

The Shape of Our Salvation

The Day of the Lord, the Rapture, and the Second Coming of Christ

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Introduction

I offer this paper to stimulate thoughts on the difficult issues surrounding Christ's second coming. I write from a post-tribulation position, believing Christians are caught up in the air to meet Christ at the very end of this age, after the Great Tribulation, as part of the complex of events surrounding his return.

My reason for writing is two-fold. First, I believe post-tribulationism most accurately reflects the tone of Scripture—and as a pastor I am interested in our people knowing what the Bible actually teaches. Second, I believe many of us have inherited a pre-tribulational position that we simply take for granted without weighing the evidence. So, if nothing else, I hope to rectify this situation by presenting the other side.

My thoughts here are not overly academic. I've done graduate work on the topic, but this is not the place for exhaustive argumentation. Rather, at the risk of over-simplifying I'm cutting straight to the chase. What follows are brief, straightforward thoughts from most of the pertinent texts of Scripture.

One caveat: On this topic we may debate, but we may not fight. Members of our church see eye-to-eye on all the most important issues: The authority of Scripture, salvation by grace, the supremacy of Christ, and so forth. Secondary issues such as end-times events must never be allowed to divide us. Besides, none of us has cornered the truth, so all of us must be humble and gracious. I invite you to consider these thoughts with a healthy curiosity and to enjoy thinking theologically with me.

The issue of the timing of the rapture hinges on a few key questions:

- Does God promise protection from the Great Tribulation by the rapture of his people out of the world, i.e. pre-tribulationism? If not, what does he promise protection from, and what shape does this protection take?
- Does Scripture give indication that the Rapture and Second Coming are two distinct events separated by a significant time period, or are they a single event?
- Do God's plans for national Israel (such as we read in Romans 9—11), require that his "spiritual Israel," the church, be absent from the world at that time?

The first two questions are the focus of this paper. Discussing the nuances of what is known as “dispensationalism” (the third question) is beyond our scope. Suffice it to say that historically, dispensationalists have believed that the church could not be present in the world when God deals with national Israel at the end of the age. But there is no logical reason or explicit biblical text necessitating this. And recognizing this fact, many scholars in the dispensational camp have revised their positions in recent years; so it’s not an overly pertinent question.

Nonetheless, the important matter is not to refute dispensationalism but to make logical arguments from the text of Scripture regarding God’s plan for the end of the age. The biblical writers are hardly exhaustive on the topic, they do give us enough to go on. We can come to grips with the major themes and events of the end, which is important in preparing for what are sure to be trying, faith-testing times.

Ten Arguments for Post-tribulationism

1. The promises of Scripture: Believers suffer tribulation—they always have—but they do not suffer God’s wrath.

The Bible does not promise escape from tribulation, but it does promise protection from God’s wrath. We must not confuse the two. The “Great Tribulation” is that time in which the forces of evil oppose believers. It is, if you will, Satan’s day. But the “Day of the Lord”—a technical term in Scripture—is God’s day. It’s the time in which God pours out his wrath and retribution on evil. These two events may overlap, but they are not identical. God actually promises that we will have to endure tribulation; but he also promises protection from the fury of his wrath that is to follow.

In this world you will have trouble [literally: tribulation]. John 16:33

We wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. 1 Thessalonians 1:10

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 5:9

2. The nature of the rapture: It occurs simultaneously with Christ’s second coming.

The word *rapture* refers to our being caught up in the air to meet Christ. This event takes place as this age closes, concurrent with the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of believers.

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.
1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

The plain sense of this text is that the rapture and second coming are a single event. To corroborate this, just two other texts use the word “meet” as found in the passage above.

At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out." Matthew 25:6-8

The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. Acts 28:15

Each of these passages refers to the custom of going out to meet a visiting dignitary, and then accompanying him back to the place from which one came. This is important because many pre-tribulationists argue that logic demands a time gap between the rapture and second coming. They reason that it makes no sense to rise into the air only to return immediately to earth. But they don't know the ancient custom. People went out to meet those coming to them. So when Jesus comes to us—in *the air!*—that's where we'll go to meet him.

But note that the parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25 suggests that when Christ returns, it will be much later than expected, and only half of those waiting for him will be ready.

3. The sequence of several end-times texts shows that our gathering to Christ (rapture) will occur after the Great Tribulation.

