



DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE TRUTH AND TIMING OF THE RAPTURE

DR. MARK HITCHCOCK



In a chapel message at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. Mark Hitchcock referred to a classic response given by our late president and chancellor, Dr. John F. Walvoord, when asked why he loved Bible prophecy so much.

“Dr. Walvoord answered the question by saying, ‘I love Bible prophecy because I love the Bible. So much of the Bible is prophecy, if you love the Bible you have to love Bible prophecy.’ I feel the same way, and therefore I want to speak on the subject of the rapture of the church. I believe it’s critical for us, especially at this time in history, to understand the template for the future. The rapture is a vital part of that template and part of the blessed hope of believers.” We agree, which is why we are delighted to bring you this timely message.

First Thessalonians 4:13–18 is a very familiar text that teaches the truth of the rapture, the next great event on God’s prophetic calendar. The apostle Paul had spent probably six to eight weeks in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey and in that time had evidently taught these believers a great deal about prophecy, including the rapture of the church. Paul wrote:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

A GLORIOUS TRUTH

Before we unfold the Bible’s teaching about the rapture of the church, let me briefly describe this event. It is the “catching away” (“caught up,” 1 Thess. 4:17, NIV) of those who are alive when Christ comes. The resurrection of the believing dead is going to happen at the same time, so we often speak of the resurrection and the rapture togeth-

er—but the rapture has to do with those who are alive. I believe the rapture applies to believers in the church age because Paul calls them “the dead in Christ.” Old Testament saints are not in Christ through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit. I believe they will be resurrected at the second coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, the Lord slows the game film for us, so to speak, so we can see it frame by frame. In 1 Corinthians 15:52 we read that this will happen “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye.” There is going to be a resurrection of the dead, then a rapture of the living. I like to say that those who are alive at the rapture will get an airlift accompanied by a facelift, all at the same time. Living saints are going to receive new bodies as they are caught up to be with the Lord.

This is what Paul taught the Thessalonians when he was with them, and now he was writing back to answer a concern they had in regard to the future. After Paul left, some of the believers had died and the others were wondering what was going to happen to those who die before the rapture takes place? This issue had not come up before, so Paul wrote to set their minds at ease in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, which teaches the doctrine of the rapture. The truth of it is certain. Someday this great event is going to occur. The question is, when is it going to happen? There are four main views on the timing of the rapture.

FOUR VIEWS OF THE RAPTURE

The first view of the rapture is the pre-tribulational view, which teaches that believers are going to be caught up before the Tribulation, or the seventieth week of Daniel 9. There are also the mid-trib-

ulational view, which usually equates the rapture with the trumpet in Revelation 11, and the post-tribulational view, which sees the church going through the Tribulation and meeting Jesus as He returns in His second coming. I call this, the “Yo-Yo” view of the rapture. We are going to be caught up to Christ, meet Him in the air, and then do a quick U-turn and come right back down to the earth with Him. A more recent view is called the pre-wrath rapture, which is something of a three-quarters rapture. It places the rapture about five-and-a-half years into the Tribulation.

There are many solid arguments for the pre-tribulational rapture, which is the view I hold and the teaching of Dallas Theological Seminary. I have space here only to briefly present four of these arguments from 1 Thessalonians, and then I want to make some application to our lives.

THE ORDER OF EVENTS

One argument or evidence for the pre-tribulational rapture is the order of events in 1 Thessalonians chapters 4 and 5.

After Paul’s teaching on the rapture, the very next topic beginning in 5:1 is the Day of the Lord, the day of His wrath at the second coming. The sequence of events here favors the pre-tribulational view, which holds that the rapture is first, followed by the Tribulation in which God pours out His judgment on the unbelieving world, climaxed by Christ’s second coming.

EXEMPTION FROM WRATH

This argument is interesting because all the views of the timing of the rapture agree that believers in Jesus Christ are exempt from wrath. The issue is when the wrath begins and how we are protected from it. Post-tribulationists say God's wrath is mostly concentrated at the end of the Tribulation, so we are preserved from that wrath even though we are still on earth.

The other three views mentioned previously all teach that we are going to be taken out when the wrath of God begins; the difference is when His wrath begins. Many pre-tribulationists believe the entire seven years of this period is God's wrath, while mid-tribulationists believe it only unfolds in the last half of the Tribulation. The pre-wrath view limits God's outpouring of judgment on the unbelieving world to the final one-fourth of the Tribulation.

God's wrath begins in Revelation 6 with the opening of the first of seven seal judgments. The Lamb, Jesus Christ, is the One who opens these seals, so we can say this is truly the wrath of God and not simply the wrath of man or of Satan. So what is the believer's relationship to the outpouring of God's fierce judgment on the earth and those who live on it?

