

The “Rapture”: Pretribulational or Part of the Second Coming?

By [Jonathan Menn](#), J.D., M.Div.

Director of Equipping Church Leaders-East Africa

A brief summary of Chapter 9 in the book entitled,
Biblical Eschatology (2nd ed., Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018)
by Jonathan Menn

The word “rapture” is derived from the Latin word *rapiemur* which is found in the Latin Vulgate Bible in 1 Thess 4:17 and is translated “caught up.”¹ The two primary passages concerning the rapture are 1 Cor 15:50-54 and 1 Thess 4:13-18. The dispensationalist *New Scofield Reference Bible* calls 1 Thess 4:13-18 the “central passage” concerning the rapture of the church.² First Thess 4:13-18 and 1 Cor 15:50-54 deal with opposite sides of the same coin: in 1 Thessalonians the issue was whether dead believers would receive the same benefits as those who are alive at Christ’s return; in 1 Corinthians the point was that, because flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, believers who are alive at Christ’s return must be transformed to participate in the kingdom.

Until dispensationalism was invented in the 1800s, all Christians understood that the church will be present during any end-time “tribulation” and that Christ’s second coming will entail the resurrection of the dead and the rapture of living believers. Dispensationalism claims that there will be a pretribulational rapture of the church. As Travis points out, “The notion of spiriting the church away before the ‘tribulation’ derives not from any statement of scripture, but from the belief that Israel must go through the tribulation, and *therefore* the church cannot.”³

In fact, all passages that deal with the issue make clear that the rapture and the second coming are not two events separated in time. The rapture occurs as part of the second coming which is after, not before, the tribulation. The primary passages are discussed below.

1 Thessalonians 4-5

1 Thessalonians 4-5 and the Olivet Discourse describe the same events. In the

¹ MacDonald, *Believer’s*, 2038, 2046n.13; Bell, “Critical Evaluation,” 2-3.

² Scofield, *New Scofield*, 1292n.1.

³ Travis, *I Believe*, 151.

Olivet Discourse, Christ never speaks of a pretribulational rapture. However, in Matt 24:31 he does speak of the “gathering of the elect,” which “can most readily be taken to refer to the gathering of the elect at the resurrection.”⁴ Thus, the one passage that directly correlates the “tribulation” with the “gathering of the elect” specifies that the “gathering,” will be “*after the tribulation*” (Matt 24:29-31), not before.

Paul says the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, which clearly is related to the second coming, not a “pretribulational rapture.” The Lord’s “*coming down from heaven*” (1 Thess 4:16) recalls, in a general way, the OT references to “*the day of the Lord*” when God will judge the wicked and save the righteous.⁵ Jeffrey Weima notes that the “*trumpet of God*” (1 Cor 15:42; 1 Thess 4:16) in the OT functioned primarily “as a signal, marking in particular the visible appearance of God not only in the past (Exod. 19:13, 16, 19; 20:18), but especially at the future day of the Lord (Isa. 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:14-16; Zech. 9:14).”⁶ Similarly, clouds are a sign of Christ’s second coming.⁷ The cloud image ultimately is derived from Dan 7:13, where Daniel had a vision and saw “*with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming.*” That passage from Daniel was quoted by Jesus in connection with his second coming. Given the consistent use of all these images in connection with the *parousia*, most standard popular and scholarly commentaries have no problem identifying the rapture described in 1 Thess 4:16-17 with the second coming described in Matt 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27.⁸

1 Corinthians 15

First Corinthians 15 is Paul's most detailed discussion of the resurrection, Christ's “coming,” the rapture, and “*the end.*” Paul's discussion of these topics in 1 Cor 15:12-58 parallels his discussion of the same topics in 1 Thess 4:13-18.

First Cor 15:25-26 says that Christ “*must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.*” First Cor 15:50-57 describes when Christ abolishes death. 15:50 says that “*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*” 15:53 goes on to state that the perishable must “*put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.*” That occurs at “*the last trumpet*” when “*the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed*” (15:52). That event (the rapture) is linked with 15:54 which says, “*When this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘death is swallowed*

⁴ Murray, “Interadventual Period,” 391.