Jesus explicitly taught that persecution and martyrdom (great tribulation) come before our being gathered to Christ. Consider the progression of Matthew 24:

- 24:9 Persecution begins
- 24:15 The antichrist is announced
- 24:21 Believers are in "great distress" (literally, "great tribulation")
- 24:29 The cosmic sign is given of the arrival of the Day of the Lord's wrath
- 24:31 God's people are gathered up (a probable reference to the rapture)

Thus believers are in the world during the Great Tribulation, but are gathered up afterward. In fact, it is for the sake of Christians on earth that God cuts short the tribulation with the onslaught of his wrath:

If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. Matthew 24:22

Mark 13 and Luke 21 describe the same flow of events. And Revelation 6 describes similar signs of the end. In this text, the fifth seal of martyrdom (great tribulation) precedes the sixth seal announcing the Day of the Lord's wrath. Thus all indications are that God's people are present on earth during the Great Tribulation.

4. Paul's encouragements in 2 Thessalonians suggest that believers are not gathered to the Lord until after the antichrist is revealed and the Day of the Lord commences.

Paul writes 2 Thessalonians at least in part to correct erroneous ideas concerning the end of history. Apparently some were spreading the news that certain prophetic events had already taken place. "Not so," says Paul:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3

First, observe that in the first sentence, Paul links three specific events—the coming of Christ, our gathering to him, and the day of the Lord's wrath—as if they are all aspects of one great event.

Second, note that Paul says that none of this can take place until the man of lawlessness, i.e. the antichrist, is revealed. Once again, the coming of the antichrist (and the great tribulation he brings) precedes any gathering up of believers via the rapture.

Important, too, are Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians 1. He commends the Thessalonians for persevering in the face of persecution. And he says that God will both repay evil-doers and give relief to the godly, and that he will do this at Christ's second coming, not before.

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7

5. The letters to the churches in Revelation 2 – 3 call us to endure tribulation.

Like most Bible prophecies, Revelation had both an immediate historical relevance and a greater, future application. Most of the churches to which John wrote were already suffering tremendously under the Caesars. Collectively, the churches in Revelation were told to repent of sin, remain faithful, avoid deception, and endure persecution. Each church is told to overcome and triumph. This is the very message God intends to send churches at the end of the age. The call is to endurance, not escapism.

6. The promise of Revelation 3:10 is not a rapture promise.

Most pre-trib rapturists claim this as their great promise of escape from the Great Tribulation:

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. Revelation 3:10

This is a truly wonderful promise, but it probably applies to believers living *in the world* who are protected *from God's wrath*. It is not a promise of rapture out of the world. Here's why:

First, other Bible passages promise us protection in the world, not escape from it. John 17:15 is the only other New Testament passage that uses "keep from" as Rev. 3:10 does. It is Jesus' "high priestly prayer" in which he says, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from [i.e. "keep them from"] the evil one." Clearly Jesus does not request that his people be removed from the earth, but protected on it. Galatians 1:4 is similar. It says that

Christ “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.” Again, he doesn’t physically remove us from this age, but he saves us as we live in it.

Second, the “hour of trial” referred to in Revelation 3:10 probably isn’t the Great Tribulation, but the Day of the Lord’s wrath. The term “trial” here refers to a test to prove guilt or inadequacy; “those who live on the earth” indicates worldly people, those who live in opposition to God, in contrast to true believers. So an hour of trial is coming to prove the guilt of unsaved humanity. What is this trial?

Revelation 9 and 16 seem to describe it. In the midst of God’s judgment, people refuse to repent. They curse God, but they do not turn from evil. This response to God’s judgment proves the depth of their sinfulness. Of course, true believers are not in their company. They are not the objects of God’s judgment, so they have received a protective seal against it (Revelation 7).

So the weight of the evidence is that Revelation 3:10 speaks of God protecting his people from judgment while they live in the world.

7. The way in which God protected his people throughout history corresponds to the way he will do so during the Day of the Lord.

Godly people have often been protected in the midst of judgment rather than removed from it. For example, Noah and his family rode out the waters of judgment in the ark. And the Israelites in Egypt suffered tremendous tribulation at the hands of Pharaoh, yet the worst of God’s plagues did not touch the Hebrew people. They suffered Pharaoh’s wrath but were protected from God’s wrath (Exodus 7—12).

