

# Rapture, Pre-Tribulation View

## Biblical Evidences for a Pre-Tribulation Rapture

### (1) Place of the Church in Revelation

If it was God's plan for the church to experience any or all of the future Great Tribulation, we would naturally expect at least one, maybe more, passages of Scripture to include an account of the church's role during that time period. But remarkably, in the most detailed description of the Great Tribulation in the Bible (Rev 4-18), there is not a single mention of the Church in this passage (nor any other one).

The Greek word for "church" is *ekklesia*. This word occurs 20x in Revelation. In Rev 1-3 the church is specifically mentioned 19x. The glorified Lord addresses seven letters to seven specific churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. In these letters the Lord gives detailed instructions and admonitions to the churches. But then, suddenly, beginning in Rev 4:1, John shifts from in-depth messages to the Church to total silence about the Church for 15 chapters. Incredibly, the Church is never mentioned once in Rev 4-18. This absolute silence is unexplainable if the Church continues on earth during the Great Tribulation.

In Rev 4:1 the apostle John, who is a member of the Church, is called up to heaven, and projected into the future in a kind of spiritual time machine. In the subsequent 15 chapters, from Rev 4-18, John looks down on earth as the events of the Great Tribulation unfold. But the Church does not appear again until Rev 19 where she is pictured as a bride, beautifully adorned for her Husband, who returns to earth with her glorious Bridegroom at the Second Coming.

### The Use of the Word "Church" in Revelation

- Rev 1-3: "Church" 19x
- Rev 4-18: "Church" 0x
- Rev 20-22: "Church" 1x (22:16)

### What about the Saints?

Post-tribulationists counter this argument by noting that while the word "church" does not appear in Rev 4-18, but the word "saints" (holy ones) occurs several times in Rev 4-18 and that this is a description of the Church present on earth (Rev 13:7,10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24).

The problem with this argument is that there were saints in the OT, there are saints today in the NT church, and there will be saints in the future Tribulation period. The use of the word saints to describe believers on earth during the Tribulation period tells us that there will be believers on earth, but it does not prove that they are Church Age believers. The saints in Revelation are best described as Tribulation Saints who will be saved during the Tribulation period after the Rapture.

### **The 24 Elders**

Post-tribulationists further point out that if the Church is not present on earth during the Tribulation, then she must be in heaven. They then ask the question, "what evidence is there in Revelation that the Church is in heaven during the Tribulation?" Do pre-tribbers have any evidence that the Church is in heaven during this time?

I believe the Church is referred to 12x in Rev 4-19 by the term "24 elders" (Rev 4:4,10; 5:5,6,8,11,14; 7:11,13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). There are 4 main views concerning the identity of the 24 Elders:

1. Angelic beings
2. Israel
3. The church
4. All of the redeemed—Israel and the Church

Evidences on why the 24 Elders refer to The Church:

1. The Title - They are called elders (*presbuteros*) who in Scripture are the representatives of God's people. We get our English word "Presbyterian" from this word. In the NT the elders of a Church are its representatives. These 24 Elders represent the glorified Church in heaven.
2. The Number - The Levitical priesthood in the OT numbered in the thousands (1 Chr 24). Since all of the priests could not worship in the temple at the same time the priesthood was divided into 24 groups, and a representative of each group served in the temple on a rotating basis every two weeks. While the nation of Israel was a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6), only Aaron's sons were allowed to enter God's presence. However, all believers in the Church are priests unto God (1 Peter 2:5,9). These 24 Elders therefore are representative of the entire church of Jesus Christ.
3. The Position - They are seated on thrones. Enthronement with Christ is promised to the church (Rev 3:21).

4. The Crowns - Angels are never pictured in Scripture wearing crowns, yet Church Age believers will receive crowns at the judgment seat of Christ (Rev. 2:10). The Elders also cannot include saved Israel because OT believers will not be resurrected and rewarded until after the Tribulation is over (Dan 12:1-3).
5. The Clothing - The white clothing of the Elders is the clothing of the redeemed in the Church Age (Rev 3:5,18; 19:8).
6. The Praise - Only believers in the present church age can sing the song the elders sing in Rev 5:9-18.
7. The Distinction - The elders are clearly distinguished from angels in Rev 5:11.

Assuming this view is correct, where are these Elders in Rev 4-19? Are they on earth getting ready for the Tribulation? No! They are in heaven worshiping Him who sits on the throne and the Lamb. From their first mention in Rev 4:4, the 24 Elders are in heaven, judged, rewarded and enthroned. If the elders represent the Church, this is another indication that the Church must be raptured to heaven before the first judgment of the Tribulation is unleashed in Rev 6:1. The only place you find the Church in Rev 4-19 is in heaven as the 24 elders who are seated on thrones, dressed in white, crowned with crowns worshiping the Lamb (Rev 4:4,10; 5:5,6,8,11,14).

## **(2) Difference in Passages Relating to Rapture vs. Return**

Some students of Bible prophecy strongly object to the notion that the Rapture of the Church and the Second Coming of Christ are distinct events separated by at least seven years. They contend that this is teaching two future comings of Christ while the Bible only presents one event.

However, the NT teaches that Christ will come for His Church to escort her to His Father's House (John 14:3). And also teaches that He will come with His saints when He descends from heaven to judge His enemies and establish His glorious 1,000 year kingdom on earth (Zech 14:5; Rev 19:14). I view this as one coming that will occur in two distinct phases or stages separated by at least seven years.

