

The Pretribulation Rapture

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There are quite a number of biblical promises on the rapture of true believers before the start of the seven year-long tribulation period when the Antichrist will rule over the world. Some of these promises are implicitly evident from certain scriptures while, in other cases it is explicitly stated as a fact that believers will escape the coming tribulation. We cannot afford any doubt on this important matter as it will detrimentally influence our spiritual expectation as well as the quality of our relationship with the Lord.

The Lord Jesus calls people hypocrites who do not consider biblical prophecies by interpreting the signs of the times in the light of the prophetic word (Luke 12:54-56; cf. 1 Thess. 5:20). Such believers are prophetically in the dark and do not have a clear future expectation; consequently, they are not well prepared to what the future holds. The foolish virgins paid a high penalty for their insufficient preparations to meet the bridegroom. They pretended to be ready but they were not (Matt. 25:1-13). With reference to this situation we are warned to be vigilant and take all the necessary steps to be ready for the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom.

The concept of a pretribulation rapture is clearly instilled in us by the Bible. It is completely in agreement with God's actions throughout the centuries, so we can have no excuse to be ignorant on this important promise. The following facts should be heeded in this regard:

The basic promise

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:16-18). The verb "caught up" means to be "suddenly snatched away". In this case the bride will be caught up from the earth to meet the Lord in the air. It is a wonderful promise to look forward to being united with the heavenly Bridegroom, and for this reason Paul describes it as our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13).

In His Olivet Discourse the Lord Jesus also clearly indicated that informed Christians who understand biblical prophecies and devote themselves to watching and praying will definitely escape the coming tribulation in its entirety: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36). Escaping the tribulation means to be outside of it. Christians will be removed by the Lord Himself from the disaster area of divine judgements. In view of this fact Paul says that we should wait for the Son of God from heaven "who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10).

Distinction between Israel and the church

The Lord expects us to know the Bible, and that includes the prophetic word that shines like a light in a dark place (2 Pet. 1:19). This knowledge will enable us to discern between the prophetic future of Israel and that of the church. People who have this knowledge will be mindful of the fact that, from a dispensational point of view, Daniel's 70th year-week – i.e. the tribulation of seven years – forms part of Israel's divine history and is therefore not part of the church dispensation. Daniel did not even refer to the church dispensation which fits in between the 69th and 70th year-weeks. If one does not consider this fact you are inclined to add the tribulation period (or least a substantial part of it) to the church dispensation, thereby promoting an unbiblical future expectation. Consequently, you offer people an Antichrist expectation in stead of a Christ expectation, and this idea influences many Christians to make unnecessary preparations for survival during the coming tribulation period. Some of them even prepare places of refuge away from the large cities, because they do not believe in the rapture before the outpouring of divine wrath.

A further problem which arises if we schedule the rapture somewhere in the 70th week of Daniel is that of date-fixing. All the events of the tribulation occur strictly within a time frame of seven years, which makes a form of date-fixing possible. People who engage in this practice effectively tell us that we should wait for the Antichrist to be revealed, after which we can start with a countdown to the rapture. It may, for instance, be 3½ years after the beginning of the tribulation, in the middle of the year-week, when some people expect the rapture. In such cases they completely ignore the surprise element of the heavenly Bridegroom's coming.

The elders in heaven

A further argument in favour of a pretribulation rapture is the fact that the book Revelation has been written in a dispensational and chronological way. Firstly, the church dispensation is described in Revelation 2 and 3, followed by the glorified church after the rapture in Revelation 4 and 5, represented in heaven by the 24 elders. The seven year-long tribulation is described in Revelation 6 through 19, which will be ended by the public coming of Christ. Revelation 20 describes Christ's thousand year reign of peace, and Revelation 21 and 22 elaborate on the new heaven and earth which will be created after the final judgement.

