Is The Rapture a New Doctrine?

The bulk of what follows was originally written to a friend. He asked for my response to a video in which Dr. William Lane Craig rejects the doctrine of a pre-tribulational rapture as a modern invention, originating in the 19th century with John Nelson Darby¹ While I've benefitted from much of Dr. Craig's material, I've certainly got areas of disagreement. This doctrine is one. But his claims did provide an opportunity to address some common critiques of this position. In its present form, this article has been edited and expanded for broader use.

Craig, Darby, and Doctrinal Inventions

Hey, brother

I promised a few more thoughts regarding the rapture. While these points are not exhaustive, I hope they will be helpful.

William Lane Craig begins with the sensational claim that the doctrine of the rapture was a 19th century invention. But, of course--as he admits--the real issue here is one of timing. The word 'rapture' simply refers to what Paul describes in I Thessalonians 4:17: "we who are alive and remain shall be *caught up together* with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." The phrase rendered "caught up" comes from the Greek word $\alpha \rho \pi \alpha \zeta \omega$ (*harpazo*) which quite literally means to be "seized and carried off", "snatched away". That's where the idea comes from. Rapture is a perfectly fine translation of what Paul describes here. And it's plain in the text -- no appeals to 19th century kookiness necessary.

So, again, the real question is the issue of timing. If we believe Paul, we believe in the rapture. It's that simple. But, the question is, "When does it happen?" Craig claims that there is no Biblical basis for perceiving any span of time between the rapture of the Church and the return of Christ. I disagree.

Romans 11 and God's Plans for Israel

Now - before I get into specifics - a quick word about dispensationalism. I think dispensationalism gets a bad rap because it's so frequently misunderstood (and, admittedly, often poorly represented.) It's not about arbitrarily dividing the Bible up into little chunks and then mapping those chunks onto convoluted charts. Rightly defined, it's the result of consistently applying a normal (historical/grammatical) hermeneutic. One of its central findings is this: a plain reading of the Bible reveals that the church is *distinct* from Israel. In other words, the church does not *replace* Israel. Therefore, those covenant promises which pertained specifically to national Israel remain to be fulfilled when God *returns* his attention to national Israel.

So, for now, God has temporarily set Israel aside. But 'temporarily' is the key. This is one of Paul's main points in Romans 11.

11 I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. **12** Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!

In other words, their fall is not permanent. Hope remains for Israel <u>as a nation</u>. A little later in the same passage:

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. **26** And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

"The Deliverer will come out of Zion,

And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;

27

For this is My covenant with them,

When I take away their sins."

28 Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, <u>but concerning the election</u> they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. **29** For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

One of Paul's emphases in Romans 11 is that the church should not take her privileged position as an occasion for pride. After all, Israel - God's chosen nation - was judged for unbelief. Additionally - and still making the same point - Paul now argues that God's judicial blinding of Israel is *temporary*. For now, God's focus is on opening the door of salvation to the Gentile world. But, says Paul, that will come to an end. When? When "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And, at some point following that time, "all Israel will be saved." On what basis? On the basis of God's "covenant with them." Israel is "beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and calling of God are *irrevocable*."

This is not to say that Jews cannot currently be saved by coming to Christ in faith. Of course they can - and should! (All the first members of the church were Jews.) Rather, it is to note that God still has plans for national Israel. And those plans are to be distinguished from His plans for the church in this present time. For now, God's primary focus is *not* on dealing with Israel. It's on offering salvation to the entire world. Through the church. This is the "mystery" about which Paul gets so passionate in Ephesians 2-3. The church is not Israel. It is "one new man." "Man" here is a body of people. The church is "one new people", or "one new humanity".

Paul is astounded to learn that it was always in God's plan "that the <u>Gentiles</u> should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the Gospel." Paul's apostolic mission is to "preach among the <u>Gentiles</u> the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ." As you may know, in Biblical parlance, a "mystery" is not something spooky or some kind of inscrutable riddle. It's something that God has now revealed which He had previously kept hidden. The church was *always* in God's plan. But, only following the first coming of Christ (and His rejection by His people) was it revealed.