The distinct differences between these two phases of Christ's coming are harmonized successfully by the pre-trib view, while other views of the timing of the rapture are unable to accommodate the differences. Here are some of the main verses that describe these two stages of Christ's future coming.

### **Rapture**

John 14:1-3  
Rom 8:19  
1 Cor 1:7-8; 15:51-53; 16:22

### **Second Coming**

Dan 2:44-45; 7:9-14; 12:1-3  
Zech 12:10; 14:1-15  
Matt 13:41; 24:27-31; 26:64

Phil 3:20-21; 4:5	Mark 13:14-27; 14:62
Col 3:4	Luke 17:20-37; 21:25-28
1 Thess 1:10; 2:19; 4:13-18; 5:9,23	Acts 1:9-11; 3:19-21
2 Thess 2:1,3	1 Thess 3:13
1 Tim 6:14	2 Thess 1:6-10; 2:8
2 Tim 4:1,8	1 Peter 4:12-13
Titus 2:13	2 Peter 3:1-14
Heb 9:28	Jude 14-15
James 5:7-9	Rev 1:7; 19:11—20:6; 22:7,12,20
1 Peter 1:7,13; 5:4	
1 John 2:28—3:2	
Jude 21	
Rev 2:15; 3:10	

The only sure-fire way to fully resolve this issue is to set what the Bible says about these events side-by-side to see if they are describing the same occurrence.

### **The Rapture Coming)**

Christ comes in the air (1 Thess 4:16-17)  
(Zech 14:4)

Christ comes for his saints (1 Thess 4:16-17)  
Thess 3:13; Jude 14)

Believers depart the earth (1 Thess 4:16-17)  
(Matt 24:37-41)

Christ claims His bride  
bride

Christ gathers His own (1 Thess 4:16-17)  
(Matt 24:31)

Christ comes to reward (1 Thess 4:17)  
(Matt 25:31-46)

Not in the Old Testament (1 Cor 15:51)  
Testament

There are no signs. It is imminent  
(Matt 24:4-29)

It is a time of blessing and comfort (1 Thess 4:18)  
judgment (2 Thess 2:8-12)

### **The Return (Second**

Christ comes to the earth

Christ come with his saints (1

Unbelievers are taken away

Christ comes with His

Angels gather the elect

Christ comes to judge

Predicted often in the Old

Preceded by many signs

It is a time of destruction and

Involves believers only (John 14:1-3; 1 Cor 15:51-55; Matt 24:1-25:46) 1 Thess 4:13-18	Involves Israel and the Gentile nations
Will occur in a moment; Only his own will see Him (Matt 24:27; Rev 1:7) (1 Cor 15:51-52)	Will be visible to the entire world
Tribulation begins	Millennium begins
Christ comes as the bright morningstar (Rev 22:16) (Mal 4:2)	Christ comes as the sun of righteousness

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." 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 Thess 4:16); at the Second Coming the Lord comes *with* His saints (1 Thess 3:13).
- At the Rapture, the Lord comes only for believers; His return to the earth will impact all people.
- The Rapture is a translation/resurrection event; the Second 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 Rapture is an imminent, signless event that from the human perspective could occur at any moment; whereas, the Second Coming will be preceded by all kinds of signs (Matt 24:1-29).
- The same event cannot logically be both signless and yet portended by numerous signs. This is contradictory. The best harmonization of these two different events supports a pre-tribulational 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.

## Conclusion

While both the rapture and the return describe a coming of the Lord, these dramatic differences demand that they describe two very unique events at two separate times. It is simply impossible to merge the rapture and second coming into a single event that makes sense of the passages that describe them.

John MacArthur provides an excellent summary of this point in favor of the pre-Tribulational viewpoint: Scripture suggests that the Second Coming occurs in two stages—first the Rapture, when He comes for His saints and they are caught up to meet Him in the air (1 Thess 4:14-17), and second, His return to earth, when He comes with His saints (Jude 14) to execute judgment on His enemies. Daniel's 70th week must fall between those two events. That is the only scenario that reconciles the imminency of Christ's coming for His saints with the yet unfulfilled signs that signal His final glorious return with the saints.

### **(3) Believers Exemption from Divine Wrath**

Many people strongly object to the notion that the Church will be raptured to heaven to escape the time of tribulation on earth. They think this is a form of Christian "escapism." After all, they argue, who are we to think that of all the generations of believers who have lived that we are somehow so special that we will be rescued from the coming time of trouble and tribulation.

Believers in every generation have faced trouble. Some have faced terrible persecution and even martyrdom. Jesus Himself told His disciples, "In the world you have tribulation" (John 16:33b). Acts 14:22b the apostle Paul said, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Let me make it very clear that I do not believe that Christians are somehow exempt from the troubles of this life—even serious trouble. A cursory reading of the Bible would prove this point. True believers get ill, have family problems, deal with emotional stress, face persecution, lose their jobs, and die. We live in a fallen, sin-cursed world. But there is a vast difference between the troubles and tribulations of this life that we all face and the wrath of God poured on a godless, sinful planet in the final years of this age. It's the difference between tribulation (with a little "t") and THE Tribulation (with the definite article and a big "T"). We all experience tribulation. But the Bible says we are exempt from the Tribulation.

