

Left Behind---The Doctrine of the Rapture

Considerable attention has been given in the last 20 years to the concept of the rapture of the church. That event which seems to be spoken of in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and 1 Cor. 15:51-52. The word rapture is not used in the Bible but was coined much later from the Latin word which means to snatch or to seize. The idea is that before the time of unprecedented tribulation and harsh judgments comes upon the earth, the church will be “caught up” to meet the Lord, and thus spared from the judgments in the book of Revelation. This doctrine gained considerable press and popularity from the best selling series of novels by Tim LaHaye called “Left Behind”. Nevertheless it remains the minority view amongst professing Christians.

History Lesson

The early church (first 200 years) generally interpreted prophecy literally with a futuristic view, except where it was obviously intended to be figurative, until the Alexandrian school of theologians like Origen interpreted Old Testament prophecies and Revelation in the New Testament allegorically. This made sense at the time because most of the prophecies involved Israel, but there was no Israel. The Romans laid siege to Jerusalem in 70 AD and destroyed the city, the Temple, and most of the Jews. It has always been a struggle to believe prophecies about a nation, a city, and a people that simply were not there. The churches were divided in interpreting Revelation until the time of Augustine around 400 AD. From that time the official position of the church was to interpret prophecy in an allegorical way.

The Protestant Reformation was centered around other issues so it continued its eschatology (study of the end times) largely on Augustine, who embraced a nonliteral view with no attention to the Rapture. However, one of the core issues of the Reformation begun in 1517 was that every believer may read his or her Bible and be their own interpreter. This encouraged personal Bible study which eventually brought up all the questions of the Millennium mentioned in Rev.20, the Rapture in 1 Thes.4, and the second coming of Christ in Matt.24 and Rev. 19. With the rise of the popular Bible study movement in the 19th and 20th centuries there was a popular movement to study these doctrines in a futuristic and literal way.

Are You Going to Believe What You See or What They Tell You ?

I have always said I far and away trust any layman with a Bible to interpret it over a so-called scholar without a Bible to interpret it. That said, let me make it clear that however you interpret prophecy has nothing to do with your salvation, and this is not an issue that should divide the church. There are many godly people who disagree with me and I fully respect their position. I only invite you to read the passages and make up your own mind.

Prophecy has been a great source of comfort and hope to me as well as an incentive to get busy and serve the Lord while there is still time.

A Case for the Rapture

I think somebody wrote a book called “300 Reasons for a Pre-Tribulation Rapture”, but to save space I will just give you eight. The Tribulation is the name given to that time depicted in Rev.4-19 in which God pours out terrible judgments upon the earth. It is also the last seven year prophetic period from Daniel 9:27. In the last half of this period (42 months), the Antichrist will gain popularity as taught in the New Testament by Paul in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Jesus in Matt.24. Those of us who believe in the Rapture are divided between whether it occurs before the seven year period or at the midpoint. Either way is fine by me because the real issue is whether you distinguish the Rapture from the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation. If you would like to avoid the very painful last three and a half years, here is why I believe you will:

KEY VERSE: 1 Thessalonians 4:17, “Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

1. You never see the church or the Greek word for the church (ecclesia) in the Tribulation or the 70th period of seven years of Daniel. The church is not in Matt.24 or Rev.4-22.

2. The church is not appointed to the wrath of the Tribulation. In fact the church is promised to be kept “from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole world” in Rev.3:10. This is a big point of contention. Critics strongly believe the church is supposed to suffer and be persecuted. However, there is plenty of precedent for God removing His people before judgments like He did with Lot when He destroyed Sodom and Noah before the flood.

3. Doctrine of imminency—the N.T. authors all wrote with a sense of urgency that Jesus was coming back soon and quickly, that it would be sudden and catch many by surprise. In Matt.24:36 Jesus taught a series of parables about being faithful, alert, and acting now before it was too late. He even likened it to Noah and how the flood caught everyone by surprise. This loses its meaning if the second coming and the Rapture are the same event because they are preceded by so many signs like specific judgments and Armageddon, etc.

4. Believers who are converted during the Tribulation are not translated at the second coming, but carry on in their mortal bodies with occupations and procreation per Isa. 65:20-25. If the saints are taken up at the second coming, who is alive to enter the Kingdom? Notice that at the judgment of the second coming (the sheep and the goats of Matt 25), the saved and the unsaved are in their mortal bodies and the saved enter the Kingdom.

5. At the Rapture, the saints meet Christ in the air, while at the second coming Christ returns to the Mount of Olives to meet the saints on earth.

6. In 2 Thes 2:6-9, the divine restrainer is removed from the world so the Antichrist can take over. The Holy Spirit in the church best fits here, the “light of the world” must be removed before the Antichrist can take over. Therefore the church is raptured before the Antichrist takes over.

7. There is a distinction between believers in the tribulation and those prior to it in Rev.7:14 and 20:4, and there appears to be a separate resurrection for the tribulation believers distinct from the church.

8. In 1 Thes 4:17, when we go to meet Him “in the air”, He is alone, whereas at the second coming the heavenly host, including the church in their resurrected bodies comes with Him to the earth. In fact there seems to be many distinctions between the Rapture and the Second Coming. Compare 1 Thes.4:17 and Rev. 19:11-21 and see if you don’t agree.

Disclaimer

There is plenty of room for interpretation here and many opinions. I definitely don’t want to be too dogmatic, but after careful consideration and studying all the different views I think this is a reasonable position. Selfishly I don’t want to be here on planet earth during all those terrible judgments so I pray we are taken up soon, but I also believe it fits all the New Testament teaching of being ready, on the alert, and being faithful today because we expect Him to come for us soon.

Charlie