This why you'll hear dispensationalists use the term "Church Age." We believe this is the age in which we live. To be a member of the people of God is to be a member of the Church, the Body of Christ. Those of us who trust in Jesus get to be "partakers of His promise in Christ through the Gospel." God promised a Messiah. He promised Abraham that the Messiah would

come through His line. In Christ we come to know the salvation that those promises predicted! We're partakers of the promise. We're the people of God. But does it follow, then, that all other promises to national Israel (regarding things like land, judgment, national revival) are now obsolete? Or to be interpreted spiritually and thereby reassigned to the church? Not according to Romans 11.

Of course, these are not the only passages that I could reference here. The theme of the Church as a glorious new entity that no one saw coming is woven all throughout the NT. This may all seem tedious, but it has a huge influence on our understanding of the timing of the rapture and the purpose of the coming Great Tribulation.

Paul's Comfort for the Thessalonians

Now, I'll set all that to one side for the moment (it'll be relevant shortly) and have a quick look at Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. One of Paul's chief goals in these letters is to offer comfort. Paul knows these believers have been undergoing a great deal of hardshiop. It appears that some doctrinal confusion has contributed to their troubles. This confusion gives rise to Paul's discussion of the rapture in I Thessalonians 4.

Firstly, it appears there was a concern that recently deceased believers might somehow miss out on God's great eschatological plans.

13 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. **14** For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

So, that was one concern. And Paul assuages their fears by reminding them that *all* believers those who have died and those who are alive - will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Next he moves to a separate, but related concern - the *timing* of the great and terrible "Day of the Lord." In the second letter, it appears that some of the Thessalonians wondered whether their current tribulations may be an indication that they've missed Christ's return and therefore have found themselves in the actual Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:1-2).

Notice the sequence in chapters 4-5 of the first letter. First, Paul offers the rapture as a means of comfort. *Then* he turns in chapter 5 to discussing God's coming wrath ("the Day of the Lord"). He explains that the sudden onset of the Day of the Lord will come as a shock to the unbelieving world ("like a thief in the night"), but *not* to these believers.

2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. **3** For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. **4** But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. **5** You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.

So, before we even do any exegesis, we see that Paul is making a distinction. Unbelievers will be caught unprepared by the coming Day of the Lord and "they shall not escape." For the Thessalonian believers, however, he has a different message: "You, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief." We might wonder whether Paul just means that they'll see it coming, not necessarily that they'll be delivered from it. Fair enough. But I think the ensuing context clarifies the point.

As is typical in eschatological passages, Paul exhorts his readers to vigilance and diligence as they look forward to these things. But what is it these believers look forward *to*? Will they inevitably enter the same period of judgment as the unbelieving world?

6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. 8 But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.

11 Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.

In this context, what is the wrath of God which Paul is discussing? He's not talking just about the wrath of God in a general, soteriological sense. He's talking about the coming *eschatological* wrath of God. This is the significance of the coming Day of the Lord (as seen in a host of OT passages). So, in this context, the salvation Paul is discussing is not salvation in a general, spiritual sense, it's salvation from that coming eschatological wrath.

He goes on to clarify, "whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him." In other words, whether a believer has died or is still living, we look forward to being united with Christ in heaven, *not* suffering under God's wrath. In Christ, we've been promised deliverance from that wrath. No wonder, then, that Paul upholds all of this teaching as reason for edification in verse 11: "therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing."

So, a quick recap of this passage: Paul offers the coming rapture as a special comfort to suffering believers. He then explains that the coming day of God's judgment (DOTL) will be a shock to unbelievers but *not* to believers. Why? Because "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation though our Lord Jesus Christ." It's a straightforward argument, based on a simple chronological sequence: (1) Rescue for the Church, then (2) wrath for the World. That's the comfort. Moreover, the second coming of Christ described in Revelation 19 is an event of violent judgment, the climactic conclusion to the time of wrath from which Paul has promised that believers will be spared. So the idea that there is no Biblical basis for perceiving any span of time between the rapture of the Church and the second coming of Christ strikes me as odd.

Here's another point that seems relevant here. Paul is teaching that the *reason* we look forward to being delivered from God's wrath is because Christ has satisfied God's wrath on our behalf. In other words, for believers, Christ has delivered us not only from the judgment of hell but from God's eschatological wrath as well.