### **Wrath or Rapture?**

The Bible promises in several places that God's people are exempt from the coming wrath of God of the tribulation period (1 Thess 1:9-10; 5:9; Rev 3:10). But why are we exempt from the tribulation? What is there about the tribulation that necessitates our absence from this time? The nature of the entire seven year tribulation period is one of pounding judgment from God Himself against a rebellious world. The judgment of God begins with the first seal that is opened in Revelation 6:1 and continues all the way until the Second Coming in Rev 19:11-21.

## The Pre-Trib Rapture in 1 Thessalonians

There are four strong points in 1 Thessalonians that indicate the church will be exempt from the coming wrath of the Tribulation.

### (1) A Promise of Deliverance

In 1 Thess 1:9-10 exemption from the coming wrath of the tribulation is explicitly stated. "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, *who delivers us from the wrath to come.*" (italics added) Notice in this verse that it is Jesus coming from heaven who delivers us from the wrath to come. And the word "wrath" has the definite article in front of it. It's not just any wrath, but the wrath to come. This points to the specific time of wrath in the coming day of the Lord. Moreover, Jesus' coming for us is the means of our deliverance from the coming wrath of the tribulation. This strongly supports the pre-trib position.

### (2) First the Rapture

In 1 Thes 4:13—5:9, the order of events is striking. 1 Thess 4:13-18 deals with the rapture of the church to meet the Lord in the air. Then, in 1 Thess 5:1, a new subject is introduced by Paul with the words, "Now as to" (*peri de* in Greek). This Greek phrase is one of Paul's favorite ways in his letters to change subjects. So, it's clear that he is finished focusing on the rapture. But what is the next subject in 5:1-9? The Day of the Lord or coming time of tribulation: "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night" (1 Thess 5:1-2). Why is this significant? Because of the order of the events. Which event is mentioned first the rapture or the tribulation? It's the rapture first, then the tribulation or Day of the Lord. The tribulation is pictured as a separate and subsequent event from the rapture. The order is clear: First, 1 Thess 4:13-18 (The Rapture); Second, 1 Thess 5:1-9 (The Day of the Lord (Tribulation)). The rapture and the day of the Lord can hardly be parts of the same event as post-tribbers maintain. The rapture comes before the day of the Lord in 1 Thess 4-5.

### (3) "You" and "Them"

In 1 Thess 5:1-5 the interplay between the different audiences is critical, yet easy to miss. Read 1 Thess 5:1-5 and notice the pronouns that are in italics (you probably never knew someone could get this excited about pronouns).

"Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon

**them** suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and **they** shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that they day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of night nor of darkness."

Notice the dramatic change in this setting between you and we (the believers) in the first and second person, and **they** and **them** (the unbelievers) in the third person. It's striking. The wording indicates that when the tribulation comes there will be two groups of people each exclusive of the other. One group will be raptured, and the other will face destruction. The day of the Lord will come upon them, and they shall not escape (5:3). Then in 5:4 there's a sudden contrast: "But you are not in the darkness." They stand in sharp contrast to the believers in v4-11 who will escape. This clear distinction between the unbelievers, who will not escape, and the believers, who will escape, is another strong indication that believers are exempt from the wrath of the Day of the Lord.

#### (4) An Appointment to Keep

1 Thess 5:9 says clearly, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." This verse is clear that we have an appointment with salvation, not wrath. Some maintain that this simply means that believers are not destined for the wrath of hell, but that we will be saved. However, there are two reasons why I don't think that's what this verse is referring to.

First, the Thessalonians already knew they were not destined for God's wrath in hell. Paul had told them this very clearly in 1 Thess 1:4. Second, in the context of 1 Thess 5:1-8 what wrath has Paul just been talking about? Not the wrath of hell but the wrath of the Tribulation or day of the Lord. In this context, that's the wrath that believers will be delivered from. As Walvoord says, "In this passage he is expressly saying that our appointment is to be caught up to be with Christ; the appointment of the world is for the Day of the Lord, the day of wrath. One cannot keep both of these appointments." [John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 54.]

#### **Did the Apostle Paul Teach the Pre-Trib Rapture?**

After writing his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul had to write them another letter within a few months. The problem this time was that someone had written a spurious, counterfeit letter to the church at Thessalonica claiming that it was from Paul. In this false, forged epistle, the author had told the believers that they were already in the day of the Lord or Tribulation period that Paul had discussed in 1 Thess 5.

This spurious letter had deeply upset the Thessalonians. Their distress is evident in Paul's words to them in 2 Thess 2:1-2. "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you be not quickly shaken

from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come."

I believe this statement of Paul indicates that the Thessalonians expected that they would be raptured before the Tribulation. Why do I say this? Think about it from the opposite angle. If the Thessalonians believed that they would have to endure the tribulation before Christ's coming, then why would they have been so upset to receive a letter telling them that the Day of the Lord had come? They would have been excited, not shaken and afraid. This would mean that what Paul had taught them was being fulfilled. They would have faced the tribulation with hope and endurance knowing that the coming of the Lord was less than seven years away.

But what was their response to being told that they were in the tribulation? The exact opposite. They were "shaken from their composure" and "disturbed." The letter they had received contradicted what Paul had taught them in 1 Thess 4-5. It didn't square with what Paul had previously taught them about the timing of the rapture. Being told they were already in the tribulation caught them totally off guard. It shook them up and disturbed them. It caused a panic. It either meant that Paul had lied to them before about the pre-trib rapture, they had totally misunderstood what he said, or that the rapture had already come, and they had been left behind. Any of these scenarios was devastating.

