

The Rapture

Why it cannot occur before the Second Coming

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The date is a day in the near future. The place, a Boeing 747 over the Atlantic on its way to London Heathrow. Most passengers are sleeping or dozing. Suddenly almost half the passengers disappear into thin air. First one, then another of the remaining passengers cries out as they realize their seat mate is missing, only the clothes of those who have gone are left behind. The remaining passengers cry, they scream, they leap from their seats. Parents are frantically searching for their children, but all the children have disappeared in midflight.

Science fiction? No; this is a scene from the first volume of the projected multivolume series *Left Behind*[™].¹ Written by the Christian authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, their books have shown up on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and can be obtained in most bookstores.

These books are based on the theory that seven years prior to the second advent of Christ, faithful Christians will be translated, taken up into heaven—they will be raptured. Why exactly seven years? Because one of the mainstays of this theory is that the last week of the seventy prophetic weeks in Daniel 9:24 is still future.

The roots of the rapture theory

The roots of this theory may be traced back to the time of the Counter-Reformation. The Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century identified the papacy as the antichrist of prophecy.² Several Jesuit scholars undertook the task of defending the papacy against these attacks. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), head of the Jesuit College in Rome, sought to nullify the prophetic year-day principle as proof for the 1,260 years of papal rule.³ The Spanish Jesuit, Francisco Ribera (1537-1591) projected the antichrist prophecies into the future (futurism), and another Spaniard, Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613), contended that these prophecies were already fulfilled in the time of the Roman Empire (preterism).

Alcazar's preterism was soon adopted by the Calvinist Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) in Holland, and in time became the favorite method for the interpretation of biblical prophecy among liberal theologians.

Ribera applied the antichrist prophecies to a future personal antichrist who would appear in the time of the end and continue in power for three and a half years.⁴ For nearly three centuries futurism was largely confined to the Roman Catholic Church, until in 1826 Samuel R. Maitland (1792-1866), librarian to the Archbishop of Canterbury, published a 72-page pamphlet⁵ in which he promoted Ribera's idea of a future antichrist. Soon other Protestant clergymen turned to futurism and began propagating it far and wide. Among them were John Henry Newman, leader of the Oxford movement, who later became a Roman Catholic cardinal, and Edward Irving, the famous Scottish Presbyterian minister.

Dispensationalism

Ribera's futurism laid the foundation for dispensationalism, which teaches that God has dealt differently with humanity during different eras of biblical history. John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) is usually regarded as the father of dispensationalism. He was a lawyer and Anglican clergyman who in 1828, disillusioned with the spiritual laxness of the church, joined the Brethren Movement. He had a brilliant mind; not only did he preach fluently in German and French, he also translated the New Testament into German, French, and English. He was the author of more than 50 books, and in 1848 became the leader of the Exclusive Brethren.

Darby developed an elaborate philosophy of history in which he divided history into eight eras or dispensations, "each of which contained a different order by which God worked out his redemptive plan."⁶ Furthermore, Darby asserted that Christ's coming would occur in two stages. The first, an invisible "secret rapture" of true believers, would end the great "parenthesis" or church age which began when the Jews rejected Christ. Following the rapture, the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel would be literally fulfilled,⁷ leading to the great tribulation which would end with the second coming of Christ in glory. At that time Christ would establish a literal one thousand-year kingdom on earth with Israel at its center.

Darby's eschatological views figured prominently in American fundamentalism in the 1920s when conservative Christians defended orthodox Protestant Christianity against the challenges of Darwinism and liberal theology. Today, most evangelical Christians have accepted the main pillars of Darby's eschatology.

The concept of a rapture prior to the final tribulation period was not new with Darby. "Peter Jurieu in his book *Approaching Deliverance of the Church* (1687) taught that Christ would come in the air to rapture the saints and return to heaven before the battle of Armageddon. He spoke of a secret rapture prior to His coming in glory and the judgment at Armageddon. Philip Doderidge's commentary on the New Testament (1738) and John Gill's commentary on the New Testament (1748) both used the term rapture and spoke of it as imminent. It is clear that these men believed that this coming will precede Christ's descent to the earth and the time of judgment. The purpose was to preserve believers from the time of judgment."⁸

The doctrine of the rapture was disseminated around the world, primarily through the Brethren Movement and the Scofield Reference Bible. In the twentieth century it was taught in schools like Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary. Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* and many books of a similar nature further propagated the secret rapture theory.

