Pretribulationism

The Pretribulation view of the rapture teaches that Christ will rapture His church to His Father’s house prior to the seven-year Tribulation (John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4–5). The timing of the rapture is not a cardinal doctrine that should divide God’s people, but those who interpret the Bible literally find many strong reasons to believe that the rapture will be pretribulational.

1. The pretribulational view offers the most logical interpretation of second-coming scriptures when they are taken for their plain, literal meaning. Indeed, Walvoord says, “The only view that interprets prophecy literally and consistently is that of the pretribulational, premillennial position” (Walvoord, Prophecy, p. 122). The pretribulational position has a logical explanation of every second-coming passage. Other views do not unless they jettison literal interpretation at one or more points.

2. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul promised believers they would be saved from the “wrath to come” (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7; 1 Thessalonians 1:10) and kept from “the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10). Such a “trial” has not yet occurred. Paul gave the same promise in Romans 5:9 and 1 Thessalonians 5:9. All the other viewpoints contradict these scriptures by stating that at least a portion of the church will experience all or some of the Tribulation period.

3. The pretribulational position clearly and logically untangles the details of Christ’s second coming. The Scriptures say that Jesus will come in the air to rapture (snatch away) His church, yet He will also come to the earth publicly to judge the earth. The coming of Christ in blessing for His church and His return to the earth in judgment are two distinct events separated by time. As Walvoord puts it, “The Rapture is a movement of the church from earth to heaven and is in sharp contrast to the church’s return with Christ at the Second Coming, which occurs more than seven years later as a movement from heaven to earth” (Walvoord, Prophecy, p. 38). The book of Revelation and 2 Thessalonians 2 clarify what takes place between those two events.

4. The pretribulational rapture position is the only view that makes a clear distinction between Israel and the church. The lack of a proper understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church in prophecy is one of the major causes of confusion in the teachings of amillennialism and posttribulationism. The church was born in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. We know this because the church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18), believers become part of the body of Christ through baptism with the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13), and Spirit baptism commenced when the Holy Spirit came upon believers in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4; 11:15-16). The church was a “mystery” (it was not revealed) in the Old Testament (Ephesians 3:3-5,9; Colossians 1:26-27). Furthermore, the church could not have come into existence until Christ died (to provide atonement—Matthew 16:18-21), rose again (Ephesians 1:20-23), and ascended to heaven (Ephesians 4:7-11). In fact, the Holy Spirit was not provided for believers until after Christ’s ascension (John 16:7-13). The apostle Paul calls the church “one new man” composed of Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15)—a completely new entity. It is distinguished from both Israel and the Gentiles, composed of members from both groups, and identified as the “church” and “one body” (Ephesians 2:16; 3:6). First Corinthians 10:32 distinguishes the church from both Israel and the Gentiles. Also, the name Israel is never used of the church. In the New Testament, it refers either to Jews in general or Jewish believers in particular. The reference to the “Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16, so often taken by amillennialists as a synonym for the church, in fact refers only to Jewish believers in Christ. In summary, there is no evidence that the church began before Acts 2, and much evidence that it began at that time as a new entity in the program of God. Therefore, it must be kept distinct from Israel, and a pretribulational understanding of the rapture is the only means of doing this.

5. Pretribulationism is the only view that makes “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13) truly a blessed hope. Few doctrines have brought more hope to grieving and persecuted souls during the past 2000 years than the doctrine of this blessed hope, which is the teaching that Christ will return for His church, resurrect the dead, and transport living believers to be with Himself while the world endures the Tribulation. The midtribulational position destroys that hope by forcing Christians to anticipate the trauma of at least part of the Tribulation. Posttribulationism further destroys the hope by propelling Christians through the entire Tribulation period. No proper reading of Bible prophecy gives credence to the idea that the church will be on earth during that seven-year period. The judgment pictured in Revelation is clearly intended for Israel and the unbelieving world.

6. Pretribulationism allows sufficient time for important end-time events to occur. Christ will take Christians to His Father’s house and reward them at the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:12). The marriage of the bride of Christ in heaven occurs before He comes “with power and great glory” to the earth (Matthew 24:30; Luke 21:27). Other viewpoints are all too brief to allow time for the important events listed in Revelation.

7. Only the pretribulational view preserves the motivating power of the imminent return of Christ. In John 14:1-3; Acts 1:11; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; Philippians 3:20; Colossians 3:4; and many other passages, the apostles taught that Christ could come at any moment. When the church loses this anticipation, it tends to become carnal and spiritually dead.

8. Pretribulational Christians are looking for the coming of the Lord. In other views, Christians are awaiting the Tribulation, the Antichrist, and great suffering. In fact, only the rapture could occur as soon as today. The glorious appearing of Christ cannot occur for at least seven or more years (see Walvoord, Prophecy in the New Millennium, pp. 38–39).

9. Pretribulationism emphasizes the magnitude of the rapture. At least four passages of Scripture describe the rapture, so it must be a significant event. The posttribulational view trivializes the rapture, treating it as a quick trip up and right back down. The pretribulational view treats it as a dignified, blessed event commensurate with a heavenly bridegroom who comes to take His bride to His Father’s house for their wedding.

10. Pretribulationism most clearly fits the flow of the book of Revelation (see Revelation 4:1-2). Further, this view explains why the church is so central in the first three chapters of Revelation but then disappears and is not mentioned again until 18:24. Pretribulationists insist that the church has already been raptured before the events of Revelation 4–18. Other views try to find the church in the Tribulation even though she is not mentioned in these chapters.

11. Pretribulationism preserves the credibility of Christ’s word that Christians will be kept from the Tribulation. It is the only view that resolves the contrasting difficulties of Revelation 3:10 and 7:14.

12. The purpose of the Tribulation is not to prepare the church for glory but rather to prepare Israel for restoration in God’s program (see Deuteronomy 4:29-30; Jeremiah 30:4-11).

13. The rapture of the church is not mentioned in any passage describing the coming of Christ following the Tribulation.

14. None of the Bible passages describing the Tribulation mention the church (see Jeremiah 30:4-11; Daniel 9:24-27; 12:1-2; Matthew 24:15-31; Revelation 4–19).

15. The church has not been appointed to wrath (Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:9; see Revelation 6:17).

16. When the church is raptured, believers will go to the Father’s house in heaven (John 14:3). They will not immediately return to the earth, as posttribulationism teaches.

17. The exhortation in Titus 2:13 to look for Christ’s return as a blessed hope is misleading if the Tribulation must come first. Believers would need to look for signs instead. On the contrary, the church is always exhorted to look for the Lord’s coming. In the Tribulation, however, believers are told to look for signs (Matthew 24).

18. According to Old Testament texts, living Tribulation saints are not translated and glorified at Christ’s second coming. They continue earthly human lives and occupations, including having children and raising crops (Isaiah 65:20-25). If all saints are translated and glorified (as described by the rapture) at Christ’s second coming to the earth, this would be impossible. In addition, the separation of the “sheep” and “goats” described by Jesus in Matthew 25:32 would be unnecessary because it would already have occurred at the rapture before He even set up His throne of judgment (25:31).

19. God has often delivered believers (including, for example, Noah, Lot, and Rahab) before punishing the world for sin (see 2 Peter 2:6-9).

20. Jesus mentions the possibility of believers escaping the Tribulation in Luke 21:36. 21. Almost all scholars acknowledge that the early church believed in the imminence of Christ’s return, which logically leads to pretribulationism.

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