

Reasons for a Pretribulation Rapture by Dr. Grant R. Jeffrey

Different methods in the interpretation of prophecy attest to conclusions that are drawn from prophetic passages. Those who view prophetic Scripture as a figurative compilation of apocalyptic literature will draw different conclusions from those who view Scripture from a literal point of view. If one interprets Scripture literally and consistently one arrives at the conclusion that the church, the body of Christ, will be removed from the earth before any part of the tribulation begins. Several passages of Scripture support this interpretation of the pretribulation rapture of the church.

In Christ's messages to the seven churches in the opening chapters of Revelation the church is mentioned nineteen times as being on earth. However, the central chapters of Revelation (Chapters 4 – 19), which describe the tribulation period in great detail, make no mention of the church's presence on earth during that time of wrath. Instead, throughout this section of Revelation the church is described as participating in the marriage supper of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:7 – 9) and standing before the judgment seat of Christ in heaven (see 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Note also that Revelation 6:17 and 7:1-8 prophesy that before the great day of God's wrath, the angels will hold back their judgment until that have "sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads" (Revelation 7:3). John's account describes the angels sealing "an hundred and forty and four thousands of all the tribes of the children of Israel" (7:4), describing each of the tribes of Israel by name and noting the number of each tribe that is sealed for divine protection. Because of God's great love for believers, the omission of a reference to any protection extended to the church strongly indicates that the church is already safely in heaven at this time.

John's vision in Revelation 4 provides another supporting reason for a pretribulation rapture. When John was taken up to heaven to stand before the throne, he saw 24 elders with crowns on their heads, Scripture indicates that believers will be given crowns in heaven for specific behaviors and actions performed on earth. Paul indicates that these crowns will be awarded by "the Lord, the righteous judge." (2 Timothy 4:8) after Christ's return. He also indicates that all believers must "appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). This judgment will take place following the resurrection of all believers. Therefore John's vision of the 24 crowned elders lends great credence to the belief that these elders represent the church and that the rapture of the church must have already occurred. It is only after John sees these 24 elders that he is granted the vision of the sequential series of judgments of the tribulation.

The book of Matthew also records the events of the tribulation and focuses on Israel's participation in this time of wrath while omitting any reference to the church (see Matthew 24:26); there is no mention of any other country or persons told to flee. Jesus' words also indicate that the Jews should pray that this devastation does not occur on the Sabbath (see 24:20). Jewish rabbis had interpreted God's prohibition of work on the Sabbath in Exodus 16:29 to include a restriction prohibiting a Jew from walking (or fleeing) more than two thousand cubits (one thousand yards) on the Sabbath. Only the Jews would be bound by the rabbinical restriction of this "Sabbath day's journey" (Acts 1:12), so Jesus' concern would have no meaning for Christians. Obviously, Jesus was referring to the Jews enduring the tribulation, not the church.

Paul also supports the pretribulation rapture when he tells the Thessalonians that "God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Notice that Paul contrasts two separate destinies in this verse. He reminds the church that their destiny is salvation, not God's wrath. When compared with his words earlier in this letter, Paul clearly says that Christians are to "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus,

which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Notice that Paul contrasts two separate destinies in this verse. He reminds the church that their destiny is salvation, not God’s wrath. When compared with his words earlier in this letter, Paul clearly says that Christians are to “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.” (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Though some contend that this coming wrath refers to the punishment of hell, Scripture clearly states that we are delivered from hell by Christ’s first coming and death on the cross, not by his second coming in the clouds. This “wrath to come” of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 must refer to the tribulation, and this verse, therefore, is a clear declaration that Christ’s return for his church (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) is the event that will deliver us from the tribulations’ wrath.

The strongest proof that the rapture will precede the tribulation is found in the book of 2 Thesalonians. The church at Thessalonica was apprehensive that the great day of the Lord could occur at any moment. Paul reminded the believers of his teaching about “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him” (2 Thesalonians 2:1). He told them not to be confused about the incorrect teaching that Armageddon awaits the church and very specifically points out that Armageddon would not come “except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” (2:3). This man of sin is the antichrist.

Daniel clearly prophesied that the antichrist will not be revealed until he seizes power over the ten nations of revived Rome and makes a seven-year treaty with Israel (see Daniel 9:27). Paul declares that the antichrist will be revealed only at his appointed time (see 2 Thesalonians 2:6), but until then he is restrained by supernatural powers until God releases him (see 2:7). Only then will this wicked antichrist be revealed: “Even him, whose coming is after working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders: (2:9).

Scholars have tried to identify the restrainer of the antichrist. Some believe that this restrainer is the system of human government, but that suggestion is disproved by the fact that governments and kingdoms will continue after antichrist is revealed (see Revelation 13:7); they will not be taken away. Others have suggested that the church is the antichrist's restrainer; however, nowhere in Scripture is the church referred to with the masculine pronoun "he", nor does the church ever exhibit any supernatural power except that which God manifests through it.

Most probably, therefore, the restrainer of the antichrist is God's Holy Spirit. This determination further supports the pretribulation rapture of the church because of the Holy Spirit's ministry among believers. Prior to Christ's ascension to heaven, Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to empower the church (see Acts 1:8). Jesus had promised earlier that the Holy Spirit would abide in the church forever in his role as the comforter (see John 14:16), but that the Holy Spirit could not come until Jesus had ascended (see John 16:7). Unless the Holy Spirit is removed from his role as the restrainer, the antichrist will not be revealed. Therefore, because of Jesus' promise to believers of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, when the Holy Spirit is removed as the restrainer of the antichrist, it is because the church has already been raptured and is now in heaven at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Note that though the Holy Spirit will be removed from his role as the restrainer and comforter of the raptured church, the third person of the Trinity was, is now and always will be omnipresent. He will continue to convict sinners and thereby save a great multitude out of the tribulation (see Revelation 7:9-14).

The day is coming when God will call every believer, living or dead, to meet him in the air and return home to heaven to the great marriage supper of the Lamb. Since we know not the exact time, this rapture of the church could happen without warning at any moment. It has not occurred yet, and Scripture indicates that it will occur before the tribulation begins. Until that time, "beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless." (2 Peter 3:14).