The Biblical Argument, Summarized

A couple of things come to mind. (1) A pre-tribulational rapture view is perfectly plausible from simply reading Paul's letter to the Thessalonians in its context. No kooky books or charts, no

appeals to J. N. Darby, or corny end-times movies or any of the rest of it. Just a bit of exegesis. (2) This view harmonizes nicely with the rest of New Testament soteriology. If Christ has indeed satisfied God's wrath on our behalf, it stands to reason that we won't be around to be on the receiving end of the *worst time* of God's wrath in the history of the world (Mark 13:19-20). The simple fact that being in Christ means being delivered from God's coming wrath seems to be the basis for all of the comfort Paul offers in this letter.

I hope that makes sense. Obviously, there's much more I could say about all of this. But I wanted to take a purposefully minimal approach, sticking with clear inferences from Scripture. I think it's clear that Paul teaches that the church is distinct from national Israel. I think it's clear that Paul teaches that God still has plans for national Israel. I think it's clear that God's future plans for the church involve being miraculously delivered from the time of His coming wrath.

Additional Considerations

There are a few other points worth mentioning. But for time's sake, I'll just offer these in bulletpoint form.

- Notice what I didn't do here. I did not argue for this position on the basis of a desire to escape all hardship. I argued from Scripture. Often, the pre-trib position is lampooned as some kind of cowardly, limp-wristed escapism that proceeds from a soft-headed belief that God will rescue us from the great Tribulation because He would never want us to endure any difficulty. That's a straw-man. Of course believers will suffer hardships and persecution of all kinds. We know that. It's part of the deal. But the distinction is that we are promised deliverance from God's coming wrath on the unbelieving world. It really comes down to the doctrine of propitiation. If Jesus has satisfied God's wrath on our behalf, it follows that we will be delivered from God's wrath. To put it the other way around, if the Body of Christ still looks forward to being directly afflicted by the outpouring of God's wrath, was God's wrath satisfied in Christ?
- I know I did not directly address the preterist view of the Olivet Discourse. It's a difficult issue and I think there's a lot to say there. To be sure, I think some of what the Lord predicted referred to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But I don't think it can be denied that a lot of what he predicted *remains* to be fulfilled. I think the strongest argument for this

point comes from the Lord himself. "[B]ecause those will be days of distress unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again." (Mk. 13:19). AD 70 was awful. But it wasn't worst-ever awful. Jesus says the Day of the Lord will be the worst ever. That means worse than the flood. That hasn't happened yet.

- Luke 4 is worth mentioning here. It's the classic text in which Jesus stands in the synagogue to read from Isaiah 61. It's a powerful Messianic passage. Jesus declares that He's come as its fulfillment and then sits down. Often preachers skim right over the fact that Jesus stopped mid-verse. If you flip back to Isaiah, you see the next line reads, "and the day of vengeance of our God." That's a Day of the Lord reference. Why would He stop the quotation just prior to that line? Apparently that portion of the prophecy did not refer primarily to His first coming. It seems it remains to be fulfilled.
- I freely admit that a lot of the popular literature/fiction based on the pre-trib view has not been helpful. Much the Left Behind series rests on the assumption that if you miss the rapture, you can still come to Christ and have a grand ol' time running around fighting the anti-Christ for Jesus. I'm not sure there's much Biblical basis for that assumption. I think the Tribulation does present an opportunity for salvation to unbelieving Jews. But I think for the most of the world, it's a time of unmitigated wrath.
- I think the pre-Trib view aligns nicely with the whole body of OT Day of the Lord prophecies. Throughout Scripture, when the coming time of the great Tribulation is discussed, there are two primary purposes: (1) To punish the unbelieving world. (2) To purge Israel in preparation for a final national restoration.² If the church is distinct from Israel, we would not expect the Tribulation to pertain to us. We don't belong in either of those categories. From this perspective, I could argue that the burden is on critics of the Pre-Trib view to demonstrate why we might *expect* to find the Church present during the Tribulation. It seems the whole function of the Rapture is to remove the Body of Christ from a time of wrath in which it does not belong.
- Along those same lines, we can note that once the descriptions of the coming time of Great
 Tribulation begin in the book of Revelation, the church is suddenly absent. It's presented as
 the worst time in human history, yet no instruction to the church on how to weather the
 storm?

