

THE RAPTURE- BEFORE OR AFTER THE TRIBULATION?

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The most relevant text relating to the rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4:17. This verse teaches that at the coming of Jesus, his followers shall be caught up in clouds to meet him in the air. In the Latin Vulgate the word for “shall be caught up” is “rapiemur” from which “rapture” is derived. It means “we shall be carried away” or “we shall be snatched.”

The original Greek word is “harpazo.” According to Strong it means to seize (in various applications) catch (away, up), pluck, pull, take (by force). These meanings are confirmed by the 13 references to harpazo in the New Testament. For example, the words “take by force” in Jn. 6:15 which relate to the people wanting to take Jesus by force to make him a king, are translated from harpazo. The same applies to the reference in Act. 23:10 to soldiers having to “take by force” the apostle Paul to rescue him from a violent mob. The word translated “catches” in Jn. 10:12 in relation to a wolf catching or snatching sheep comes from harpazo. And in verses 28 and 29 of the same chapter the word “pluck” in relation to plucking or pulling out of the hand is also harpazo. The word “pulling” in Jude v23 in relation to pulling someone out of the fire, has also been translated from harpazo.

The reference in Act. 8:39 to Philip being “caught away” by the Spirit of the lord is particularly interesting in connection with the subject of the rapture. The words “caught away” come from harpazo and relate to Philip being physically transported for many kilometres through the air from a road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza up to Ashdod (Act. 8:26, 40).

Unfortunately, some people who have an aversion to supernatural experiences and feel more comfortable keeping Scripture as much as possible within the confines of normal human experience, get technical with the word “air” in 1 Thes. 4:17 in order to avoid the conclusion that Christ’s followers will literally be caught up physically into the air to meet Christ at his coming. They maintain that as the air is above the earth, being caught up into it simply signifies that the saints will be elevated in rank as rulers over those left on earth.

However, when Scripture refers to dust being thrown into the air (Act. 22:23); shadow boxers beating the air (1 Cor. 9:26); people speaking into the air (1 Cor. 14:9) etc, the reference is clearly to the atmosphere.

The reference to Philip being caught away and transported through the air from one place to another, is not the only case or example in Scripture.

The prophet Ezekiel was also lifted up by the Spirit into the air and

taken from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezk. 8:3. 3:11-15).

Elijah was also caught up into the air - literally and physically (1 Kng. 18:12. 2 Kng. 2:11).

Enoch was physically removed (“translated”) by God to another locality to avoid premature death at the hands of violent men like Lamech who lived contemporary with him (Gen. 4:23-24. 5:21-24. Heb. 11:5).

Paul was “caught up” (harpazo) into the city of God (“paradise”) and, like the apostle John, he was given revelations of it. But, whether Paul’s experience was “in the body” or “out of the body” he could not tell, so neither can we! But we do know that the Spirit of God drew Jesus up into the air, literally, physically and bodily and that he is going to return in the same manner (Act. 1:9-11).

Angels also of course constantly ascend and descend through the air and will accompany Jesus when he returns (Gen. 28:12. Dan. 9:21. Matt. 25:31).

So then, there is nothing new or peculiar about the power of God transporting people through the air, and according to 1 Thes. 4:17, this is what is going to happen to the saints at Christ’s return! And 1 Thes. 4:17 is not the only reference to this momentous event.

OTHER REFERENCES TO THE RAPTURE

Paul also refers to the gathering of the saints in 2 Thes. 2:1: “Now we beseech you brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him ...” Here, Paul is referring back to the reference in his first letter in relation to being caught up into the air to meet the Lord when he descends from heaven.

Jesus himself referred to this during his earthly ministry. He said that when he returns “he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his chosen ones from the four winds, from one end of the horizon to the other” (Matt. 24:31).

In one of his parables, Jesus referred to this gathering in terms of being carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom (Lk. 16:22). Many shall come from the east and the west and shall recline (as did John on Jesus’ bosom Jn. 21:20) with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of God (Matt. 8:11). Close personal fellowship is what is meant by Abraham’s bosom.