The only logical conclusion from 2 Thess 2:1-2 is that from Paul's previous teaching in 1 Thessalonians the Thessalonians must have believed that the rapture would occur before the beginning of the tribulation. Paul went on in 2 Thess 2:3-11 to show the believers that the teaching that they were already in the Day of the Lord was false doctrine and that their fears of being in this awful period were groundless.

### **Kept from the Hour**

In Rev 3:10-11a the Lord's promise of deliverance from the tribulation period is very specific. "'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will **keep you from** the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. I am coming quickly.'" Notice four important things about this promise:

(1) The Lord promises to keep believers "from" the time of testing. The words "keep from" are the English translation of the Greek words *tereo ek*. Pre-tribbers argue that this supports the notion of evacuation from the earth before the tribulation. Post-tribbers believe this passage teaches protection of the church on earth during the tribulation.

The English words "keep from" translate the Greek words *tereo ek*. *Tereo* is the Greek word for "keep, preserve, protect," and the Greek preposition *ek* means "out of, out from within". Those who oppose the pre-trib view argue that the word *ek* here means "through;" thus, the Lord will keep believers "through" the time of tribulation not "out of" it. But if the

Lord had meant that believers would be kept "through" the tribulation, He would have used the Greek preposition *dia* which carries this clear meaning. Furthermore, the only other use of *tereo ek* in the NT is in John 17:15, which says, "I do not ask thee to take them out of the world, but to **keep them from** the evil one." The usage of this identical phrase in John 17:15 supports the meaning of *ek* in Rev 3:10 as "to keep from completely" or "out from within." God doesn't keep His people through Satan—the evil one; he keeps us from Him. Also, if Rev 3:10 is a promise of protection for believers through the tribulation, then how does one explain Rev 7:9-14 which presents millions of believers who are martyred during the tribulation? It's much more consistent to understand Rev 3:10 as a "keeping from" the wrath of God during the tribulation.

(2) The Lord promises to keep his people not just from, or out of, the testing but from the very "time" or hour of testing. Our exemption is not just from the trials of the tribulation but from the very tribulation itself. This means that the church will be exempt from the hour or very time period when this testing occurs, that is from the tribulation period itself. And it strongly supports the pre-trib notion of evacuation out of the tribulation, not the post-trib idea of protection through it.

(3) The time of testing that believers will miss is worldwide. It will "come upon the whole world." What is this time of worldwide testing? In the context of the book of Revelation, it is clearly the tribulation period described in Rev 4-18.

(4) After promising to deliver His people from the time of worldwide testing, Jesus gives the means of this protection from the hour of testing in Rev 3:11. He tells us how this deliverance will be accomplished—"I am coming quickly." Putting these four points together, it is clear that the Lord will protect His people from the time of worldwide testing by His coming for them at the rapture.

Charles Ryrie gives an excellent illustration of the truth in Rev 3:10: As a teacher I frequently give exams. Let's suppose that I announce an exam will occur on such and such a day at the regular class time. Then suppose I say, 'I want to make a promise to students whose grade average for the semester so far is A. The promise is: I will keep you from the exam.' Now I could keep my promise to those A students this way: I would tell them to come to the exam, pass out the exam to everyone, and give the A students a sheet containing the answers. They would take the exam and yet in reality be kept from the exam. They would live through the time but not suffer the trial. This is post-tribulationism: protection while enduring.

But if I said to the class, 'I am giving an exam next week. I want to make a promise to all the A students. I will keep you from the hour of the exam.' They would understand clearly that to be kept for the hour of the test exempts them from being present during that hour. This is pre-tribulationism, and this is the meaning of the promise of Rev 3:10. And the promise came from the risen Savior who Himself is the deliverer of the wrath to come (1 Thess 1:10).

### **Calling the Ambassadors Home**

Most Americans are well aware of what happened on Dec 7, 1941. It was "a day that will live in infamy." The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor inflicting heavy casualties on the U.S. Navy and crippling our Pacific fleet. Most people also know what happened on Dec 8, 1941. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called on Congress to make a formal declaration war against Japan and the axis powers of Germany and Italy. Most people probably don't know what happened on Dec 9, 1941. President Roosevelt issued an order calling all of the U.S. ambassadors home from Japan, Germany, and Italy. Before he unleashed the full wrath of the American military machine on these nations, he wanted to make sure that no American civilians were in harm's way. The wrath of America was for her enemies, not her own people. In the same way, before God declares war on this godless world at the beginning of the tribulation, unleashing his unmitigated wrath, He will call his ambassadors home (2 Cor 5:20). God's wrath is not for the citizens of his heavenly kingdom. It's not for His own people.

### **(4) Time Gap Between the Rapture and the Second Coming**

Another important argument for the pre-trib rapture is the necessity of a time interval or gap between the Rapture and the Second coming. An interval or gap of time is needed between the rapture and the second coming in order to fit together many end time events predicted in the Bible in a logical and timely manner. These end time events can be harmonized by a pre-trib time gap of at least seven years, while other views, especially post-tribulationists, are forced to come up with scenarios that would not realistically allow for a normal passage of time. Here are a three end time events that point to a time interval between the rapture and the second coming of Christ.