- Interestingly, earlier in Revelation the church at Philadelphia (the faithful church) is promised, "Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth." (Rev. 3:10) Note it's not just protection *within* the time of trial, it's deliverance *from* the whole time ("hour of trial").
- In the very next chapters of Revelation (4-5), we see a massive redeemed crowd, *already in heaven* proclaiming, "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made us kings and priests to our God, And we shall reign on the earth." Sounds an awful lot like the Church. Then, in chapter 6, the focus is back to earth, and God's coming wrath.
- All of this also fits nicely with the fact that when the apostles are offering direct instruction to NT believers, our eschatological expectation is always the Lord's imminent return for us, not a time of God's great coming wrath. We're "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works."3

The Historical Question: Was Darby the First?

That brings me, finally, to the issue of historical precedent. William Lane Craig stated that there are no instances of a Pre-Trib view prior to J. N. Darby. That's simply not true. (I think Dr. Craig is just outside his area of expertise here. (I) Now, to be fair, sometimes the Pre-Trib guys overstate the case here. There are a handful of patristic passages that are often upheld up as clear instances of Pre-Trib teaching in the time of the Church Fathers. When you go to the primary sources, however, the picture is not always so clear.

But perhaps holding our comprehensive eschatological system in one hand while we go rifling through the pages of church history looking for a perfect match with the other is ... the wrong approach. I think the truth is a bit more nuanced. You'll have a hard time finding many clear instances of *any* carefully delineated systematic eschatology among the writings of the church fathers. I think those guys, like the apostles, expected the Lord to return in their lifetimes. So

there wasn't much purpose in sitting around sorting out the details. (To a large degree, I think they had the right idea. I think, in Biblical terms, everything between the ascension of Christ and the Rapture is considered the Last Days. We're meant to live with that expectation.)

That said, I *do* think we can find early instances of the Pre-Tribulational view. I think there is a relatively clear Pre-Trib statement in the writings of Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn was a disciple of John the Apostle. He taught the following:

"And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, "There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be."(2) For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption."⁴

The author of the second-century work, The Shepherd of Hermas, seemed to hold a pretribulational hope as well:

You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly.⁵

There is a similar reference in a 4th-6th century sermon entitled, *Sermon on the Last Times, the Anti-Christ and end of the World*. This sermon was attributed--perhaps pseudonymously--to Ephraim the Syrian.

"Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms all the world? Believe you me, dearest brother, because the coming (advent) of the Lord is nigh, ... See to it that this sentence be not fulfilled among you of the prophet who declares: "Woe to those who desire to see the day of the Lord!" For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins."6

Post-reformation, there are many pre-Darby instances of Pre-Tribulation Rapture teaching. Early American Puritan, Increase Mather (1639-1723) taught the following:

"The Living Saints at Christ's coming shall be caught up into the Air, that so they may escape that Deluge of Fire, which will be the Perdition of ungodly Men, (Luk. 17.34. 1 Thess. 4.17. 2 Pet.3.7.) But before this Rapture of the living, the dead Saints shall be raised."

This quotation comes from a work he published in 1709. John Nelson Darby was born in 1800. Additionally, such a citation is also helpful given Mather's stature. He was the sixth president of Harvard. So not only is his Pre-Tribulational stance pre-Darby, it was also not obscure. He was a man of great learning and influence.

Similar references may be found in the works of English Baptist theologian, John Gill⁸ (1697-1771) as well in the writings of Baptist pastor, Morgan Edwards⁹ (1722-1292)--one of the founders of the college now known as Brown University.

Church History From 30,000 Feet

So, yes, there are Pre-Darby instances of the Pre-Trib view. Some folks might be troubled by the fact that there aren't more. ¹¹ But perhaps we're looking at it the wrong way. The context of church history is tremendously important. We *should* be suspicious of doctrinal innovations that are truly novel, entirely without historical precedent. But there are countervailing concerns. For one, (as I've demonstrated) such a characterization does not apply to this view. Those who insist that Darby invented the pre-tribulational rapture view are simply incorrect. Furthermore, I am wary of giving too much weight to a criticism that could be directed with similar force at core doctrines of the gospel--such as justification by faith alone.