We have the answer twice in 1 Thessalonians. First, Paul told his readers to wait for the coming of God's Son from heaven, "Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1:10). In other words, we will be exempt from God's wrath, the time known as the Great Tribulation. It could be argued that Paul is speaking of the wrath of hell, or eternal wrath. But I believe the overall context of the Thessalonian letters

favors the view that Paul is speaking of the Day of the Lord, when His wrath will be unleashed on earth-dwellers.

A second reference to this is in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, where Paul writes: “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The change of pronouns in verses 1–11 of this chapter is instructive. In verse 3, Paul spoke of those who will suffer God’s wrath in the third person. But beginning in verse 4, he changed to the second person when addressing the believers in Thessalonica. It is also interesting that in 4:17, Paul included himself and other believers in the rapture. But here in chapter 5, he excludes believers from the Day of the Lord.

Once again the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:9 favors the pre-tribulation view of the rapture. Paul had just been talking about the Day of the Lord, the future time of tribulation, and the outpouring of God’s wrath. So it makes sense to me that the wrath which we are not destined to experience is the wrath of the coming Tribulation.

Revelation 3:10 also supports the teaching that believers in this age are exempt from the coming wrath of God. Jesus Himself, speaking to the church at Philadelphia, said, “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.”

The Lord was speaking of this yet future period of worldwide wrath or testing that is coming upon the earth-dwellers, a technical term in Revelation for unbelievers. But notice what Jesus said here. His promise is to keep believers from the time of the test. The only way I

know to be kept from the time of the test is to not be there.

THE COMFORT TO BELIEVERS

A third argument for the pre-tribulational rapture is found in Paul's closing exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 4:18: "Therefore encourage each other with these words." The word "encourage" can also be translated "comfort," which better captures the idea. This raises the question of how the teaching about the rapture can be a comfort to believers if we have to go through half, three-fourths, or all of this terrible time of God's unleashed wrath.

Bible teacher Tim LaHaye once said that if we have to go through the Tribulation, the rapture is not the "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13), but the "blasted hope." He has a point. Paul could tell his readers to be comforted about those who died because they would see them again and because they would be spared from the coming time of wrath.

THE DOCTRINE OF IMMINENCY

A fourth argument in favor of the pre-tribulational rapture is the idea of the doctrine of imminency, meaning that Jesus could come at any time to catch away His church. Other prophetic events may happen *after* the rapture, but nothing must happen *before* the rapture. It is the next event on God's prophetic calendar.

The imminent return of Christ is expressed in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the verse already quoted. The idea of waiting for God's Son from heaven suggests expectation, the idea that the coming could be at any

moment. This same sense of expectation is found in Titus 2:13, where Paul writes, “We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The doctrine of imminence carries the idea of the rapture being at any moment.

Only the believer in the pre-tribulational rapture can really believe that Jesus could come at any moment. There aren’t any signs given in Scripture to look prior to the rapture. The signs in God’s Word regarding the end times are signs of Christ’s second coming, not signs of the rapture.

I was in California a few years ago and experienced my first earthquake. It is said that the “big one” is coming to California someday. Experts believe it is certain; it’s just that no one knows for sure when it will occur. Similarly it’s important to remember that although the rapture is certain, we don’t know when it will occur.

TRUTH FOR TODAY

It is very important to note that all of the main rapture passages in Scripture include practical application for believers. Here are four ways the truth of the rapture should impact our lives today as believers in Jesus Christ.

First, the rapture should have a calming influence on stirred hearts.

In John 14:1, Jesus told us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.” There is a lot in this world to get us anxious and troubled today.

Second, the rapture should have a controlling influence on serving hearts. After discussing the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:58, Paul wrote: “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” The rapture should energize us to be working and serving the Lord.

Third, the rapture should have a comforting influence on sorrowing hearts. We have dealt with this in 1 Thessalonians 4:18, so I will simply note this here.

Fourth, the rapture should have a cleansing influence on sinning hearts. It is a purifying hope, as the apostle John stated (1 John 3:3). If we really believe that Jesus could come back today, it will impact our daily actions and choices. May God help us to be prepared, to be pure, to be motivated, and to be energized vessels the Lord can use as we await His coming.

ABOUT MARK HITCHCOCK

Mark Hitchcock received his B.S. degree from Oklahoma State University and his J.D. degree from Oklahoma City University School of Law. He also holds the Th.M. and Ph.D. degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary. He worked for a judge at the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals for four years before his call to full-time ministry. Since his Th.M. graduation in 1991, Mark has served as senior pastor of Faith Bible Church in Edmond, Oklahoma. He also serves as an associate professor at DTS in the Bible Exposition Department. He has written more than 20 books related to end-time Bible prophecy. He and his wife, Cheryl, have two sons, Justin and Samuel.

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