### **The Judgment Seat of Christ**

The NT teaches that all church age believers must appear before the judgment seat of Christ in heaven. This event is often known as the "Bema Judgment" from the Greek word *bema* which refers to a raised platform or step where awards were administered at the Greek games or the bar of justice where a judge presided. 2 Cor 5:10 says, "For we must all

appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

The *people* at this judgment will be believers only. The context of 2 Cor 5:10 indicates that "we" refers to Paul and other believers. The *purpose* of the judgment seat of Christ is not to determine if a person is admitted to heaven or not. The purpose of the judgment seat of Christ is two-fold: to review and to reward. The Lord will review our conduct (Rom 14:10-12), service (1 Cor 3:13), words (Matt 12:36), thoughts, and motives (1 Cor 4:5) after we became a believer in Christ. Based on this review we will receive rewards from our gracious Lord. The place of this judgment isn't heaven. The period of the bema judgment is right after the rapture (1 Cor 4:5).

Interestingly, the judgment seat of Christ is an event never mentioned in the detailed accounts connected with the Second Coming of Christ to the earth. Since such an evaluation like this would require some passage of time, the pre-trib gap of seven years between the rapture and the Second Coming would account for such a requirement.

Moreover, since Rev 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.

### **Life in the Millennial Kingdom**

Another event or situation that requires some gap of time between the rapture and the second coming is the presence of believers in mortal, physical bodies during the 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth. The Bible teaches that when Christ returns to earth He will establish His kingdom on earth that will last for 1,000 years (Rev 20:1-6). **OT saints, church age believers and believers who died during the tribulation will all enter the millennial kingdom in new glorified bodies. Believers who come to faith in Christ during the tribulation and live until the Second Advent will enter the millennial kingdom of Christ in their natural, human bodies. They will carry on ordinary occupations such as farming and building houses, and they will bear children, populating the Messianic kingdom (Is 65:20-25).** Here is the problem. It would be impossible for people to enter the 1,000 year reign of Christ in natural bodies if all saints were caught up at the Second Coming, as post-tribulationists teach. Why? Because everyone would already have a glorified body. There would not be anyone left in natural bodies to populate the kingdom.

However, because pre-tribulationists 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.

### **The Sheep and the Goats**

Matt 25:31-46 is a sobering picture of the judgment of the Gentile nations on earth that will occur right after the Second Advent of Christ when Jesus sets up His throne on earth. The people gathered at this judgment will be Gentiles who have survived the great tribulation. In describing this judgment Jesus said, "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on His left."

At this great judgment event, Jesus will divide these Gentile believers into two categories—the sheep (believers) and the goats (unbelievers). What this means is that when Jesus returns at His Second Coming there will be both unbelievers and believers alive on the earth. Why is this significant? If the rapture happens in conjunction with the Second Advent, as post-tribulationists say, and all living believers are caught up to heaven to meet Jesus and escort Him back to earth, then who are the sheep on earth when Jesus arrives? Everyone left on earth would be goats. There would not be any sheep. They would have all just been raptured.

To state it another way: How would both saved and unsaved, still in their natural bodies, be separated in judgment right after the Second Coming if all living believers are caught up at the Second Coming? There would not be any need for Jesus to separate the sheep from the goats when He gets to earth because the rapture would have already accomplished the separation. But if the rapture occurs before the tribulation there would be time for many people to come to know the Lord during the tribulation. These tribulation believers would be the "sheep" of Matt 25:31-46 when Jesus returns. Once again, the issue is solved by taking a pre-trib position with its gap of at least seven years.

### **A post-Tribulational Rapture is Meaningless**

There is one final point I want to make in connection with this discussion about an interval or gap between the rapture and Second Advent. Post-tribulationists maintain that the rapture happens in conjunction with the Second Coming. Believers will be caught up to meet the Lord Jesus in the air as He is coming from heaven to judge the world. Then will come right back to earth with Him. But this raises a very important question that often gets overlooked in this discussion. If God has miraculously preserved the church throughout the

entire tribulation, why even have a rapture? Why bother? It's inconsequential. The Lord will not be delivering His bride from anything. There's really no purpose in it. But if Christ comes before the tribulation, His coming is filled with purpose. He will rescue us from the wrath to come.

## **Conclusion**

Of all the views of the timing of the rapture, pre-tribulationism does the best job handling the necessity of a time-gap to harmonize a number of future biblical events. This requirement of a seven-year gap of time is just one more point that proves the likelihood that pre-tribulationism best reflects the biblical viewpoint.

## **(5) Removal of the Restrainer**

2 Thess 2:3-8 outlines and describes in broad terms three important ages that take us from the present age to eternity.

- The Present Age - The Age of Restraint (Before the Rapture)
- The Tribulation Age - The Age of Rebellion (After the Rapture)
- The Messianic Age - The Age of Revelation (After the 2nd Coming)

Amazingly, this present age in which we live is described as the time or age of restraint. There is something or someone who is restraining or holding back the full blast of evil that is to come when the Antichrist is unleashed. If this evil world we live in now is described as time of restraint what in the world will it be like when the restraint is removed? What will this world be like when all restraint against the Antichrist and his wickedness is taken out of the way? It will be like removing a dam from a lake—evil will overflow this world swamping everything in its path.

## **Who is the Restrainer?**

The key question in this section of the God's Word is—who or what is this person or entity who is restraining the appearance of the Antichrist? Down through the centuries many candidates have been suggested. Here is a list of the most important ones:

1. The Roman Empire
2. The Jewish State
3. The Apostle Paul
4. The Preaching of the Gospel
5. Human Government
6. Satan
7. Elijah
8. Some unknown heavenly being

9. Michael the archangel
10. The Holy Spirit
11. The Church

St. Augustine was transparent when he said concerning the restrainer, "I frankly confess I do not know what He means." I can sympathize with Augustine, but I believe there are several points that help us identify the restrainer.

