

Questions after Week Three No. 2

Scripture quotations first, then Pastor Chris' commentary based on the historic orthodox view of the church.

The Rapture

John 14:3: This is a promise of Jesus that He will prepare a place for us. We most always assume that our ultimate home is in heaven with actual mansions and rooms (the Greek word actually means abiding or remaining). We get the idea, often, that these dwelling places are for us to live in. The other place in the Bible the Greek word occurs is in the same chapter when Jesus refers to Him and Father dwelling with those who love them.

Heaven is not our ultimate home. The new heavens and new earth will be. In the meantime, the dwelling place of God's presence is in the church (the New Testament often talks about the church, the Temple of God, is His habitation). But whether this passage applies to our temporary home in Heaven, before the new heavens and the new earth, or whether it applies to our future and forever home in the new heavens and the new earth, it certainly does not speak of a secret rapture of the church. One more thing: This language of going away to "prepare a place" is very much reminiscent of Jewish bridal language where, when the groom temporarily departs from his newly-betrothed bride, he goes away for a short period of time to "prepare a place" for her before the ceremony.

Rev. 3:10: Dispensationalists find here a promise of a pre-tribulation rapture because it suggests a global-wide crisis. Since Jesus promises to keep the church from this terrible time, their line of thinking goes that the church must therefore be removed from the earth before the tribulation of the last days. However, this passage can be interpreted in other ways.

Another interpretation would not agree that the "hour of trial" is identified with a specific period of a few years at the end of time. Even if that were the case, it's not at all clear that removing the church from the earth would be the only way Jesus could keep His people from the wars and plagues, etc. For example, Jesus prayed the following for His disciples: "I do not pray that You (Father) should take them (the disciples) out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). The words in John 17, "keep...from," are the same Greek words used in Revelation 3 above.

Another interpretation is that the time of trial is generic. We know that all people in the world experience times of trials and there have been many spots in history where terrible wars and disease have threatened believers. Yet, we are still secure in God's care. What's more, there have been many, many times in history—not to mention things going on today—that are unspeakably horrible for believers (we Americans are currently quite isolated from these tribulations) and God did not take them out of the world. My view is that obscenely persecuted Christians past and present would be deeply offended and confused if we were to suggest to them that God will remove His faithful followers from the earth before tribulation.

Another interpretation is that the words “whole world” were consistently and normally used at the time of John to refer to the Roman Empire (e.g. Luke 2:1). A trial that is going to come on the “whole world” may suggest a coming crisis that will shake the whole empire and place Jews, in particular, in great danger. In 68 AD, Nero’s death and the wars that followed severely threatened the stability of the Roman Empire. During the same time, Jews were in the fight of their lives for the survival of their nation against the Romans. This interpretation suggests that the judgement on Jerusalem is what is implied in the promise “I am coming quickly” (verse 11).

One final word: Much has been made about the dating of the Book of Revelation, and where someone places the date of authorship has an impact on how the book is interpreted (i.e., 68 AD versus 96 AD). I personally side with the scholars who go with the earlier dates citing internal evidence. One thing, though, is absolutely certain, one theologian says: “The book was not primarily written about events that would not transpire until hundreds or even thousands of years later. If it had been, it would be the only book of the Bible that was intentionally meant to be undecipherable to its original readers. God does not pull tricks like that on people who are undergoing intense persecution: this book could not be primarily speaking of events in our own [present] day [or in our own future].”

1 Thess 5:9: This passage is not about avoiding a future tribulation but rather the promise to God’s faithful that they will not meet the same fate as the unfaithful when Christ returns.

Matthew 24:15-28: This is not about the rapture or the second coming. Once again, this passage is an answer to the disciples from Jesus about the destruction of the Temple. Jesus describes here what will happen, within that generation’s lifetime, in 70 AD.

1 Cor 15:50-54: This passage has no reference to a rapture in the way that Dispensationalists view it: For example, there is no reference to a secret snatching away (in fact, the passage says that Christ returns with a trumpet sound) or to the church returning to heaven with Him. What the passage is describing is the glorious second coming of Christ and, in clear and beautiful resurrection language, describes that we all—those alive and those who have passed on before us—will get our new bodies which we will inhabit in the new heavens and the new earth.