At present we are in Revelation 3, in the seventh and last church period shortly before the end of the church dispensation. The spiritually lukewarm, apostate and materialistic church of Laodicea is presently dominant in the world. Shortly, the true church will be called to heaven with the sound of a trumpet. It is clearly only the true disciples of the Lord Jesus who received the promise that He would come to take them away after He has prepared a place for them in heaven (John 14:2-3). The elders around the throne will sing to the Lamb: "You were slain and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9-10).

There are literally thousands of tongues, tribes and nations in the world, and saints from all of them will gather around the throne in heaven when the seals are opened, the trumpets are sounded and the seven last plagues are poured out upon the wicked. When the first seal is opened the Antichrist will be revealed as a false prince of peace. There is no possibility that the true church of Christ can be surrendered to the Antichrist and subjected to God's judgements, since we have not been appointed to divine wrath (1 Thess. 5:9).

The coming day of the Lord, therefore, proclaims a completely different destiny to believers and unbelievers. To the apostates and unbelievers on earth it will be a time of divine judgements because they do not belong to the Lord Jesus and therefore do not share in His salvation. But to the disciples of Christ the day of the Lord will be a time of glorification and unspeakable joy. Paul says, "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on

that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8).

"That day" refers to the day of the Lord. When the Antichrist will gain control over the whole world through great deception, the children of the Lord will appear before the judgement seat of Christ in heaven, receive rewards of grace in the form of crowns, and then judge the world in righteousness together with Christ (1 Cor. 6:2). They will be present when God's judgements are poured out upon the wicked multitudes and confirm the righteousness of His judgements.

Divine wrath

The entire seven years of the tribulation will be a time of divine wrath upon the sinners. Initially, spiritual intimidation and deception by the Antichrist will be the order of the day (cf. 2 Thess. 2:8-12; Rev. 13:3-4), followed by a time of great tribulation, natural disasters and wars. The Antichrist will have dominion over the world for the entire seven years. Never in history did God judge believers together with unbelievers, and consistent with this principle they will be removed from planet earth before the revelation of the Antichrist.

During the time of Noah and Lot there was also an escape for believers before the outpouring of divine wrath. At that early stage it was already unthinkable that God would judge believers together with unbelievers. Abraham asked God: "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (Gen. 18:23). The Lord said that He would not do it, and reconfirmed that He would not destroy the pagan cities if there were only ten righteous persons in them. But there were not even ten, and subsequently God first sent the believers away to a place of safety before the wicked were struck by His judgements. The angel said that God's judgements would be held back until Lot and his family had left (Gen. 19:22).

Before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the Lord allowed true Christians the opportunity to first flee from the city, thereby escaping God's wrath upon a spiritually hardened Jewish people (Luke 21:20-24). Historic sources indicate that the Christians all fled Jerusalem to Pella, a city east of the River Jordan, before Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed in 70 AD by Roman forces under the command of Titus.

This escape occurred during the first generation of the Christian dispensation. In the last generation of this dispensation, before the tribulation and the revelation of the Antichrist, there will also be a literal and worldwide escape of Christians: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36).

Tribulation because of our faith

The tribulation and persecution which Christians experienced throughout the centuries was because of their faith and it was perpetrated by a hostile world which lies under the sway of the Evil One. We are not judged or afflicted by God. We should, at all times, be able to clearly discern between tribulation because of our faith, and tribulation as God's punishment upon the wicked. The gates of Hades will never overcome and obliterate the church of Christ (Matt. 16:18), but after the rapture the son of perdition (the Antichrist) will have great powers over all people: "And it was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And he was given authority over every tribe, tongue, and nation" (Rev. 13:7). The tribulation saints will heavily suffer under his rule (Rev. 6:9-11).

Although the Antichrist will initially act as a false prince of peace, his dictatorship will span the entire seven years of the tribulation. During his reign of terror God's judgements will be poured out upon the earth, and for that reason all Christians have to be evacuated before the start of the seven year tribulation. This will be an escape, similar to what Noah and Lot experienced before times of divine judgement. The promise of escape is a blessed hope to us in a world which increasingly becomes darker.

