the great tribulation. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'" Those who subscribe to a pretrib view will say, "There, God's church come out of the Great Tribulation. They don't have to through it because they are raptured first." There's no reference to a snatching or a being caught up - the word "coming out of" is not the same as we see in 1 Thess. 4. And I would just ask, "On which side do they come out? Do they come out of a time of tribulation at the beginning, before it happens, or do they come out after as ones who have endured by faith?" Why must one presume they come out of the tribulation before? If you saw me *coming out* of the gym, which you presume I was first in the gym? I think you would. And look what Jesus says of those who *come out* of the great tribulation in vs. 17, "... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Where else do we see God doing that (or maybe the better question is, when)? Revelation 21... at the end (vs. 4): "He will wipe every tear from their eyes."

Jesus makes a reference to the gathering of his children at the end of the present age in Matthew 24 as he teaches his disciples. But listen to when the gathering takes places (READ Mt. 24:29-31). In both the Matthew passage and the one we read earlier from 1 Thess. 4 there is a trumpet call and then an event where God gathers his people. But in Matthew 24 we are told this collecting or gathering of God's people happens immediately after the tribulation. I just don't see strong evidence in the scriptures for a rapture of God's people prior to a period of tribulation; or I would say I see at least as much evidence for one after instead.

The second reason why I don't believe the evidence supports a rapture of God's church prior to tribulation or trouble on the earth is because the scriptures are clear that God's people will endure trouble and tribulation. John quotes Jesus in John 16:33 where our Lord says, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Over and over again, we are told to prepare for suffering as followers of Jesus. When Paul and Barnabas were finishing up their first missionary journey they stopped by the churches they planted to encourage them and we are told they went (Acts 14:22) "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

When I was in seminary back in 2001 I went to a pastor's conference where a Romanian pastor was speaking; his name is Joseph Tson. In the 60's and 70's, when communism had a grip on Eastern Europe, Christians were regularly persecuted and mistreated in Romania. Pastor Tson recounted many of the times when he suffered terrible mistreatment as a Christian. During a question and answer session he was asked about suffering and American Christian's relative lack of

suffering. And he said something that I haven't forgotten. He said something like, "You American Christians wonder if Christians will be persecuted in the tribulation. What you should be wondering is 'Will American Christians be persecuted in the tribulation' because Christians everywhere else are persecuted during great times of tribulation." That was very convicting to me and it showed me that the comfort and ease we are so familiar with is so unfamiliar and odd to so many of our brothers and sisters around the world.

We will go through tribulation; don't count on a rapture saving us from trouble. Now, most pretrib subscribers believe that, too; they do believe that Christians will go through trouble. What's different is that someone who believes in a pretrib rapture view believes that a time is coming when the suffering is so intense that God will rescue and rapture his church out of it. So, there's tribulation; and then there's the Great Tribulation that's greater in intensity.

I do believe the rapture does have a strong appeal for American Christians because of our fear of suffering. Friends, let's not forget what the scriptures say. Whatever ends up happening with the rapture - and maybe I'm dead wrong about my view and there is a rapture prior to a Great Tribulation period of 7 years - we are told that suffering for Christ is inevitable for believers; and we are also told it is a beautiful, desirable thing. Paul says in Phil. 3:10, "I want to know him... and share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." Peter says (4:13), "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also be glad when his glory is revealed." Our own Lord said (Matthew 5:11-12), "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

I know such suffering can be scary to think about. That's why we have the promises: God will keep us. Again, regardless of your rapture view, remember, there's something worse than suffering; what's worse is falling away from the Lord. And suffering tempts us to do that. So, prepare yourself to suffer. Remind yourself of the rewards for those who suffer for Jesus. They are worth it. And remind yourself of the provision of God; he will keep you in him. And count falling away from God, giving into sin and selfishness as your greatest threat.

Read your word, my brothers and sisters, and come to these conclusions yourself. As I said, I read and studied Revelation for 2 years straight; I'm so glad I did. It's given me stronger convictions as to what I believe. But who knows? Maybe I'm still wrong. And if I am, I pray I will change my view in time as I keep studying and listening to others. The good news is God wins in the end and he's so kindly invited us to be a part of the victory.

Key verse: 1 Thess. 4:17 ~ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Questions for the week

- How much thought do you give to the rapture and events concerning the end? Why is it important to do so?

- What's the most important point God pressed on your heart today from the message?
- "Iron sharpens iron" is a metaphor describing how we can mutually bless each other. What do you need to be one who receives the help of others and provides encouragement to others?