1 Thess 4:14-17: A favorite place for Dispensationalists to prove the rapture. And yet, in truth, the passage simply does not teach that doctrine in the way Dispensationalists view it.

This is only one place in the entire Bible that says anything close to the Dispensational view of the rapture. The Greek word for “caught up” has been translated in Latin as *rapiemur*, and that’s where we get the word “rapture.”

Paul talks about a similar idea in 1 Corinthians 15 as well, where he writes about “a mystery:” He says that we will not all sleep (die), but we will all be changed in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall rise, etc.

Those two passages, 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, are the only two passages in the Bible that can be linked to the concept of or word “rapture,” but neither of those places say anything at all about a tribulation being before, during, or afterwards,

Furthermore, there is absolutely no connection in any passage of Scripture of a rapture with a tribulation.

What is happening in 1 Thessalonians? Paul is describing something in his own contemporary culture called a parousia. (That word is a secular word and later becomes a Christian word). Why did Paul use that particular word? It describes an event where a dignitary or king would return triumphantly to the city. Then, all the inhabitants go out to welcome him. The dignitary does not then return from where he came from, nor do the inhabitants go away with the dignitary.

Now, it may be that when Christ returns someday, the faithful will actually be caught up in the air to greet the Lord, but there’s nothing in this passage to suggest that we go back with Jesus into heaven. Rather, the event is a parousia: We welcome back our conquering King. (I talk about this in depth in two sermons: “We Belong to the King,” and the “King is Coming” found on the website). Many faithful biblical scholars interpret this passage as being more about the resurrection of the dead in Christ—that’s the gist of the “caught up” language—than being about going up in the air.

Further, there is also nothing in the passage that suggests Christ’s coming is secret (“loud command,” “trumpet,” etc.), or that there are two second comings, meaning a secret rapture and then at some point an additional return of Christ.

Rather, there is scriptural evidence that when Jesus comes again, His second coming, then He comes back for good to reign forever. Jesus says in John 6:39, 40, 44, and 54 that He’s going to raise his people up, that’s His faithful believers, “on the last day.” If Jesus thought that the last day would be followed by a seven-year tribulation, and that the last day was not actually the last day, He surely would have said so.

Jesus also makes it clear that when He returns, the wicked will be judged, too—that is to say, those who reject his words—in John 12:48.

Then, in Matthew 25:31 Jesus says that when He comes back, He’s going to call all the nations before Him, and then He’s going to separate between the sheep and the goats. Again, nothing in these words from Jesus Himself would suggest a secret coming, or a return to heaven of His faithful ones, before a tribulation that would then end with Him coming again an additional time.

Titus 2:3: This passage is an admonishment for the older women in the church to be reverent. I’m not finding the connection to the rapture. (Perhaps a typo?)

1 Thess 2:19-20: This speaks of our hope and joy in which we will glory when Christ returns. I’m not finding a connection to the rapture.

Jer 30:7: This passage, a word that came to Jeremiah in a dream, is sometimes used by Dispensationalists to point to the second coming of Christ at the end of the last half of what they call the “Great Tribulation” and just before Christ is to establish an earthly thousand-year kingdom. “The time of Jacob’s trouble” words here are the only place in the Bible they appear. Dispensationalists view “Jacob’s Trouble” as being “code” for a pre-tribulation rapture. There is no reason, scripturally, to see those words attributed to a future tribulation, or to see this passage as pointing to a future rapture. The tribulation Jeremiah has been referring to all along has been about the conquering and judgement and exile. He goes on to say that the Children of Israel will be saved from the Babylonian yoke. The historic understanding of this chapter is that it points to the judgment that is coming to the Children of Israel, and not only to the exiles from Babylonian returning to the land, but also ultimately to the messianic age. We know this because the New Testament quotes these passages and applies them to Christ. For example, when the passage goes on to talk about raising up “David their king,” it’s pointing to Jesus. The prophets did not know what the Messiah’s name would be—it had not yet been revealed—and so they sometimes refer to the coming Messiah as “David.”

The Second Coming

Rev 1:7: This passage does seem to point to Christ’s marvelous second coming, but it says nothing of a secret rapture where the church is snatched away (it’s a very public affair). I should also mention that very often in Scripture the notion of clouds or coming in clouds can also mean with great glory and royal pomp and splendor.