1. The Greek word *katecho* ("what is holding him back," "the one who is holding it back" - 2 Thess 2:6-7) means to hold back or restrain.
2. The one who is holding back or restraining is both neuter and masculine.neuter "what is holding him back" (a principle) masculine, "the one who is holding it back" (a person).
3. Whatever it is it must be removable.
4. It must be powerful enough to hold back the outbreak of evil under Antichrist.

In answering these four questions only one view is satisfactory. Just ask yourself this one question. Who is able to restrain evil and hold back the appearance of Antichrist? The answer of course is God. In this case it is God the Holy Spirit who is at work during this age in and through God's people, the church.

The main objection that is always mentioned when anyone identifies the restrainer as the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit is omni-present and cannot be removed from the earth. I agree. The Holy Spirit is the third member of the triune Godhead. He is omnipresent and cannot be removed from the earth. Moreover, millions of people will be saved during the tribulation (Rev 7:9-14). The Holy Spirit must be present on earth during this time to convict sinners of their need for salvation and bring them to faith in Christ just as He does today. The convicting, drawing, regenerating ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential for anyone to be saved both now and in the tribulation (John 3:5; 16:7-11; 1 Cor 12:3b).

I believe the restrainer in 2 Thess 2:6-7 is not just the Holy Spirit and not just the church. Rather, the one who holds back the onslaught of Satan is the restraining influence of God the Holy Spirit who presently restrains evil through the church. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came to earth in a new capacity that He had not fulfilled before. He was present on earth before that time. He came to fulfill a new ministry. The Spirit was present during creation according to Gen 1:2, and was on earth all during OT times to convict sinners and uniquely empower certain ones of God's people. But on the day of Pentecost He came to earth with a new ministry—to indwell each individual believer and the church as a whole. He "came" to earth in a new capacity or new ministry. And the presence of the Spirit in all believers individually and corporately is the means God uses in this age to restrain evil. That

restraining influence will be here as long as the church is here. The return of the Holy Spirit to heaven will not be a complete withdrawal from earth, but a return in the sense that He came at the very beginning of the church age.

There are four key reasons for identifying the one who holds it back as the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit through the church.

1. This restraint requires omnipotent power.
2. This is the only view that adequately explains the change in gender in 2 Thess 2:6-7. In Greek the word *pneuma* (Spirit) is neuter. But the Holy Spirit is also consistently referred to by the masculine pronoun "He" especially in John 14-16.
3. The Holy Spirit is spoken of in Scripture as restraining sin and evil in the world (Gen 6:3) and in the heart of the believer (Gal 5:16-17).
4. The church and its mission of proclaiming and portraying the gospel is the primary instrument the Holy Spirit uses in this age to restrain evil. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). We are the temple of the Holy Spirit both individually and corporately (1 Cor 3:17; 6:19; Eph 2:21-22).

The restrainer then is the restraining influence and ministry of the Holy Spirit indwelling and working through His people in this present age. Therefore, when the Spirit goes the church must go with Him. The great Bible teacher and expositor Donald Grey Barnhouse summarizes this view:

*Well, what is keeping the Antichrist from putting in his appearance on the world stage? You are! You and every other member of the body of Christ on earth. The presence of the church of Jesus Christ is the restraining force that refuses to allow the man of lawlessness to be revealed. True, it is the Holy Spirit who is the real restrainer. But as both 1 Cor 3:16 and 6:19 teach, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer. The believer's body is the temple of the Spirit of God. Put all believer's together then, with the Holy Spirit indwelling each of us, and you have a formidable restraining force. For when the church is removed at the rapture, the Holy Spirit goes with the church insofar as His restraining power is concerned. His work in this age of grace will be ended. Henceforth, during the Great Tribulation, the Holy Spirit will still be here on earth, of course—for how can you get rid of God?—but He will not be indwelling believers as He does now. Rather, he will revert to His OT ministry of 'coming upon' special people. [Donald Grey Barnhouse, Thessalonians: An Expositional Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan PublishingHouse, 1977), 99-100.]*

When the rapture occurs, the Spirit-indwelt church and its restraining influence will be removed, and Satan will put his plan into full swing by bringing his man onto centerstage to

take control of the world. The removal of the restrainer is another strong argument for the pre-trib rapture.

### **(6)Imminency—the Any-Moment Rapture**

I believe the strongest and probably the simplest point in favor of the pre-trib rapture is what is often called imminency. What do we mean by the word imminent? Or more importantly what is the biblical definition of this doctrine. The word imminent is not found in Scripture related to the rapture but is a theological term used to describe the nature of the rapture. The English word “imminent” is used most often to simply mean “soon” or “near.” But as a theological term pre-tribulationists mean something different when we use this word. When pre-tribulationists use this word we have three main ideas in mind:

(1) Imminency means that from the human perspective the rapture could occur at any moment. Other events may take place before the rapture, but no event must precede it. After all, if some event must happen before the rapture then the rapture could not happen at any moment; thus, it could not be imminent. An imminent event, according to Charles Ryrie, is one that is, “impending, hanging over one’s head, ready to take place. An imminent event is one that is always ready to take place.”

(2) Imminency means that the rapture is a signless event. Since the rapture is an any moment event, then it follows that one must be ready for it at any time, without any signs or warning. If signs have to precede it then it cannot occur at any moment. The signs of Christ’s coming in the New Testament, such as Matt 24, are signs of the Second Coming of Christ, not signs of the rapture. The rapture is a signless event.