On another occasion Jesus said: “If I go away I will come again (second coming) and receive you to myself, so that where I am you may be there also.” In the revelation of Jesus given to John, reference is also made to the end time witnesses ascending up to heaven in a cloud in the sight of their enemies (Rev. 11:12). It is clearly not a secret event.

This gathering of the saints to meet Christ at his return is not only

referred to in the New Testament, but also the Old. For example: Ps. 50:1-5: “Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence; a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be raging about him ... gather my saints together to me: those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice” i.e. Christ’s sacrifice!

In that day each saint will say, in the words of Ps. 19:16-19: “He (God) sent from above, he took me, drew me out of many waters (persecution and tribulation v4, 43); he delivered me from my strong enemy (the beast), and from those who hated me; for they were too strong for me ... he brought me into a large place” (city of God).

MEET THE LORD IN THE AIR

Some hold to the view that when Paul says the saints will meet the Lord in the air, he means that Jesus will not at that stage actually descend to the earth itself, but hover above it while the saints are gathered to him, and then turn around and take them back to heaven, and then at a later date, return to earth accompanied by the saints, making it his third coming. Scripture however never refers to a third coming. It refers to the time of the return of Christ as “the second time” (Heb. 9:28).

The true significance of the word “meet” confirms this. The Greek word translated “meet” is “apantesis.” It is not the usual word for meet but a special word which only occurs 4 times in the New Testament (Matt. 25:1, 6. Act. 28:15. 1 Thes. 4:17). Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament words points out that apantesis is used in the papyri of a newly arriving magistrate. He says: “It seems that the special idea of the word was the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary.”

This particular sense of the word is illustrated and confirmed in Act. 28:15. This verse refers to Christians from Rome venturing forth from the city to “meet” (apantesis) Paul at Appii Forum, which was a market town about 70kms from Rome. When they met Paul, he did not turn around and take them all back to where he had come from. No! They met him to accompany him on the rest of his journey to Rome. That is what the word apantesis signified. In more modern times it has likewise been the custom for government officials to go to the airport to officially welcome a visiting dignitary and accompany him to their city. They don’t hop on the plane and fly back with him to where he came from!

HIS FEET SHALL STAND UPON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

According to Act. 1:9-12 Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives which is on the eastern side of Jerusalem. While he was ascending, angels who stood by said to the apostolic onlookers: “You men

of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven.”

Jesus did not depart secretly and neither will he return secretly. The Bible does not teach a secret coming of the Lord or a secret rapture. Jesus warned that some false teachers would claim that he has come in secret, but he said: “Believe it not; for as the lightning comes out of the east and shines as far as the west, so also shall the coming of the son of man be” (Matt. 24:26-27) i.e. very bright (2 Thes. 2:8). “Every eye shall see him” (Rev. 1:7). To those not expecting him, his coming will be like a thief in the night, but not to those who are expecting him (1 Thes. 5:1-5).

Not only do we infer from Act. 1:9-12 that the return of Jesus will be as literal and physical as his departure, but also that the touchdown pad will be the same as his departure pad, namely: the Mount of Olives.

This is confirmed by a prophecy in Zech. 14:4 which was given around 500 years before Jesus was born. It says: “His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem to the east.” This prophecy continues by referring to an earthquake of unprecedented magnitude that will occur, splitting the Mount of Olives in half and causing the site of Jerusalem to be elevated and all the surrounding hill country to be levelled into a plain.

Zech. 14:5 says that on that day, not only will the Lord come, but also “all the saints with Thee.” And v9 states that “The Lord shall become king over all the earth.” The rest of the chapter reveals that Jesus will establish the kingdom of God upon earth and rule over it with his saints from Jerusalem (the new Jerusalem). Send for the free booklet: “Jerusalem - City of Remarkable History and Destiny.”

Now, if Jerusalem is the geographical centre of Christ’s return, and all the saints will accompany him through the air on his victorious descent, it should be evident, in view of the fact that the saints live in all parts of the planet, that they will all have to get over to Israel and above Jerusalem somehow or other to meet Jesus in the air. And Jesus is not likely to ring them up or send them an e-mail telling them to get over there by road, rail or aeroplane! No! As we have seen, he shall send his angels to gather them up from one end of the earth to the other.

