

## The Pre-Trib Rapture Doctrine While Standing On One Foot



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Jewish rabbis have an expression for giving a short answer, as opposed to their normal long version. The short version is supposed to be no longer than one can endure while standing on one foot. Since God designed us to stand on two feet, it does not take long for one who stands on one foot to become weary and begin to lose balance and put the other foot down in order to restore equilibrium. In this article, I want to give an overview of the Pre-Trib Rapture doctrine, both the foundational supports and the specific biblical arguments, while standing on one foot. In future articles in this series, I will come back and deal more extensively with each specific item.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 teaches the fact of the Rapture: ". . . shall be *caught up* together with them. . ." "Rapture" comes from the Latin translation of the Greek (*harpazō*) in this verse and is accurately translated into English by "caught up" (NASB). A debate swirls around *when* this takes place relative to the Tribulation. Like the Trinity, the timing of the Rapture must be developed from proper interpretation and then harmonization of many biblical passages. Therefore, I think the Pre-Trib Rapture doctrine can best be understood by looking at the doctrine in three aspects. These aspects are (1) foundational issues, (2) specific arguments from the Bible, and (3) practical implications. The Pre-Trib Rapture teaching has been depicted in the following house diagram.

### FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

Four foundation stones provide the biblical basis for the Pre-Trib Rapture. They are (1) consistent literal interpretation, (2) Pre-millennialism, (3) Futurism, and (4) a distinction between Israel and the church. These are not mere suppositions, but rather are important biblical doctrines.

#### *Literal Interpretation*

Consistent literal interpretation is essential to properly understanding what God is saying in the Bible. The dictionary defines literal as "belonging to letters." Further, it says literal interpretation involves an approach "based on the actual words in their ordinary meaning, . . . not going

beyond the facts" (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Unabridged, Second Edition, p. 1055). "Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language" (Paul Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 29). How is this done? It can only be accomplished through the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), contextual (in accord with its context) method of interpretation.

Literal interpretation recognizes that a word or phrase can be used either plainly (denotative) or figuratively (connotative). As in our own conversations today, the Bible may use plain speech, such as "Grandmother died yesterday" (denotative). Or the same thing may be said in a more colorful way, "Grandmother kicked the bucket yesterday" (connotative). An important point to be noted is that even though we may use a figure of speech to refer to Grandmother's death, we are using that figure to refer to an event that literally happened. Some interpreters are mistaken to think that just because a figure of speech may be used to describe an event (i.e., Jonah's experience in the belly of the great fish in Jonah 2), that the event was not literal. Such is not the case. A "Golden Rule of Interpretation" has been developed to help us discern whether or not a figure of speech was intended by an author.

*When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.* (David Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library: Graphically Illustrated*, p. 11.)

When the Bible is consistently interpreted literally, from Genesis to Revelation, then the Pre-Trib position is hard to avoid.

### *Premillennialism*

The next biblical foundation stone supporting PreTribulation-ism is Premillennialism. Premillennialism teaches that the Second Advent will occur before Christ's thousand-year reign from Jerusalem upon earth. It is contrasted with the Post-millennial teaching that Christ will return after He has reigned spiritually from His throne in heaven for a long period of time during the current age, through the church, and the similar Amillennial view that also advocates a present, but pessimistic, spiritual reign of Christ.

Biblical Premil-lennialism is a necessary foundation for PreTrib-ulationism since it is impossible for either Postmillennialism or Amillennialism to support Pretribulationism.

### *Futurism*

The third biblical foundation stone for Pretribulationism is Futurism. As if understanding the different millennial positions are not complicated enough, diversification is compounded when we consider the four possible views which relate to the timing of when an interpreter sees prophecy being fulfilled in history. The four views are simple in the sense that they reflect the only four possibilities in relation to time-past, present, future, and timeless. The *Preterist* (past) believes that most, if not all, prophecy has already been fulfilled, usually in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The *Historicist* (present) sees much of the current church Age as equal to the Tribulation Period. Thus, prophecy has been and will be fulfilled during the current Church Age. *Futurists* (future) believe that virtually all prophetic events will not occur in the current Church Age, but will happen in the future Tribulation, Second Coming, or

Millennium. The *Idealist* (timeless) does not believe either that the Bible indicates the timing of events or that we can know before they happen. Therefore, idealists think that prophetic passages mainly teach great ideas or truths about God to be applied regardless of timing.

Since Pretribulationism can only be built upon Futurism, it too is an essential building block.