(3) Imminency means that the rapture is certain to happen but not necessarily soon. Imminent does not mean soon. Prophecy expert Renald Showers clarifies this point. “A person cannot legitimately say that an imminent event will happen soon. The term ‘soon’ implies that an event must take place ‘within a short time (after a particular point of time specified or implied).’ By contrast, an imminent event may take place within a short time, but it does not have to do so in order to be imminent. As I hope you can see by now, ‘imminent’ is not equal to soon.”

Imminency, therefore, combines two key conditions: certainty and uncertainty. An imminent event is one that is certain to occur, but the timing of which is uncertain. Therefore, those who believe in the pre-trib rapture should carefully avoid saying things like, “Jesus is coming soon!” Or, “The rapture is going to happen very soon.” It may happen soon, but it may not. We simply do not know for sure. What we ought to say instead is, “From our human perspective, the rapture can happen at any moment—it could happen today.” I think this more accurately reflects the Biblical teaching of imminency.

### **Imminency in the New Testament**

The central question is—"Does the NT really teach the idea of imminency?" We have defined it. But do we find this idea in the Bible? Here are some key passages that I believe teach this truth:

- 1 Cor 1:7 — "awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ"
- 1 Cor 16:2 2 — "Maranatha"
- Phil 3:20 — "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ"
- Phil 4:5 — "The Lord is near"
- 1 Thess 1:10 — "to wait for His Son from heaven"
- Titus 2:13 — "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus"
- Heb 9:28 — "so Christ . . . shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him"
- James 5:7-9 — "Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord...for the coming of the Lord is at hand...behold, the Judge is standing right at the door"
- 1 Peter 1:13 — "fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ"
- Jude 21 — "waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life"

All of these Scriptures refer to the Rapture and speak of it as though it could occur at any moment. It is something we are always to be looking for. Because we are looking for a Person—the Lord Jesus Christ—not signs or an event. We are "waiting for His Son from heaven" (1 Thess 1:10).

### **Arguments Against Imminency**

While these Scriptures seem to clearly present the idea of imminency or an any-moment coming of Christ, there are some who challenge this notion and argue that the NT does not teach that Jesus could come at any time. Three main arguments against imminency are commonly given:

- (1) It is alleged that since the gospel had to be preached throughout the world before Christ could return, He couldn't return at any moment (Acts 1:8). We must remember the powerful driving force of missions in the early church. By 50 AD the gospel had already penetrated into Europe. This fulfilled the requirement of the gospel going to the uttermost parts of the earth. Also, in writing to the Thessalonians Paul included himself when he spoke of the rapture. He said "we who alive and remain." Evidently, he didn't see anything standing in the way of Christ coming during his lifetime or at any moment.

(2) Opponents of imminency maintain that John 21:18-19 precludes an any-moment rapture because it says that Peter had to live to be an old man. However, Peter himself encouraged believers to look for the coming of the Lord (1 Peter 1:13; 4:7). He knew that he might die suddenly (2 Peter 1:14). Also, other believers expected Peter's early death, because when Rhoda told the believers in Acts 12 the news of his release from prison, they said, "You are out of your mind," and when he appeared to them "they saw him and were amazed" (Acts 12:15-16). They apparently had no concept that he would have a long life. As they looked for the Lord's coming they certainly did not walk around every day asking, "I wonder if Peter is dead yet?" Moreover, the passage in John 21 was not even written and circulated to the churches until fifteen to twenty years after Peter was already dead, so John 21:18-19 is not an impediment to imminency.

(3) The third argument against imminency is that the Temple had to be destroyed before Christ returned (Matt 24:1-3). It must be remembered that in Matt 24, Jesus was not discussing the Rapture or the Church since the Church was still a mystery and had not yet been revealed, much less established. There is nothing in Matt 24 which relates the destruction of the Temple to the timing of the Rapture, nor remotely suggests that it must happen first.

### **Jesus May Come Today!**

The Rapture is presented in the NT as an event that from man's viewpoint could occur at any moment, and believers are to be looking for it all the time. Only the pre-Tribulational position allows for an imminent, any moment, signless coming of Christ for his own. Only those who believe in a pre-Tribulational Rapture can honestly say, "Jesus may come today." Since the Tribulation period has not started yet, a mid-Tribulational Rapture must be at least 3½ years away; a pre-Wrath Rapture must be at least 5½ years away, and a post-Tribulational Rapture it is at least 7 years down the road.

The any moment coming of Christ is one of the truths in the NT that is to fill us with hope, anticipation and motivation to godly living. Believers should live with this hope every day—the hope that Jesus may come today! Only the pre-Tribulational view allows for this Blessed Hope (Titus 2:13). Donald Grey Barnhouse used the old song Is it the Crowning Day? to make the point.

The early church had a special watchword or password they would use to identify themselves to one another. They used this word as a special greeting. This word, that appears only one time in the NT, was Maranatha (1 Cor 16:22). It is an Aramaic word that the pagans who spoke Greek couldn't understand. It consists of three Aramaic words:

*Mar* (Lord), *ana* (our), and *tha* (come). Therefore, it's a kind of one-word prayer— "our Lord, come."

Obviously, Maranatha only makes sense in light of the imminent coming of Christ. Why say Maranatha ("our Lord, come") if you know that Christ can't come for at least 3½ to 7 years as the other views of the Rapture teach? It's beautiful that the early church coined this greeting to reflect their hourly hope, eager expectation, and ardent anticipation of the Rapture. No doubt this expectation was a powerful incentive for personal purity and evangelism. Think of how it would change the Church today if we were to return to this form of greeting our brothers and sisters in Christ. Think of how it would change our lives if this simple greeting was always on the lips of an expectant people. Maranatha!