It does seem clear from Scripture that the Lord wants His church to accompany or escort him in glory when he descends to earth. The reference in Zech. 14:5 to the Lord coming and all the saints with him does not stand alone in teaching this. Jude v14 says: “Behold, the Lord comes with a multitude of his saints.” 1 Thes. 3:13 refers to “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all the saints.” And we are informed in Col. 3:4 that when Christ shall appear, we shall also appear with him in glory.

CAUGHT UP INTO THE CITY OF GOD

In the event of the saints being caught up to meet Jesus as he descends, it is natural to wonder if they will remain out in the open in the atmosphere, or be taken into the city of God, the new Jerusalem, as it descends to earth.

When the apostle John was given a vision of the city of God descending, the angel who was talking to him said: “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife” (i.e. the church) Rev. 21:9. It is concluded from this that the church was in the city as it descended to earth. As it turned out, John got so caught up with the size and glory of the city and his descriptions of it, that he made no reference to the church inside the city. Because of this, some have concluded that the city is not literal but symbolical of the church. However, Rev. 21 does not say that the city is the bride, but rather that it is adorned like a bride. In Biblical times, brides were adorned with jewels, so the adornment of the city of God is compared with the adornment of a bride.

References in Rev. 21 and 22 to the gates of the city being open day and night and of people entering the city, along with references elsewhere to the Lord’s throne being in the city and of millions worshipping him, makes it clear that this is a literal city. For more on this subject send for the free booklet entitled: “The City of God - Literal Not Symbolic.”

THE GREAT TRIBULATION

When Jesus was asked what the signs of his coming would be, he said that one of the signs would be “great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, nor ever shall be” (Matt. 24:21).

This naturally gives rise to the question: Will the saints be caught away to meet the Lord prior to the tribulation or after? Before pursuing an answer to this question, some thought should firstly be given to the nature of the tribulation itself, the cause of it, its time in history and its duration.

Prior to referring to the great tribulation such as has never been before, Jesus referred to a prophecy made by Daniel (Matt. 24:15), indicating that he had Daniel’s prophecies in mind. This is certainly true in relation to the statement about the great tribulation such as has never been before. Jesus was clearly quoting Dan. 12:1 which refers to “a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation till that time.”

The context of this statement is the key to understanding what the unprecedented time of trouble is all about, and it all starts in Dan. 11:40 which projects us into “the time of the end,” elsewhere referred to in the prophetic Scriptures as “the latter days” and “the last days” i.e. the last lap of human history - the days leading up to “the last day” when Jesus

returns to the earth.

The prophecy in Dan. 11:40-45 describes an invasion of the land of Israel by a “king of the north” resulting in many Jews in “the glorious land” (the holy land) being “overthrown.” The king of the north ends up planting himself on Mount Moriah, the holy mount at Jerusalem where God ordained the Jewish temple to be situated. This results in the king of the north coming to his end with no one to help him (Dan. 11:45).

Ignoring the chapter division at chapter 12 (for there are no chapter divisions in the original manuscripts), the reference in chapter 12:1 to Michael the archangel whose commission is to defend the Jews, indicates that the king of the north will be terminated by divine intervention. And reference in the same verse to this all taking place at a time of trouble such as has never been before, indicates that the king of the north’s invasion and overthrow of the Jewish people is the cause of the unprecedented trouble for Israel.

It should be evident from this that the land and people of Israel will be the vortex of the great tribulation, which is not surprising in view of the fact that Israel is the focal centre of Bible prophecy. It is also evident in the list of signs given by Jesus in Matt. 24 that Israel is at the centre of the tribulation. In v15 he refers to “the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet” who will “stand in the holy place.” This is a reference to the king of the north who will place himself on the holy temple mount at Jerusalem. Jesus then went on to say: “Let those who are in Judea (Jews) flee to the mountains ... and pray that your flight be not on the Sabbath day” (a Jewish observance). For then shall be great tribulation” - a time of “wrath” upon Israel according to Jesus (Lk. 21:23).