One could just as easily say (as many Roman Catholics do), "If this is the Biblical view, than where was it prior to the sixteenth century?" We would have at least two responses to this. (1) We have a responsibility to believe what the Bible plainly teaches, even if others have obscured what ought to have been clear. (2) The Reformers' rediscovery of the genuine gospel

was just that--a rediscovery. It was not an invention, but a recovery of what was clearly preached by the apostles and believed by the earliest Christians.

I think we could mount a similar defense for the pre-tribulational rapture. It wasn't invented, it was rediscovered. Which raises an important question--how was it lost for more than a thousand years?

I think what we can say with certainty is that the modern rise of the pre-tribulational view correlates historically with an emphasis on a normal/grammatical hermeneutic. When the more allegorical approach of the medieval Roman Catholics dominated the discussion, so did the amillennial view of Augustine. But the Reformation was, among other things, a hermeneutical shift. The rediscovery of the simplicity of the Gospel was the result of a commitment to read the Bible and believe what it plainly says, regardless of papal tradition. The idea that such a shift would result in other areas of doctrinal recovery should not be surprising. What *is* a bit jarring is to be scolded by our Reformed brothers--the inheritors of the traditions of Luther and Calvin--for being out of step with the formerly dominant view.

So, there are some things to consider. And I hope that you can see that--though there are difficulties--it's not the modern, kooky invention it's often made out to be. No dark conspiracies lie behind what I've written here. No movie deals, no TBN trinkets, no secret Rothschilds funding. Furthermore, I doubt whether there are any eschatological systems that *don't* involve some unanswered questions. Nevertheless, I do think that there is a relatively simple, elegant Biblical argument for a pre-tribulational rapture. And a glance down the centuries of church history reveals that I am not alone here. As always, my desire is to be faithful to the text of God's word. I hope this helps.

Notes:

- 1. *Youtu.be*, 2025, youtu.be/Cno6M44O8YE?si=ziJxk0ImPluzGYtq. Accessed 12 July 2025.
- 2. See: Obad. 15-16, Isaiah 13:6-11, Ezek. 30:3-4, Isa. 2-4, Ezek. 20:33-38, Jer. 30:4-7, 11, etc.
- 3. See: I Thess. 1:10, Js. 5:7-9, I Jn. 2:28, Rom. 13:8-11, Ph. 4:4-5
- 4. Irenaeus. Against Heresies. S.L., Christian Classics, 2019, Book V, Chapter 29.
- 5. Hermas. Shepherd of Hermas. Nabu Press, 2010, ch. 23:4.
- 6. Ephraem. *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World.* https://www.pre-trib.org/pretribfiles/pdfs/Ephraem-OntheLastTimestheAnt.pdf. To be fair, this citation is disputed due to the presence of textual variants. I'd need to do some more work on this one to be certain.
- 7. Mather, Increase. A Dissertation Concerning the Future Conversion of the Jewish Nation. Answering the Objections of the Reverend and Learned Mr. Baxter, Dr. Lightfoot, and Others.: With an Enquiry into the First Resurrection. Evans Early American Imprint Collection | University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N01184.0001.001/?view=toc, 1709. Accessed 12 July 2025.
- 8. Gill, John. "1 Thessalonians 4:17 *Bible Verse Meaning and Commentary. Bible Study Tools*, https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/1-thessalonians-4-17.html, 2025. Accessed 12 July 2025.
- 9. Ice, Thomas. "Morgan Edwards: Another Pre-Darby Rapturist", 2009, digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=pretrib_arch.
- 10. Note that in the video he refers to John Nelson Darby as "James Darby".
- 11. While we only have a handful of pre-tribulational quotes from the church fathers, I think it's beyond dispute that many--perhaps most--of them were premillennial (or chiliastic, to use the older term). And yet that view, too, fell out of favor for more than a thousand years. For a fuller treatment of this, see Charles Ryrie's, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*.
- 12. For a fascinating comparison of pre and post Reformation hermeneutics, see Peter Harrison's great work, *The Bible, Protestantism, and Rise of Natural Science*.