### **(7)Blessed Hope**

The truth of the rapture is intended to be a comfort and blessing to the Lord's people. It is consistently presented in the New Testament as a sure hope that God's people are to anxiously anticipate. Here are three of the key passages that present the blessing and comfort of the rapture.

In John 14:1-3, Jesus said, Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you: for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

Titus 2:13 says, "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

1 Thess 4:18, after describing the rapture, Paul concludes with this gentle reminder: "Therefore comfort one another with these words." The doctrine of the rapture is a soothing balm for troubled hearts. It's a blessing and consolation for the Lord's people.

If Paul taught a mid-Trib, pre-Wrath or post-Trib Rapture, would the truth of the Rapture really be that comforting? If God's people have to endure 3½ years, 5½ years or all 7 years of the Tribulation before He comes, how much of a comfort would the Rapture be? If we must face the Tribulation before He comes, Jesus would have to change the words, "Let not your hearts be troubled" in John 14:1 to, "Let your heart be troubled." Knowing we had to live through the Tribulation would be troubling to say the least.

How comforting would it be to know that Jesus was coming after 3½ or 7 years of hell on earth? What would it be like to at the graveside of a loved one, hear the pastor read the beautiful words in 1 Thess 4:13-17, and then say, "And after we endure part or all of the Tribulation, Jesus will come and Rapture us to heaven and reunite us to our loved ones—comfort one another with these words?" Could you honestly get excited about the Rapture if you knew that you had to endure a time on earth when all the judgments of Rev 6-16 were being poured out? A time when the Antichrist will be enforcing his mark and you and your family would be denied the right to buy or sell.

### **A Quick Comparison**

Let's suppose for a moment that the Rapture will occur at the middle or the end of the Tribulation. I know that's a scary thought. But bear with me for a minute. What would we expect to find in 1 Thess 4:13-18? And how does this compare with what we find in these verses?

First, we would expect the Thessalonians to be rejoicing that their loved ones had already died and gone to heaven and wouldn't have to endure the terror of the tribulation. However, in 1 Thess 4 the believers are grieving because they fear that their loved ones will miss the rapture. Only a pre-tribulation rapture makes sense out of their grief.

Second, we would expect the Thessalonians to be upset about their own impending trial in the tribulation rather than sorrowing over their deceased loved ones. We would expect them to be asking for details about the tribulation and the Antichrist. However, the Thessalonians have no fear or questions about the coming day of wrath or the Antichrist. Why? They were looking for Christ, not Antichrist.

Third, we would expect Paul, in view of their grief over their deceased loved ones, to remind them that their present grief was inconsequential in light of the future time of trouble that's coming. However, there's not even a hint of any impending tribulation for them. What we find in 1 Thess 4 fits the pre-trib position like a glove, but it's totally incompatible with either mid-tribulationism or post-tribulationism.

The blessed hope of the rapture is that Jesus will come and take us to be with Him forever before the time of worldwide devastation is unleashed. And what a comfort and blessing it is!

### **(8) The Marriage Supper of the Lamb**

In Luke 12:36 states that when Christ returns, He will be returning from a wedding. In Rev 19:7-8, we read about the marriage itself. the marriage supper takes place before the marriage. According to Jewish custom, the marriage contract, which often includes a dowry, is drawn up first. The contract parallels the act of faith we use when we trust Jesus to be our Savior. The dowry is His life, which was used to purchase us. When it's time for the wedding, the groom goes to the bride's house unannounced. She comes out to meet him, and they he takes her to his father's house. The precisely correlates with the events in a pre-tribulation rapture scenario. Jesus, the Groom, comes down from heaven and calls up the Church, His Bride. After meeting in the air, He and His Bride return to His Father's house, heaven. The marriage supper itself will take place there, while down here on earth the final events of the tribulation will be playing out. After the marriage supper of Jewish tradition, the bride and groom are presented to the world as man and wife. This corresponds to the time when Jesus returns to earth accompanied by an army "clothed in fine linen, white and clean" (Rev 19:14)

### **(9) Events Described during the Tribulation are NOT Past History**

Some of those who try to discredit a pre-tribulation rapture believe that most (if not all) of the end-time events in the Bible have already taken place. A group of people called 'preterists' claim that the Book of Revelation was mostly fulfilled by 70 AD. If the events described in Revelation took place in the past, how do you explain the rebirth of Israel, the reunification of Europe, the global wars that have taken place, or the development of nuclear weapons?

When did the events described in Revelation happen? Where in our history books is it documented when one-third of the trees on earth were burned up, 100-pound hailstones fell from the sky, and the sea turned to blood (Rev 8:7-8; 16:21)?

### **(10) Great Tribulation called "The Time of Jacob's Trouble"**

In several passages, the Bible refers to the Great Tribulation as a time of trouble for the Jews.- Jeremiah 30:7 calls the tribulation "the time of Jacob's trouble", and says that this time will come just before the Lord returns to save His people.- Daniel 9:24 states that "70 weeks are determined unto thy people"

Scripture never mentions that the Great Tribulation is meant to be a time of testing for Christians.

### **(11) Other References**

Luke 18:8 - I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth? (the Greek requires a negative answer to the rhetorical question)