THE LAST TWO SIGNS OF CHRIST’S COMING

Now, in 2 Thes. 2 Paul writes to the church to put their troubled minds at ease due to false teachers claiming that Christ had already returned. The reason for them being troubled was because Paul had told them previously in his first letter (1 Thes. 4:17) that when Christ returns they would be caught up into the air to meet him, so they would naturally be anxious about not having been caught up if he has returned.

In response to this, Paul tells them that in order to avoid being deceived in relation to claims concerning Christ’s coming, they need to know that he will not come until two major events take place first - the two last signs of the second coming. These two last signs are firstly: Christians falling away from the faith, and secondly: an arrogant “man of Sin” who is opposed to all forms of worship (an anti-God atheist) who will plant himself in the temple of God (the Jewish temple which will have been rebuilt at the time) proclaiming himself to be God and

demanding to be worshipped as a god. This man of sin can be equated with the king of the north in Dan. 11 and the abomination of desolation referred to by Jesus. In all 3 cases (Dan. 11:45. Matt. 23:15. 2 Thes. 2:4), the Jewish temple mount is the focal centre of end time events. It will be due to the tribulation caused by the man of sin's anti-God and anti-Christian policies that will cause many Christians to fall away from their faith, and more will be said about this shortly in relation to "the beast" in the book of Revelation.

Before going there, it needs to be pointed out that a prophecy in Ezk. 38, like Dan. 11:40-45, also speaks about Israel being invaded from the north by an enemy, and he will be supported by a Moslem confederacy in the latter days. Verse 2 tells us that the leader is "Gog" and that he is the prince of Rosh, which was the ancient name for Russia. He is the king of the north referred to in Dan. 11 and the man of sin referred to in 2 Thes. 2. During this invasion, according to Ezk. 39:23-29, many Jews will perish and be taken captive and put to shame. Zech. 13:8 says two thirds of the population will be cut off. This refers to the great tribulation, and according to Dan. 12:6-7 the period of time involved will be "a time, times, and an half" which is 3½ years. (Send for free booklet on "The Six Time Prophecies in the Book of Daniel").

Joel's prophecy of the invasion of Israel by the northern army says the land of Israel will be turned into a desolate wilderness (Joel 2:3). This time of Israel's tribulation is referred to in Jer. 30:7: "Alas, for that day is great, so that none is like it: It is even the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it." Dan. 12:7 explains that the purpose of this tribulation period is to "shatter (break, crush) the self reliant power of the nation of Israel. The breaking of the power of the nation of natural Israel is in preparation for the coming of their Messiah and being transformed into spiritual Israel, trusting in God's power instead of their own.

At the end of the tribulation period, divine intervention will take place resulting in Israel being delivered from the enemy. This will be the time of the battle of Armageddon and Ezk. 38:18-23 lists the terrible judgements that the Lord will execute against the enemy on that day, resulting in the Lord magnifying and sanctifying Himself and becoming known in the eyes of many nations.

Bodies of the enemy will lay strewn over the land. Ezk. 39:4, 17-20 says a call will go out to all the ravenous birds of prey to come and devour the bodies of the slain. These words are quoted in Rev. 19:17-18 in relation to birds of prey being summoned to devour the dead bodies of the beast and his armies who have been killed by the Lord at the battle of Armageddon. We conclude from this that the beast is "Gog, prince of Rosh" (Ezk. 38); "the king of the north" (Dan. 11:40-); "the abomination of desolation" (Matt. 24:15); "the man of sin" (2 Thes. 2).

Considerable space is given in the book of Revelation to the beast which gives us more insights in relation to the tribulation he causes. Reference is made in Rev. 11:7-8 to him waging war against the Lord's witnesses and killing them, leaving their dead bodies lying out in the open in the street of the great city where the Lord was crucified, namely: Jerusalem, which is likened to Sodom due to its immoral state.

Rev. 13:5-6 says the beast will have an arrogant and boastful mouth, blaspheming God, and will continue doing this for 42 months (3½ years). Verses 7-8 says he will wage war with the saints and overcome them, and will have power over all nations, resulting in all who dwell upon the earth whose names are not written in the book of life, worshipping him. Verses 15-17 says that those who refuse to worship him and bow to his dictates, will not be able to buy or sell anything. This is the time when many Christians will fall away from, and abandon their faith, as Paul warned in 2 Thes. 2. Members of families will betray one another turning each other over to the authorities (Lk. 21:16).