Investigating the rapture theory

The rapture theory is based on a number of assumptions. Due to space limitations, we can briefly investigate only two of them: (1) that the seventieth week of the seventy-week prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27 is still future; and (2) that the church will not go through the great tribulation.

1. The Seventieth Week of Daniel 9:27.

Though the idea that Daniel's seventieth week is still future surfaced first in the writings of Irenaeus (second century A.D.),⁹ it played no significant role in Christian theology until it became a foundational pillar of dispensationalism in the nineteenth century. According

to this view, the sixty-nine weeks end with the triumphal entry, and the seventieth week “is separated from the other sixty-nine by an indefinite period of time.”¹⁰ Why? Because the church age is seen as a parenthesis in God’s plan, i.e., the prophetic clock stopped on Easter Sunday and will begin to tick again after the rapture when God assumes His direct dealings with Israel in the future.

In response: (1) There is no logical or exegetical reason for separating the seventieth week from the other sixty-nine weeks. There is no other time prophecy in Scripture which has such a gap.¹¹ (2) The subject of Daniel 9:26 is the Messiah, and the subject in the next verse is also the Messiah, not the antichrist. According to the verse pattern in Daniel 9:25, 26 the prince in “the people of the prince” can also refer to Jesus.¹² But even if the prince in verse 26 refers to Titus (as a type of the antichrist) and not to the Messiah, he is not the subject of verse 27 because grammatically he is in a subordinate position to “the people.” It is the people who destroy the city and the sanctuary not the prince. The “he” of verse 27 must refer back to the Messiah at the beginning of verse 26. (3) In Daniel 9:27 we read, “he shall confirm the covenant with many.” The text does not say he will make a covenant.

The Hebrew idiom “to cut a covenant” is not used in this text. Instead the Messiah, it says, will strengthen or “cause a covenant to prevail.” The reference is not to a new covenant but to a covenant already made. If the antichrist is to make a new covenant with “many,” the prophet would have used the appropriate language of “cutting a covenant.”

Contrary to the dispensationalist theory, the seventieth week presents the high points of the Savior’s ministry.¹³ During the first half of the week He strengthened or confirmed the covenant through His teaching. An example of this is where Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, took a selection of the Ten Commandments from the old covenant and strengthened or deepened their meaning. Then in the middle of the week He brought to an end the theological meaning of the rounds of sacrifices by offering Himself up for the salvation of the human race. Thus the everlasting covenant was confirmed and ratified by the death of Jesus Christ.

2. *The Church and the Great Tribulation.*

According to dispensationalism, the tribulation after the rapture of the church will last seven years. Its purpose is “to bring about the conversion of a multitude of Jews”¹⁴ who will experience the fulfillment of Israel’s covenants. First Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9; Romans 5:9; and Revelation 3:10 support this concept.

Careful exegesis of the texts in Romans and 1 Thessalonians indicates that the “wrath to come” refers to God’s wrath which will destroy the wicked at the Second Coming¹⁵ as indicated in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10. It is the manifestation of God’s wrath in the final judgment, not the time of tribulation preceding Christ’s coming. Paul says that we “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10). It is the second advent of Christ, at which time the rapture will take place, that delivers us from the wrath to come. Hence this wrath cannot come prior to the Second Advent.

The “hour of trial (*peirasmos*)” in Revelation 3:10, may well refer to the great tribulation, but the text does not say that God’s people will not experience it. The phrase “will keep you from” comes from the two Greek words *téreo* and *ek*. *Téreo* has the meaning “to keep watch over,” “guard,” “preserve”;¹⁶ and the preposition *ek* has the basic meaning of “out of,” “from”¹⁷ referring to coming out of something or from somewhere. Another Greek preposition (*apo*) expresses the idea of separation, “away from.”¹⁸

In His high-priestly prayer Jesus says: “I do not pray that You should take them out [ek] of the world, but that You should keep [téréó] them from [ek] the evil one” (John 17:15, NKJV). To “keep from the evil one” does not mean that Satan could not tempt the disciples, but Jesus is asking the Father to keep the disciples safe in the temptation, to watch over them, and to prevent Satan from overcoming them.