⁵ See Isa 2:10-12; 13:6, 9; Ezek 7:19; 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph 1:7-8, 14, 18; 2:2-3; Zech 14:1; Mal 3:2.

⁶ Weima, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 880.

⁷ Matt 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; Rev 1:7; 14:14-16.

⁸ See Henry, *Commentary*, 1743; Cole, “Mark,” 1194; Ewert, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 1081; Mounce, *Matthew*, 227.

up in victory.” Andrew Lincoln states the obvious, “The clear temporal reference [to the events of 15:54] is to the parousia (cf. verse 52).”⁹ Thus, “*the end*” (15:24) is coterminous with the abolition of death (15:26), which is when our mortal bodies are changed and “*put on immortality*” (15:52-54).

“The believer’s victory over death is said in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55 to occur when believers receive resurrection bodies. This coincides with what is said in 1 Corinthians 15:23-26 to occur in conjunction with both the ‘coming’ of Christ and the ‘end’, when the believer’s last enemy, death, will be overcome.”¹⁰ The rapture *cannot* happen before the tribulation because at the rapture death has been ended forever. In other words, the identity of the rapture in 1 Cor 15:50-54 with the second coming is confirmed in that the rapture occurs “*at the last trumpet*” (1 Cor 15:52) which will take place at the second coming *after* the tribulation (Matt 24:29, 31).

2 Thessalonians 1-2

Second Thessalonians 1-2 is an extended discussion concerning the second coming and “*our gathering together to him,*” which clearly is posttribulational, not pretribulational.

2 Thess 1:6-10 is posttribulational

Even pretribulationists agree that 2 Thess 1:6-10 concerns the posttribulational second coming of Christ.¹¹ At that time (and not before) Christ will do two things: (1) punish the ungodly who are persecuting Christians (1:6, 8-9); and (2) rescue Christians who are being persecuted and give them rest (1:7, 10). The “rest” or “relief” of 1:7 is contrasted with the “tribulation” or “affliction”¹² of 1:6. This passage is fatal to any view of a pretribulational rapture because: “Paul explicitly states that the hope of the Thessalonian believers is the glorious second advent of Christ, at which time they will receive rest from their afflictions. If the rapture, as an event separate from the second advent, is indeed ‘the blessed hope’ (Titus 2:13) of the Christian, this passage becomes inexplicable.”¹³

2 Thess 2:1-2 and “our gathering together to him”

In 2 Thess 2:1-2 Paul states that “*our gathering together to him,*” which pretribulationists take as a reference to the rapture,¹⁴ occurs at “*the coming*” of the Lord (2:1), which is “*the day of the Lord*” (2:2). Those events all must refer to

⁹ Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 66

¹⁰ Venema, *Promise*, 250.

¹¹ Pache, *Return*, 358; Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 284-94; Feinberg, *Millennialism*, 289; Ice, “Rapture and Second Coming,” 2.

¹² Greek = *thlipsis*, the same word used in Matt 24:21, 29 for the “tribulation.”

¹³ Bell, “Critical Evaluation,” 275.

¹⁴ Ice, “Rapture and Second Coming,” 2; MacDonald, *Believer’s*, 2053.

the second coming since “the word ‘gather together’ (*episunago*) in Matthew 24:31 is the verb whose noun (*episunagoge*) is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 of our ‘gathering together’ unto the Lord at the Rapture.”¹⁵

Further, 2:1 introduces a discourse concerning the “coming” (*parousia*) of Christ, i.e., the coming at which the church is raptured. The only other time Christ’s *parousia* is mentioned in that discourse is in 2 Thess 2:8 (“*Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming [parousia]*”). Bell notes the fatal nature of 2 Thess 2:8 to pretribulationism:

This description of the destruction of Anti-Christ by Christ Himself is an obvious reference to the glorious second advent and is so taken by all leading pretribulationists. But this identification, again, would seem to be fatal for pretribulationism. If Paul expressly sets out to inform the Thessalonians concerning certain aspects of the Lord’s coming (*parousia*), which is identified as the rapture of the church, and then mentions the *parousia* again in the passage only in connection with the admittedly posttribulational *parousia* to destroy Anti-Christ, there can be no escaping the obvious identification of the two events as one and the same.¹⁶

The “restrainer” of 2 Thess 2:6-7

The “restrainer” who is “*taken out of the way*” (2 Thess 2:7) does not imply a pretribulational rapture. Pretribulationists identify the “restrainer” as the Holy Spirit who indwells believers (the church). They then wrongly claim that the church must be removed from the earth in order to take the restrainer “*out of the way*.”¹⁷

The identity of the “restrainer” is not at all clear and has been identified in various ways. Even the grammar of “restrains” in 2 Thess 2:6-7 is difficult. “Paul first refers to this restraining influence in 2:6 as *to katechon* (a neuter participle meaning ‘that which restrains’) and then in 2:7 as *ho katechōn* (a masculine participle meaning ‘the one who restrains’).”¹⁸ Thus, it is not clear whether the restrainer is an impersonal force or a personal entity. Michael Holmes notes that the following have been proposed as candidates for the restrainer: (1) the Roman Empire as personified in the emperor; (2) the principle of law and order (personified in 2:7); (3) the Jewish state; (4a) Satan; (4b) a force or person hostile to God (taking the verb in the sense of “possess, occupy,” or “hold sway”); (5a) God and his power; (5b) the Holy Spirit; (6) the proclamation of the gospel (the neuter participle) by Christians and especially by Paul himself (the masculine

¹⁵ Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, 73.

¹⁶ Bell, “Critical Evaluation,” 280-81.

¹⁷ Ryrie, *Holy Spirit*, rev. ed., 185; Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 241-43

¹⁸ Holmes, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 233

participle); (7) an angel who restrains evil until the gospel has been preached to all nations (see Mark 13:10).¹⁹ The identity of the “restrainer” may represent a combination of forces and entities.²⁰

Even assuming the Holy Spirit is the “restrainer,” there is no logical reason why the church has to be raptured before the tribulation. Bell explains why:

The conclusion drawn by pretribulationists is a *non sequitur*. Walvoord himself, in his comprehensive work on the Holy Spirit, points out that the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit is a work which has been going on since antediluvian times (Genesis 6:3) and is not to be thought of as a New Testament ministry alone. Since His permanent indwelling of believers did not begin until the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, it is obvious that His indwelling ministry is largely independent of His ministry in restraining sin. Therefore, if His restraining ministry should cease in the tribulation period (as pretribulationists posit) this would not necessarily affect His indwelling ministry. . . . Unless, then, the Holy Spirit’s indwelling ministry specifically is mentioned as being withdrawn (which it is not, as Walvoord admits) there would seem to be no logical reason to assume that the removal of restraint—even that of the Holy Spirit—logically or Biblically necessitates the removal of the church.²¹

The “blessed hope” for which believers are to “watch,” and which is the incentive for godly living, is the second coming, not a “pretribulation rapture”

Titus 2:13 urges Christians to be “*looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and savior, Jesus Christ.*” Pretribulationists speak of the pretribulation rapture as “*the blessed hope.*”²² This passage, however, makes clear that the posttribulation second coming (*epiphaneia*) in “glory” is “*the blessed hope.*” Grammatically, “*the blessed hope*” and “*the glorious appearing*” are “one and the same event, according to the rules of Greek syntax” because there is a “single definite article with two nouns in the same case, connected by the correlative *kai*.”²³ Indeed, all other passages that connect “glory” with Christ’s “appearing,” “coming,” or “revelation,” are manifestly posttribulation second coming passages.²⁴

¹⁹ Holmes, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 233-34.

²⁰ See Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 535-36; Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 221.

²¹ Bell, “Critical Evaluation,” 289-90. Bell’s reference is to John Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen, 1954).

²² Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 74-75, 276; MacDonald, *Believer’s*, 2141; Higgins, *Manasseh Effect*, 94-95.

²³ Bell, “Critical Evaluation,” 298.

²⁴ See Matt 24:30-31; Mark 8:38; 13:26; Luke 9:26; 21:27; 2 Thess 1:9-10; 1 Pet 4:13; 5:1.

The passages that exhort Christians to “watch,” “be awake,” and be “alert,”²⁵ manifestly are talking about the second coming, *not* a rapture that will occur some years before the second coming. The Olivet Discourse, which largely concerns the second coming, concludes with multiple exhortations to “watch” and remain faithful.²⁶ “Watch” does not mean to look up at the sky but to be spiritually ready, i.e., “since one never knows when Christ will return, one should always live in readiness for that return.”²⁷ The reason “is not that Christ might return before the disciples expected, i.e., at any moment, but that He might delay longer than they expected and thus they might become negligent and lose sight of the hope of His coming entirely.”²⁸ Thus, the reason for Christ’s exhortations to “watch” is the *exact opposite* of that given by pretribulationists.

God has not appointed the church to “wrath,” even though it will suffer during the tribulation

Most verses that talk about God’s wrath “refer primarily to God’s wrath in the final judgment. But the Great Tribulation will, in one of its aspects, be the outpouring of the divine wrath upon a rebellious and sinful civilization. It is the out-reaching of final judgment just before the end comes. It is in fact the beginning of that judgment.”²⁹ Pretribulationists claim that the church will be removed from the earth before the great tribulation so that it will not experience God’s wrath.³⁰ However, no verse actually says that the church will leave the earth in order to avoid God’s wrath.

Promises such as “*we shall be saved from the wrath of God*” (Rom 5:9), “*God has not destined us for wrath*” (1 Thess 5:9), and the exhortation to remain faithful “*that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place*” (Luke 21:34-36) do not imply that the church will be removed from the earth before God pours out his wrath. The context of all those passages is God’s eternal wrath in judgment after the tribulation. The contrast in Rom 5:9 and 1 Thess 5:9 is between “wrath” and “salvation.” That contrast demands the meaning of *eternal* wrath because “salvation” clearly is eternal salvation, not “salvation” from temporary tribulation. Indeed, the juxtaposition in 1 Thess 5:4-6 of “*the day of the Lord*” and “*the day*” with the exhortation to “*be alert and sober*” demonstrates that the church *will be present* on earth when the *parousia* occurs.³¹

Rev 3:10 promises that Jesus will “*keep you [the church of Philadelphia] from the hour of testing.*” In Greek, the wording is “I will *keep you out of* [tērēsō ek] the

²⁵ E.g., Luke 12:35-40; Rom 13:11-12; Rev 3:3; 16:15.

²⁶ Matt 24:42—25:30; Mark 13:33-37; Luke 21:34-36.

²⁷ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 122.

²⁸ Bell, “Critical Evaluation,” 334.

²⁹ Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, 122.

³⁰ Scofield, *New Scofield*, 1356n.2; Smith, *Tribulation*, 4-6; Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 160.

³¹ See Payne, *Encyclopedia*, 561-62.

hour of trial.” That language neither asserts nor requires bodily removal before a coming trial. The only other place in the Bible where precisely the same words are used is John 17:15. In that verse, Jesus specifically asked his Father *not* to take his disciples out of the world. Instead, Jesus prayed that the Father would “keep them [the disciples] from [lit., ‘out of’—*tērēsēs ek*] the evil [one].” It is clear that “Jesus prays for the disciples’ preservation from the power of Satan, even though they would remain *in* the ‘world,’ the sphere of Satan’s activity.”³² Mounce explains, “The hour of trial is directed toward the entire non-Christian world, but the believer will be kept from it, not by some previous appearance of Christ to remove the church bodily from the world, but by the spiritual protection he provides against the forces of evil.”³³

