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The Rapture: A Hope or a Hoax?

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Each summer I have the privilege of ministering to Iron Curtain believers in East Germany and Czechoslovakia . I am asked by pastors to way a word of encouragement to their people. What does one tell believes who have been enslaved by Communism for four decades? One truth that never fails to bring comfort and courage to their hearts is the certainty of the any moment return of Christ. What a delight to be able to share with them passages such as John 14 and 1 Thess. 4: 13–18 which encourage the believer to look for the return of the Lord today. Repeatedly, believers in Communist lands have told me how they can hardly wait for that blessed event called the rapture. Life's trials and troubles grow dim in the light of the hope of the Lord's return.

The Lord has left no greater hope for His church than that the Bridegroom would return for his Bride before the Tribulation. The Biblical writers speak of the rapture as being a blessed hope (Titus 2:13); a purifying hope (1 John 3:3); a comforting hope (1 Thess. 4:18); and a sure hope (2 Peter 1:19). We at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary are united in our conviction that the Scriptures teach that the rapture will occur before the Tribulation. We concur with our doctrinal statement on that glorious event:

Rapture of the Church

We believe that Jesus Christ will return to the atmosphere of this earth; that the dead in Christ will rise first, then believers who are still living will be caught up together with them to greet the Lord in the air and to ever be with the Lord; that the rapture is the next event on the revealed calendar and that no prophecy need be fulfilled before it occurs.

Our doctrinal stand coincides exactly with that of our fellowship. Article XIX of the Doctrinal Statement of the GARBC reads in part: We believe in the premillennial return of Christ, an event which can occur at any moment ... and all shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air before the seven years of the Tribulation.

I. The Defense of the Doctrine of the Rapture

The pre-tribulational rapture has Scriptural support. Let us briefly note the promise of return (John 14), the picture of His return (1 Thess. 4:13–18) and the proof of His return (Rev. 3:10). When in John 14, Christ promised to return for his own, it was to take them to the Father's House. If believers must endure the judgments of the Tribulation, they would meet Him in the air at the second advent and immediately return with Him to earth. In the post-tribulational scheme of things, we would never inhabit

the dwelling places in the Father's House as promised, and, worse by far, Jesus would be guilty of telling a lie.

In 1 Thess. 4:13–18, the Apostle Paul gives a graphic portrayal of the sequence of events at the rapture. At the return of Christ there is the resurrection of the dead, the rapture of the living, the reunion with the Lord and our loved ones in the air, followed by Paul's blessed reassurance, And so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words, (1 Thess. 4:17b–18). Were believers destined to endure the Tribulation, Paul should have said, Wherefore scare ye one another with these words. Instead, he assures the Thessalonians again, as he has done earlier, that God has not appointed them unto the wrath of the Tribulation but unto salvation (1 Thess. 5:9, 1:10 ; cf. Romans 5:9).

Perhaps the best proof text for the pre-tribulational rapture position is found in Revelation 3:10: Because thou has kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. It should be noted that the church is not promised protection in or during the hour of trial, but protection out of it (ek). The Tribulation saints are not promised exemption from suffering (Rev. 6:9–11; 7:9–14; 14:1–3; 15:1–3). Leon J. Wood, former Dean of Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, succinctly concludes: A person is either in a period of time or out of it. If the writer of Revelation had wished to express the idea of preservation within a period of time for the church, he could have used such a preposition as 'during,' or 'through,' or 'in,' but not 'from'. (The Bible and Future Events, p. 78)

II. The Departure from the Doctrine of the Rapture

In these last days various long-held and blessed doctrines are jettisoned. The doctrine of the rapture has fallen among theological thieves. (see my article, Theological Thievery, The Baptist Bulletin , Oct–Nov., 1977). Dr. Charles Ryrie explains part of the reason for the defection from certain prophetic truths: Doctrine is not considered to be as important as experience today. Cooperation among evangelicals with a view to appealing to the largest possible audience often precludes proclaiming eschatological distinctions. The spirit of our times looks down on too much dogmatism, even if it is truth (What You Should Know About the Rapture, p. 22).

Several years ago Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ International, changed his position. In an interview with Christianity Today he gave this reply to a question on the rapture: I do not personally believe that the Lord's return is imminent. I think the current teaching that it is imminent is leading many Christians to fold their hands and disobey what Jesus said to do (Sept. 24, 1976, p. 21). And now Dr. Billy Graham seems to have traveled the same road. One of his latest books is Approaching Hoofbeats—The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. One post-tribulational reviewer warmly endorses the book and observes: Since the book does not espouse even an echo of pretribulation [sic], the only escape that Dr. Graham identifies is repentance (Relfe Ministries Bulletin, 1985, p. 3) In his 239-page book on the four horsemen there is just one reference to the rapture (p.10) and this rapture is a post-tribulational one. The promise of Christ's return in John 14:3 and Acts

1:11 are seen as being fulfilled at the end of the Tribulation (pp. 209,210). Formerly, Dr. Graham believed in the rapture. In his book *World Aflame*, he speaks of the blessed rapture as the next event on God's calendar (pp. 207,208).

Dr. Graham can no longer hold out the hope of deliverance from the wrath to come, the greatest hope that Christ left for the church.

Apart from those who defected from the pre-tribulation position apparently for the sake a wider audience, there are those who will not proclaim the whole counsel of God because of what Ryrie calls a spirit of eschatological agnosticism. Some are saying that we cannot know (agnosticism) the answers to these minor eschatological questions so we should simply ignore them. The church will not lose much, we are assured (Ryrie, p. 22).

For our part, the Scriptures are clear on the blessed hope. We delight in it and we will defend it.

Then too, some individuals and institutions have forsaken the pre-tribulational position and are attacking it now because of a feeling of intellectual superiority. One can readily sympathize with Hal Lindsey's lament: Frankly, I have become a bit bored with those nouveau post-tribulationists who give the impression that if you were truly an intellectual and macho Christian, you would charge headlong with them into the Tribulation [*bold italics in the original*]. (*The Rapture: Truth or Consequences*, p. 165).

Lindsey deplores the fact that some older post-tribulationists like Alexander Reese, George Ladd and Robert Gundry spend an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to prove the recent origins of the pre-Tribulation view (*ibid.*, p.165).

Yet another surprising method of attack used by post-tribulationists is to list a number of impressive theologians who espouse the post-tribulationist view. Lindsey appropriately asks: but does that really prove anything? Can't pre-tribulationists make their own list of adherents which is at least as impressive? What are we going to say: My godly scholars are more godly and scholarly than yours? Such arguments prove nothing (*ibid.*, p.166).

The test of the correctness of an interpretation is not how recent or how popular it is, but whether it has exegetical justification. We believe that a literal interpretation of Scripture demands a clear and consistent distinction between God's purposes for Israel and for the church. A right dividing of the Word of truth sees Israel as God's earthly and the church as God's heavenly people. As the Bride of Christ, the church has a special and distinct place in God's program. The Bridegroom is completing her eternal home. When that home is completed, He will summon the bride to a time of celebration in heaven, exempting her from the hour of tribulation on earth. And the Spirit and the bride say, come (Revelation 22:17).