The beast is clearly anti-God (an atheist), anti-Israel, anti-Christian, anti-religious. This is borne out in Rev. 17 where reference is made to him destroying Rome, the power centre of the Roman Catholic church, with fire within the space of an hour. There is only one kind of fire that could destroy a city the size of Rome within an hour, namely: nuclear. No wonder the nations of the world will say: "Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?" (Rev. 13:4). How could anyone deal with a maniac who has no compunction dropping nuclear warheads on cities like Rome?

No wonder this period in history is referred to as a time of great tribulation such as has never been before. Jesus said that men's hearts would be failing them for fear as a result of fearful anticipations for the future (Lk. 21:26).

It is evident from the signs that Jesus and other prophets have given of the second coming, that although the vortex of the great tribulation will be in the land of Israel, all other nations on the planet will also be affected. There are warnings in Matt. 24 and Lk. 21 of false messiahs appearing on the scene, unprecedented famines, pestilences and earthquakes in different places; fearful sights shall be occurring in the sun, moon and stars, causing distress among the nations with perplexity due to having no solution; the sea and the waves shall also be roaring. Rev. 8:8 refers to a great mountain burning with fire plummeting into the sea causing a third part to become blood. This sounds like an asteroid collision with earth. Rev. 16:3 refers to the sea becoming as the blood of a dead man, causing the death of all sea life.

PRE OR POST TRIBULATION?

In view of the fearful and frightening conditions that will be happening during the great tribulation, it would be natural to want or hope to avoid and escape them. Fear of these future conditions could easily lead Christians into convincing themselves that they will be caught away to meet the Lord before the time of the great tribulation arrives. This view is called “The pre-tribulation rapture.” The view that Christians will be caught away at the end of the tribulation is called “The post tribulation rapture.” Let us now have a look at what the Scriptures say in relation to this.

Before doing this it should again be pointed out that if Jesus returns prior to the great tribulation to hover above earth to gather up his followers to take them back to heaven, and then at a later date comes again with them to the earth to set up his kingdom, this would be his third coming. But Scripture knows nothing about a third coming, only a second coming (Heb. 9:28). This means that every time Scripture refers to the return of Jesus as his “coming,” we don’t have to decide whether it refers to his second or third coming. It always and only refers to his second coming to establish his kingdom on earth and involves his feet standing upon the earth with his saints, not hovering and disappearing back to heaven. As mentioned earlier: there will not be anything secret about this coming!

For this reason Scripture links his coming with his “appearing” and “kingdom,” as we read in 2 Tim. 4:1: “The Lord Jesus Christ shall judge the living and the dead at his appearing and kingdom.” This verse also teaches that the resurrection and judgement take place at the same time.

Regarding the resurrection: The Bible teaches that there will only be two resurrections. The first will be at the second coming of Christ when his millennial reign commences, and the second resurrection will be at the end of the millennium. This is taught in Rev. 20:4-6 where we read that Christ’s witnesses who were killed, came to life again and reigned with him a thousand years. “This is the first resurrection. But the rest of the dead did not come back to life again until the end of the thousand years.”

This passage of Scripture clearly teaches that the reign of Christ with his saints occurs when the first resurrection takes place. And Rev. 5:10 explicitly states that this reign will be “on the earth.”

With these thoughts in mind, we come back to the “rapture” passage in 1 Thes. 4. where Paul clearly teaches in v15 that it is at the “coming” (second coming) of Jesus that the rapture takes place. He leaves us in no doubt that this is the case because he says in v16 that it will be at this time that the resurrection takes place: “The dead in Christ shall rise: Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

This demands a simple deduction: If the resurrection occurs at the time when Jesus comes back to the earth to reign with his saints, he must be on his way back to accomplish this when his saints are resurrected and caught up into the air to meet him as he descends!

THE LAST TRUMP

1 Thes. 4:16 says that “The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with ... the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise.” 1 Cor. 15:52 also refers to the “trump” and says it will be the last trumpet: “... at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible ...”