### *Distinction between Israel and the church*

The final foundational essential for the Pre-Trib Rapture is the biblical understanding that God's single program for history includes two peoples, Israel and the church. This view is often known as dispensationalism. While the basis of salvation is always the same for Jew and Gentile, this does not mean that God's prophetic program does not have two aspects to it. God's plan for Israel is on hold until He completes His current purpose with the church and Raptures His Bride to heaven. After the Rapture, God will then complete His unfinished business with Israel during the seven-year Tribulation period. Therefore, if one does not distinguish between passages which God intends for Israel from those intended for the church, then there results an improper merging of the two programs. Such a merger cannot support the Pre-Trib Rapture since the Bible teaches that the church and Israel have in many ways different programs within the plan of God.

### SPECIFIC PRE-TRIB ARGUMENTS

Operating consistently upon the foundation of these four biblical foundations, we will survey six specific biblical arguments for Pretribulationism. These are not all the reasons for a Pre-Trib Rapture, but are simply a summary of some of the basic arguments. (For more arguments see Tim LaHaye's, *No Fear of The Storm: Why Christians will Escape All the Tribulation*, pp. 219-25.)

#### *The Imminent Coming of Christ*

The New Testament uses many different terms in various passages teaching that Christ could come at any-moment. Some Bible teachers use the English word "imminency" to encompass the biblical teaching of this truth. Imminency means that other things *may* happen before the imminent event, but nothing else *must* take place before it happens. Therefore, the idea of "soon coming" is to be distinguished from "imminency." If one is coming soon then they would be required to come by a certain time. Imminency means that one could come soon, but a soon coming is not necessary. Thus, only Pretribulationism teaches a truly imminent Rapture (consistent with the New Testament) since it is the only view not requiring anything to happen before the Rapture. Imminency strongly argues for the Pre-Trib position.

#### *The Nature of the Tribulation*

The Bible teaches that the major purpose of the Tribulation Period (i.e., the seven-year, 70th week of Daniel) is primarily a time of preparation for Israel's restoration (Deut. 4:29-30; Jer. 30:4-11). While the church is told that she will experience tribulation in general during this present age (John 16:33), she is never mentioned in Old or New Testaments as participating in Israel's time of trouble which includes the Great Tribulation, the Day of the Lord, and the Wrath of God. Pretribulationism gives the best answer to the biblical fact that the church is never mentioned as participating in Tribulational events, while Israel is found throughout.

#### *The Nature of the Church*

Only Pretribulationism is able to give full biblical import to the New Testament teaching that the church differs significantly from Israel. The church is said to be a mystery (Eph. 3) by which Jew and Gentiles are united in one body in Christ (Eph. 2). This explains why the translation of the church is never mentioned in any passage dealing with the Second Coming after the Tribulation and why the church is promised deliverance from the time of God's wrath during the Tribulation (Rev. 3:10; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 5:9). The church is promised that all believers will be taken to the Father's house in heaven (John 14:1-3), not to the earth as other views would demand.

### *The Work of the Holy Spirit*

Since the most likely interpretation of the "restrainer of evil" in 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit Who is at work through the Body of Christ during the current Church Age, then this view supports Pretribulationism. Since "the lawless one" (i.e., the Beast or anti-Christ) cannot be revealed until the restrainer is taken away, it follows that the Tribulation cannot occur until the church is removed.

### *Contrasts between Comings*

The Rapture is characterized in the New Testament as a "translation or resurrection coming" (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:15-17) in which the Lord comes *for* His church, taking her to His Father's House (John 14:3). On the other hand, Christ's Second Advent *with* His saints (the church=Rev. 19) descends from heaven and arrives on earth to stay and set up His Messianic kingdom (Zech. 14:4-5; Matt. 24:27-31). All of the differences between the two events are harmonized naturally by the Pre-Trib position, while all other views are not able to comfortably account for such differences.

### *An Interval Needed between Comings*

Several items in the New Testament are best harmonized by the Pre-Trib time-gap of at least seven years between comings. Note two examples best explained by an interval: First, an interval is needed in order for all Church Age saints to appear before the judgment seat of Christ in heaven (2 Cor. 5:10). Revelation 19:7-10 speaks of just such a judgment occurring in heaven in preparation for Christ's Return to earth. Second, an interval allows for the translation of all believers on earth (Pre-Trib Rapture) at a point in time to occur and yet have time for millions of new believers during the Tribulation who are in non-resurrection bodies at the Second Coming to provide the initial population base for the Millennium (Isa. 65:20-25), and a basis for the sheep and goat judgment at the Second Advent (Matt. 25:31-46).

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Dr. Renald Showers has clearly summarized practical implications of Pretribulationism for a forthcoming book about the Rapture. "The fact that the glorified, holy Son of God could step through the door of heaven at any-moment is intended by God to be the most pressing, incessant motivation for holy living and aggressive ministry (including missions, evangelism and Bible teaching) and the greatest cure for lethargy and apathy. It should make a major difference in every Christian's values, actions, priorities and goals."