Similarly, in 2 Peter 2:9 the apostle writes: “the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of [ek] temptations [peirasmos]” (NKJV). The apostle here is not saying that God’s people will be kept away from (apo) temptations, but that He will deliver them out of (ek) the midst of them. In the same way the apostle John in Revelation 3:10 is not saying that the believers will be kept away from (apo) the hour of trial (peirasmos), which is the same word as “temptations” in 2 Peter 2:9, but that they will be kept safe during that time.

Thus none of the texts used to support the idea that the church will not go through the great tribulation is really saying that. In fact Scripture clearly teaches that the saints of God will go through the great tribulation (Matt. 24:9; Mark 13:11; Luke 21:12-19; Rev. 13:14-17).¹⁹

Conclusion

The rapture theory, of recent origin, has captured the imagination of millions of sincere Christians. Its central teaching—that the fulfillment of the seventieth week of Daniel’s 70-week prophecy is still future—is based on unbiblical presuppositions, and its teaching that the church will not go through the great tribulation caters to the human emotion of fear of hardship, but it is contrary to the Bible’s teaching. According to Scripture, the church will experience the great tribulation, but will be delivered out of it through the rapture at Jesus’ second advent.

1 Trademark owned by Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois.

2 Martin Luther, for example, said: “I believe the pope is the masked and incarnate devil, because he is the Antichrist” *Sämtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House [1887]), 23:845.

3 L. R. Conradi, *The Impelling Force of Prophetic Truth* (London: Thynne and B. Co., Ltd., 1935), 346.

4 *Ibid.*, 2:489-93.

5 *An Enquiry Into the Grounds on Which the Prophetic Period of Daniel and St. John has been supposed to Consist of 1260 Years*, 2nd ed. (London: 1837), 2.

6 See Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 292. 7 This view completely ignores the conditional nature of many Old Testament prophecies (Deut. 28:1, 15; Jer. 4:1; 18:7-10).

8 See Mal Couch, ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology: A Practical Guide to the People, Viewpoints, and History of Prophetic Studies* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 346.

9 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.25.3, (Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:554). Speaking of the antichrist he says, Daniel “points out the time that this tyranny shall last, during which the saints shall be put to flight, they who offer a pure sacrifice unto God: ‘And in the midst of the week,’ he says, ‘The sacrifice and the libation shall be taken away, and the abomination of desolation [shall be brought] into the temple . . . Now three years and six months constitute the half week.’”

10 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 247.

11 None of the supposed prophecies with gaps listed by Pentecost (247) are time prophecies. All are based on the idea that Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel must be literally fulfilled to Israel in the future.

12 1. verse 25—Messiah (*mashiach*)—Prince (nagid)—A+B

2. verse 26a—Messiah (*mashiach*)—A-

3. verse 26b—Prince (*nagid*)—B

“This pattern suggests that all three references are to the same Messiah Prince designated by the first occurrence of this word pair in verse 25. If so, then ‘the people of the ruler who will come’ refers to the people of the Messiah. . . . If this interpretation is correct, in what sense did the people of the Jewish Messiah Prince destroy the city and the sanctuary in A.D. 70? The Roman army was indeed the physical agent which brought about the literal destruction of Jerusalem. But why did they destroy it? They did so because Judea had rebelled against Rome. If Judea had not rebelled , the Roman army would never have come there, and Jerusalem would have been spared.” W. H. Shea, *Daniel 7-12* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1996), 75, 76.

13 In dispensational thinking Christ’s death does not even fall within the 70-week period. “The cutting off of the Messiah took place only a few days after the sixty-ninth week terminated” (*Pentecost*, 248) and about two thousand years before the seventieth week begins sometime in the future.

14 *Ibid.*, 237.

15 See John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 146; John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans* NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1965), 171; Charles Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1990), 88.

16 W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, “Téreó,” *A Greek- English Lexicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

17 *Ibid.*, “ek.”

18 *Ibid.*, “apo.”

19 To claim that these texts refer to the Jewish remnant and not to the church (*Pentecost*, 278, 238) is again based on the assumption that God must literally fulfill His prophecies to Israel.