This latter example is especially pertinent for two reasons: First, there are close parallels between the plagues in Exodus and Revelation. It seems that God set a precedent in the Old Testament to be repeated more broadly at the end of the New Testament. Second, the situation in Egypt shows that tribulation and judgment can take place concurrently. The Hebrew slaves saw their situation worsen as Pharaoh poured out “tribulation,” forcing them to make bricks without straw, at the very time when the plagues of God began to fall. So while the future Great Tribulation will be avenged by the Day of the Lord’s wrath, there will not necessarily be a clean break between the two. Tribulation may continue, even as judgment on God’s enemies begins.

8. Our “blessed hope” is Christ’s second coming, not the rapture per se.

Believers are told to look forward to their final salvation:

We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Titus 2:13

Many pre-trib rapturists contend that our hope rests on a rapture before the Great Tribulation. Otherwise, facing the antichrist, what comfort and hope would we have? But we would counter: What hope did the martyrs of the first century have? They were not raptured out of tribulation, yet they still had hope in the return of Jesus, who would bring resurrection and vindication. Our hope is that evil does not get the last word; that Jesus will come and settle all accounts; and that despite Satan’s best efforts, we will emerge victorious.

9. Christ's return is less "imminent" than we may have been led to believe.

Pre-trib rapturists teach "any moment" imminence. They say Jesus could return at any second, even before you finish reading this sentence. But this view overlooks the fact that Christ himself prophesied many events that had to take place before his Second Coming. For example, in John 21:18 Jesus prophesied the martyrdom of Peter as an old man. And in Acts 23:11 the Lord tells Paul that he must witness in Rome. Could Jesus have come back before these events took place? Of course not, because Jesus speaks the truth with perfect accuracy, and he said some other things would happen first.

In the same way, in Matthew 24 Jesus predicts many events before his return: the preaching of the gospel to all nations (v. 14), the coming of false messiahs with false miracles (v. 24), signs in the heavens (v. 29), and so forth. These seem to be given to intensify our anticipation of his return, especially when we see the signs being fulfilled. Of course, we cannot know the exact day or hour of His return; but we can see the signs of its approach. Remember, Christ comes like a thief—unexpectedly and to do harm—only to those who are not prepared.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 1 Thessalonians 5:4

So we are given signs not to lessen watchfulness but to heighten it. Though Jesus' return might not technically happen "at any moment," it could still happen in any generation. It could happen in our lifetime.

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. Matthew 25:13

So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. 1 Thessalonians 5:6

We "watch," maintaining moral vigilance, spiritual alertness, and active obedience, because any generation could live to see the fulfillment of the final prophetic events and the return of Christ. And all who have this hope desire to be found faithful and ready to meet Him.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Matthew 24:15-16

10. The historical stature of the pre-trib rapture doctrine is questionable.

Believers must exercise great caution in taking novel or minority views on doctrinal matters. The pre-trib doctrine has both strikes against it. It is "new" historically speaking, starting in the 1800's in England and the United States. And it has had only minor support, primarily in the dispensational camp. Of course, just because a thought is new or not widely held does not make it wrong—but it does make it suspect.

Having run in certain circles all their lives, many American Christians are surprised to learn this. (I was!) But among Bible-believing scholars—even in this country—post-tribulationism is the

majority view. And historically, post-tribulationism was the view of Calvin, Luther, Augustine, Athanasius, and the great first and second century scholars. Moreover, around the world, it is the dominant view of the global body of Christ. Frankly, believers in other countries who have always known tribulation think that western Christians are just silly to think they will escape it.

A great deal of pre-trib material has been published for popular consumption, giving the impression that a great number of scholars hold the view. But in truth, they have clustered in relatively few Bible schools and seminaries. Most scholars find pre-trib arguments unconvincing, mainly because they force novel meanings onto texts that can be interpreted straightforwardly.

This is not to say that pre-trib rapturists are heretical or ungodly. Good people stand on both sides of the debate. But we must take our stand—humble as it may be—not on what we've always been taught but on what Scripture actually teaches. With this in mind, I would submit that a preponderance of the evidence supports post-tribulationism.

Note: For a somewhat scholarly but balanced treatment of the major rapture views, I recommend *Three Views of the Rapture*, published by Zondervan.