The withholder of the Antichrist

Those who wait for the coming of the Antichrist before the rapture do not take account of the fact that he can in no way be revealed until the withholder has been taken out of the way. Paul says to the Thessalonians: "The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming" (2 Thess. 2:7-8).

During the time of Paul the antichristian spirit of deception was already working and it continued doing its subversive work throughout the centuries to this very day. Its evil mission is to corrupt individuals, societies and their institutions, including churches, and luring them away from the kingdom of heaven by alienating them from God, His Son and the true doctrine of the Bible. That is the reason why sincere Christians were always called upon, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to shine like lights in a dark, sinful and depraved world. The mysterious working of the spirit of error is intent on preparing the world for the end-time appearance and takeover by the Antichrist. But the revelation and worldwide coup of the Antichrist cannot occur before his withholder – that is the church of Christ as the temple of the Holy Spirit – has been taken out of the way by means of the rapture. Only then the hour of complete darkness will set in and the false messiah will easily gain control over the world as political and religious leader, being accepted, followed and worshipped by all people.

There is no coexistence possible between the church of Christ and the Antichrist as a fully-fledged world leader. The church will first be removed from the scene to allow the Antichrist to be revealed and take full control over a depraved world. Under the influence of the man of sin free reign will be given to the sinful inclinations and evil intentions of the deceived multitudes who will openly worship the son of perdition. He will grant them unrestricted freedom of choice to fill the measure of their guilt to its brim, thereby causing an unprecedented and worldwide moral and spiritual collapse reminiscent of the days of Noah and Lot. That will be a prelude to a dramatic intervention by God in human affairs through the second coming of Jesus Christ, leading to His judgements upon the wicked and the sudden destruction of their satanic leaders. These judgements will reach their climax during the battle of Armageddon at the end of the seven year tribulation. The Antichrist and the false prophet will be destroyed as there cannot be a coexistence of Christ and the Antichrist on earth (Rev. 19:19-21). The devil will also be removed from the scene and bound in a bottomless pit (Rev. 20:1-3).

We are on the threshold of the revelation of the kingdom of darkness and its wicked king. Seven years later it will be followed by the public revelation of God's kingdom and His King of righteousness, leading to the destruction of evil forces and the glorious establishment of Christ's millennial reign. This series of apocalyptic events

will suddenly start when the withholder against the revelation of the Antichrist has been taken out of the way.

The last trumpet

One of the reasons why some people expect the rapture in the middle or close to the end of the tribulation period is because they cannot discern between the various trumpets in the Bible. They argue that the last trumpet which will, according to 1 Corinthians 15:52, be sounded at the resurrection and rapture of the saints, is also the seventh and last one of the trumpets which will announce God's judgements in Revelation 8 to 11. According to them, this is the last trumpet which will be sounded. However, there are many trumpets which are mentioned in the Bible, and in most cases they are not related to one another. Every trumpet should be interpreted within its own prophetic context and chronological cycle.

In Israel's programme of seven major feasts which are, as described in Leviticus 23, celebrated annually, a trumpet is sounded on the first day of the seventh month on their religious calendar to announce the final gathering of the harvest. In this month, Tishri, the last three of the seven major feasts are celebrated, i.e. the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. In the prophetic application of these three feasts the Feast of Trumpets will be fulfilled at the rapture when the harvest of the kingdom of heaven will be gathered throughout the world. The Day of Atonement will be fulfilled at the second coming of Christ when Israel as a people will be reconciled with Him, while the Feast of Tabernacles will be the joyous feast when the Messiah's earthly kingdom will be instituted with Jerusalem as capital. The saved Israel and the glorified church will play a prominent role in this kingdom.

With regard to the outward form and spiritual significance of these feasts the Feast of Trumpets on 1 Tishri has, through the years, been considerably extended in Israel. It coincides with the New Year celebrations on their civil calendar in which Tishri is the first month. This feast is celebrated on the first two days of Tishri as 1 Tishri, depending on when the first sliver of the new moon appears, may start a day later among certain Jewish communities outside Israel. Since it is impossible to determine beforehand the exact day or hour when this feast should commence, its celebration was stretched over two days.