The suffering and death of Christians during the tribulation will be a testing, refining, and demonstration of their faith, not a sign of God’s wrath against them.³⁴ There is an almost paradoxical relationship between God’s wrath, the world’s evil, and the church’s suffering and triumph: “As God exerts his wrath upon the evil world in the form of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, the world retaliates with its own vengeance against Christ’s followers. God allows the dragon for this short period (Mark 13:20) to ‘conquer’ the saints (Rev. 13:7). . . . However, these very tribulations are the victory of the church (Rev. 12:11) and of God (7:10).”³⁵

The issue of the relationship between tribulation, suffering, and God’s wrath is an important one. It is important because, throughout the entire history of Christianity, in all parts of the world, Christians have been persecuted and have suffered for their faith. The theology that says one generation of Christians will escape all tribulation and suffering by being removed from the earth is unprecedented. Ladd concludes this important discussion as follows:

It would be contrary to the entire history of God’s dealings with His people both in the Old and New Testament dispensations if God should in the consummation of the age reverse Himself to do something He has never previously done, namely, to protect His people from the hostility of an evil age. . . . Jesus Himself prophesied that throughout the course of the age, His disciples would experience tribulation and death; they would be hated by all nations for His name’s sake (Matt. 24:9). . . . It is indeed the divine order that “through many tribulations it is necessary for us to enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). . . . Physical death, bodily suffering is not to be feared, fearful as it is, by those who have been redeemed by the suffering and death of Christ. Martyrdom has ever been a mark of faithfulness to Christ. . . . Why should it be any different at the end?³⁶

³² Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture Position,” 197.

³³ Mounce, *Revelation*, 103.

³⁴ See Rev 6:9-11; 7:13-17; 11:7-12; 12:10-17; 13:7; 14:12-13; 17:14; 20:4.

³⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 325

³⁶ Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, 127-29.

Bibliography

- Bell, William Everett, Jr. "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology." PhD diss., New York University, 1967.
- Cole, Victor Babajide. "Mark." In *Africa Bible Commentary*, edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo, 1171-1202. Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006.
- Feinberg, Charles. *Millennialism: The Two Major Views*, 3rd ed. Chicago: Moody, 1980.
- Ford, Desmond. *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology*. Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979.
- Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991. Online: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/>. Ewert, David. "1-2 Thessalonians." In *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, edited by Walter Elwell, 1064-97. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989.
- Higgins, John. *The Manasseh Effect: Your Appointment With Destiny*. Phoenix, AZ: Josiah Publications, 1995.
- Hoekema, Anthony. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Holmes, Michael. *1 and 2 Thessalonians (NIVAC)*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.
- Ice, Thomas. "Why the Rapture and Second Coming are Distinct Events," 1-4. Washington, DC: Pre-Trib Research Center, 1994.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *The Blessed Hope*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956.
- Lincoln, Andrew. *Paradise Now and Not Yet*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981.
- MacDonald, William. *Believer's Bible Commentary*, edited by Art Farstad. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995.
- Moo, Douglas. "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position." In *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* 171-211. Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984.
- Mounce, Robert. *Matthew (NIBC)*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985.

Murray, John. "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25." In *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 387-400. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977.

Osborne, Grant. *Revelation* (BECNT). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.
Pache, Rene. *The Return of Jesus Christ*. Translated by William Sanford LaSor. Chicago: Moody, 1955.
Hiebert, D. Edmund. *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness*. Chicago: Moody, 1971.

Ryrie, Charles. *The Holy Spirit*, rev. ed. Chicago: Moody, 1997.

Scofield, C. I., ed. *The New Scofield Reference Bible*. New York: Oxford, 1967.

Smith, Chuck. *The Tribulation and the Church*. Costa Mesa, CA: The Word for Today, 1980.

Storms, Sam. *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative*. Tain, Scotland: Mentor, 2013.

Travis, Stephen. *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

Venema, Cornelis. *The Promise of the Future*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000.

Walvoord, John. *The Holy Spirit*. Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen, 1954.

_____. *The Rapture Question*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957.

Weima, Jeffrey. "1-2 Thessalonians." In *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, 871-89. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).