Rev 19:11-16: Recall that Revelation is written in apocalyptic language and so, therefore, interpretations can vary widely. There are at least four (that I know of): The “Historicist” approach that sees the book as a prewritten record of the course of history from the time of John to the end of the world (fulfillment is in progress now); The “Preterist” approach, which views the fulfillment of Revelation’s prophecies as having already occurred (there is also a “Semi-preterist” view that sees the final chapters as looking forward to the second coming); The “Futurist” view that says that most of the prophecies have not yet been fulfilled and will be in the future; and what is called the “Idealist” approach that doesn’t try to find individual fulfillments of these visions but rather takes the book to be a great drama depicting “transcendent spiritual realities.”

Some interpretations of this particular passage include that it refers to Christ returning at the second coming, or that it symbolizes the spiritual warfare of the church as Christ’s Body on earth. But none of them, so far as I can tell, include anything that would support the idea of a fixed period of tribulation or of the Dispensational view of the rapture.

Rev 20:4: This chapter has been interpreted many ways, and it has even been referred to as the most controversial chapter in the Bible. Why? Because from this single chapter diverge many different views about a pre-millennial, a-millennial, or post-millennial future fulfillment of prophecy.

Even if we affirm that there will be a literal thousand-year reign when Jesus comes back, we would only have this single place in the Bible upon which to base it.

The historic Church's view, for most of its history until 1830, was not pre-millennialism but rather a-millennialism, also sometimes called "realized millennialism." That is to say, the millennial is a metaphorical (not literal) period of time that is the present age of the Body of Christ—the church—and that the kingdom has already come, and Christ is presently reigning. Though the Kingdom is not fully here—Jesus hasn't yet returned—His Kingdom is in fact here (as He Himself said) and we're living in the "already and not yet" nature of His reign.

Matt 24:29-35: This is neither about the rapture nor the second coming. Once again, this passage is an answer to the disciples from Jesus about the destruction of the Temple. Jesus describes here what will happen, within that generation's lifetime, in 70 AD.

Isaiah 2:6: This passage describes God as having cut off or abandoned the descendants of Jacob before of their wickedness, so I'm not seeing a connection with the second coming.

Isaiah 26:19-21: The Church's traditional interpretation of this passage is that it is fulfilled in Christ in the Messianic Age. So, indeed, the glorious coming of Christ will inaugurate these things (the dead rising, shouting for joy, etc.). Yet the passage does not speak of a literal thousand-year literal kingdom coming after a literal 7-year tribulation.

Daniel 9:26-29: This passage, which contains Daniel's description of future events, has to do with the famous 70 weeks—"70 sevens," or 490 years, from one point to another. There are two historical points mentioned, and between those points, it says there are going to be 490 years. Dispensationalists disagree and do not take the passage literally. Instead, they interpret it to be 483 years with the last seven years postponed 2,000 years or more in the future. This, by the way, is how they arrive at a future Tribulation: They insert a gap or a chronological pause between the last two weeks.

There is simply not a single word in Daniel to suggest a gap between the 69th and 70th week. And no literal interpretation of the 70 weeks of Daniel would suggest that the whole period will be 2,490 years before it's all accomplished.

The overwhelming consensus and traditional view of the historic church is that we can take Danie's timing at face value that these events were entirely fulfilled by the year 70 AD. Daniel's 70 weeks clearly point to Christ's first coming and its subsequent blessings, the most important event in all of history.

Matt 24:3-35: This is neither about the rapture nor the second coming. Once again, this passage is an answer to the disciples from Jesus about the destruction of the Temple. Jesus describes here what will happen, within that generation's lifetime, in 70 AD.

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These Scriptures were taken from the study bible of David Jeremiah as evidence for either the rapture and/or the second coming: A popular pastor and radio/tv preacher. Jeremiah is well spoken, award-winning, and loved by many. He has a gentle, confident, and pastoral style. He has a master's degree from Dallas Theological Seminary and pastors at a church whose previous pastor was Tim LaHaye (also Dallas Seminary and author of the "Left Behind" series). His theological lens, therefore, is very heavily Dispensationalist and is a well-known Dispensational writer. He would hold to a "literal" and "futurist" view of prophecy in Scripture and has, for example, called Revelation a history of our future (my paraphrase).