Rev. 11:15 also refers to the last trumpet. In Revelation chapters 8 to 11 a series of 7 trumpets herald a series of end time events culminating with the 7th. The 7th trumpet is the last trumpet, and the event that it heralds is stated in Rev. 11:15, namely: “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

Significantly enough, it is around this time of the 7th last trumpet, that reference is made to the Lord’s witnesses being raised from the dead and ascending up into heaven in a cloud (Rev. 11:11-12). In view of the fact that these witnesses had been ministering in the spirit and power of Elijah, what could be a more appropriate sign and vindication of their ministry, than to be caught up to heaven as was Elijah himself?! It should also be noted that Christ’s witnesses witness through the beast era (the tribulation period). The Lord will not leave Himself without witnesses during this period. As Paul says: “How shall people hear without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:13-15). It is plainly taught in Rev. 11:16-18 that the 7th and last trumpet is the time for the dead to be raised and judged and for the Lord to exercise his power and reign. “When the son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory” (Matt. 25:31).

So then, in view of the fact that the last trump heralds the second coming of Christ and his reign on earth, reference in 1 Thes. 4 to the saints being caught up to meet him in the air when the trumpet is sounded, again confirms that the rapture occurs when Christ returns to earth to reign. And this will clearly be at the end of the tribulation period, not at the beginning. This is taught by Jesus in Matt. 24:29-31: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days ... they shall see the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet (the last trump), and they shall gather together his elect (rapture) from one end of the horizon to the other.” There are no Scriptures which say: “Immediately before the

tribulation of those days they shall see the son of man coming.”

It is plainly stated in the statement by Jesus that the rapture takes place after the tribulation period not before. When talking about the great tribulation, Jesus said that if the period was not shortened, no flesh would be saved, but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened (Matt. 24:22). Why would the days of the tribulation need to be shortened for the elect’s sake if they have been raptured away to safety before the tribulation?

As pointed out before, the duration of the tribulation period will be 3½ years during which an anti-god force described as “the beast” will exercise power over all nations. Being anti-Christian, he will wage war against them and kill many of them, causing many to fall away from the faith. This would not be possible of course if all Christians were airlifted to safety before the tribulation began. But Rev. 13:7 plainly says that the beast “makes war with the saints and overcomes them.” Dan. 7:21-22 confirms this by also referring to the same power, saying he will “make war with the saints and prevail against them until the ancient of days (Jesus) comes.” In other words, the saints will experience tribulation until Jesus comes, making the rapture a post tribulation event not pre tribulation.

Rev. 7:14 also refers to the “great tribulation.” In v9 reference is made to “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and tribes, and people, and tongues, who stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.” Verse 10 depicts these saints praising and thanking God for their salvation. Then, in v13 their identity is questioned, and the answer supplied is: “These are they who came out of great tribulation.” Coming out of the great tribulation doesn’t mean avoiding and escaping it, but surviving it, as in Jer. 30:7 where reference is made to Israel being saved “out of” (not “from”) the time of tribulation. The saints in the end time will not be spared from the tribulation, but saved out of it, either by being sustained and protected through it, or resurrected at the end of it. Either way, their praise and thanksgiving to God for their salvation would be appropriate. Instead of reading “came out of great tribulation,” some modern translations read “came through ...”

TRIBULATION A NECESSITY

It is stated in Act. 4:22 that “we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God.” Such an experience is an important part of a Christian’s probation during which faith and patience is tested, developed and matured. The apostle Paul says in Rom. 5:3-5 that Christians should

rejoice in tribulations knowing that they produce patience, character and hope that will not disappoint us. In Rev. 13:10 we read that the beast's war against the saints is going to require and develop faith and patience. And Dan. 11:32-35 teaches that times of tribulation during which the saints are being persecuted and killed are designed "to test them, and purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end, because it is yet for a time appointed ... But the people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits. And those who understand among the people shall instruct many: yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by plunder."