During Elul, the sixth month on the religious calendar, rabbis blow the ram's-horn (shofar) every day in their synagogues as a call to repentance to the nation in preparation of the coming Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) when their dedication to the Lord must again be completely restored. "Elul" means "search" and has the spiritual significance that people have to search their hearts and lives for hidden and unconfessed sins. On 2 Tishri the trumpet is sounded a few times throughout the day, followed by a final sounding at the setting of the sun when the day ends. Should the people at that stage not yet have heeded the call to repentance they will enter the seven awful days between 3 and 9 Tishri when they will have a further opportunity to repent and break with their sins. These seven days will prophetically be fulfilled during the year-week of the tribulation, which will be the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7). It will be a particularly dark time in Israel's history, which is symbolically indicated by the dark moon associated with the few days following the Feast of Trumpets.

On the Day of Atonement which will be celebrated on 10th Tishri after the 70th year-week of Daniel the Messiah will set His feet on the Mount of Olives, and then the entire remnant of Israel will be reconciled with Him on one day (Zech. 12:10). On the Feast of Tabernacles directly after His coming the Messianic kingdom will be established in Israel.

Within the context of Israel's harvest festival the concept of a last trumpet, therefore, has a completely different meaning than the last trumpet in the programme of God's judgements during the tribulation period. In a prophetic sense the harvest of the Lord will be gathered at the blowing of the last trumpet on 2 Tishri. That is exactly what will happen at the rapture. We have all reason to attach prophetic significance to the Feast of Trumpets since the previous four feasts were all fulfilled on their appointed time – that is Passover during the crucifixion of Jesus, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread during His burial, the Feast of First Fruits during His resurrection, and Pentecost during the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We obviously do not know during which year's program of feasts the three feasts of the harvest season will be fulfilled, but we do know that they will definitely be fulfilled.

There is also another reference to the sounding of a trumpet during the catching away of the church. In traditional Jewish marriage ceremonies a trumpet is sounded,

together with a shout, when the bridegroom comes for his bride at night time. We are waiting for this moment when the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. Then we will depart with Him in the twinkling of an eye to the heavenly marriage hall. After the Jewish bride was taken away she was secluded for seven days in the bridal room where nobody else but the Bridegroom saw her. These seven days of seclusion prophetically refer to the year-week of the tribulation period when the bride of Christ will be away from the earth. During the time of her absence the Lord's judgements will be poured out upon an apostate world.

After the harvest festival which will be fulfilled at the rapture, three series of seven judgements each will be poured out upon the unsaved world – these are the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven last plagues. The sounding of the trumpet at the rapture has no association with the seven trumpets which announce God's judgements in the tribulation. The trumpet which calls the church of Christ to heaven should not be confused with the outpouring of God's wrath upon the wicked. The church is not called to heaven during any of these seven trumpets.

When we have the correct prophetic perspective we expect the heavenly Bridegroom and not the deceptive "angel of light" bridegroom who will be sent by Satan to unite all the false religions and "marry" them to the Antichrist. When we are waiting on the true Bridegroom we have the obligation to be blameless in holiness. The Lord expects a pure heart that is filled with the Holy Spirit, and nothing less is acceptable to Him. Are there still things in your life that grieve the Holy Spirit and disturb the relationship between you and the Lord Jesus? Confess and forsake these sins, walk daily in the Spirit and let the light of the Lord's presence illuminate your life. Only then will you be safe from deception.

We should not wait to the last moment before we discover that we still do not live victoriously and are not yet filled with the Spirit. "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:1-2). He is exalted far above our dark circumstances and is still mighty to save, to sanctify His disciples, and to keep us standing against all the attacks of the enemy. He will soon come for us if we are ready! It is precisely the promise that He will soon come to take

His bride to be with Him, which is foundational to our expectation that He will come before the tribulation and take us to our eternal home.