Throughout all ages, the people of God have experienced tests and trials, troubles and tribulations of various kinds and intensities. As Jesus said: "In the world you shall have tribulation" (Jn. 16:33). The apostle John for example, being in exile for his faith, refers to himself as being "in tribulation" (Rev. 1:9). The church at Smyrna was told of impending "tribulation ten days" (Rev. 2:10). There are many references in Scripture to trouble or tribulation of a general kind. The Greek word translated "tribulation" is "thlipsis" and is also translated "trouble" and "affliction" on a number of occasions and given general applications. But the end time tribulation will be unparalleled and unprecedented in history. In the words of Jesus: "Great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be." (Matt. 24:21). Putting it into the modern vernacular, it will be the "mother" of all tribulations - the tribulation of tribulations.

A PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE VIEW

Some who believe that the rapture occurs before the great tribulation, affirm this because they regard the tribulation as the outpouring of the judgmental wrath of God, and they correctly assert that the church is not appointed to wrath (1 Thes. 1:10. 5:9. Rom. 5:9). They point out that God removes His people before He executes judgement. For example, Noah was in the ark before the judgement of the flood; Lot was taken out of Sodom before judgement was executed upon the city etc.

Unfortunately, those who advocate this view fail to make a distinction between the tribulation and the climactic judgement or wrath of God. The tribulation is not the climactic judgmental wrath of God. They are two separate and distinct events. The tribulation involves wrath upon Israel and affliction inflicted by the beast on Christians, which God allows as a testing process, but the ultimate wrath of God is the judgement inflicted by God upon the anti-god beast when the testing process has been fulfilled. The tribulation runs its course prior to the rapture whereas the judgmental wrath of God will be poured out upon the beast and his

world wide kingdom after the rapture.

The judgmental wrath of God will involve the whole planet being shaken by an earthquake of unprecedented magnitude, causing all the cities in the world to collapse, mountains tumbling down, and islands disappearing, causing huge loss of life (Rev. 16:17-21). There will also be fire from heaven, plagues, pestilence, torrential rain and massive hailstones (Ezk. 38:18-23). It would clearly not be appropriate for the godly saints for whom there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1) and who have not been appointed to wrath, to be upon the earth when it is shaken as a judgement of condemnation upon the ungodly! They will therefore be caught up into the air, into the city of God to meet and be with Jesus while the “hour of judgement” takes place.

On that day the invitation of Jesus to his followers could be expressed in the words of Isa. 26:20-21: “Come, my people, enter into your chambers (apartments in the city of God) and shut the doors behind you (as the door was shut on Noah’s ark). Hide yourself as it were for a little while, until the wrath is past. For, behold, the Lord comes out of His place (second coming) to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity: The earth shall not cover the blood shed upon her, and shall no longer cover the slain.”

Reference to entering the chambers calls to mind the promise of Jesus in Jn. 14:2-3: “In my Father’s house (the city of God) are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a room for you, and if I go and prepare a room for you, I will come again (second coming), and receive you to myself (rapture), so that where I am, there you may be also” (ultimately reigning on earth).

SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

The subject of the rapture is not merely an academic subject that does not carry with it any serious dangers. A wrong view of it could result in a Christian’s faith being shipwrecked. If someone strongly believes that the rapture occurs before the tribulation, and the tribulation arrives before the rapture, proving the pre-tribulation belief to be wrong, this could have a devastating effect on a person’s faith. In extreme cases it could have such an undermining effect as to result in people throwing the baby out with the bath water, i.e. casting aside belief in the coming of the Lord. Someone wholly convinced that the Bible teaches that the rapture occurs before the tribulation, could end up doubting the truth and veracity of the Bible and its teaching about the Lord’s coming if their conviction proves to be wrong. This in fact could be a contributing factor to the falling away

from the faith during the tribulation period referred to in 2 Thes. 2. Such people could end up fitting into the category of those referred to in 2 Pet. 3:3-4 who become scoffers, saying: “Where is the promise of his coming?” And these people could easily end up bowing to the dictates of the beast in order to avoid tribulation which they believe should not be happening.

So it is incumbent upon all genuine seekers of truth to give this subject serious and prayerful thought in order to avoid ending up believing a lie that could shipwreck their faith.

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THE RAPTURE- BEFORE OR AFTER THE TRIBULATION?

By Barry C. Hodson