

The Rapture - Part 34

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My previous articles commenced a series on the rapture of the church. We began with the question, "What is the Rapture?" This question can best be answered by noting ten truths about the rapture from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. We then moved to a second main question, namely, when will the rapture take place relative to the coming seven-year Tribulation period? We offered the contention that believers can develop certainty that they will be raptured before the Tribulation period occurs for at least seven reasons. After dealing with these two questions, we began to explore some of the weaknesses associated with the other competing views that seek to answer the question, "When Will the Rapture Take Place Relative to the Coming Tribulation Period?" At least five differing perspectives exist. We noted at the onset that it is important to understand that all of the non-pretribulation positions have a difficult time handling the seven arguments favoring **pre-tribulationism** previously discussed in this series. Beyond this, we have already noted the problems associated with **mid-tribulationism** and **post-tribulationism**, and **partial raptureism**. In this and the next article, we will briefly explain and analyze **pre-wrath raptureism**.

Pre-Wrath Raptureism

Pre-wrath rapture theory has been promoted into modern-day evangelicalism through the relatively recent writings of Robert Van

Kampen¹ and Marvin Rosenthal.² Alan Kurschner represents an even more recent promoter of this view.³ Perhaps the best way to understand this view is to note how pre-wrath rapturists divide the coming Tribulation period, or Seventieth Week of Daniel (Dan. 9:27), into *three* distinct phases.⁴

First, the "beginning of sorrows" is the label pre-wrath rapturists give to the first-half of the Tribulation period. This segment represents the three-and-one-half year time period from the beginning of the seven-year period with the signing of the peace treaty between the Antichrist and unbelieving Israel and terminating with the Antichrist's desecration of the rebuilt Jewish temple at the Tribulation's midpoint. Sometimes pre-wrath rapturists, based upon Matthew 24:4-8, refer to this segment as "unexpected soft labor pains." Pre-wrath rapturists contend that the first four seal judgments (Rev. 6:1-8) will transpire during this time period.

¹ Robert Van Kampen, *The Rapture Questioned Answered* (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell, 1997); idem, *The Sign of Christ's Coming, and the End of the Age: A Biblical Study of End-Time Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992).

² Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: A New Understanding of the Tribulation, and the Second Coming* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1990).

³ Alan Kurschner, *The Antichrist before the Day of the Lord: What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Return of Christ* (Pompton Lakes, NJ: Eschatos, 2013).

⁴ See the chart in Rosenthal, 112.

Second, the next major section of the Tribulation period, according to pre-wrath rapturists, is called the "Great Tribulation." This segment will begin with the desecration of the temple by the Antichrist at the Tribulation's midpoint when he will erect a pagan statue in the rebuilt Jewish temple (Dan. 9:27; 12:11; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:3-4; Rev. 13:15). Apparently, this segment will be initiated with the opening of the fifth seal judgment (Rev. 6:9-11) and will conclude with the opening of the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:12-17). This section will last roughly twenty-one months. During this time period, both the wrath of Satan and man through the Antichrist will be brought forth in an unprecedented manner (Matt. 24:21-22; Rev. 12:12-17). It is during this period of time that the restrainer (2 Thess. 2:6-7), who pre-wrath rapturists interpret as Michael the Archangel, will stand aside and cease from restraining evil and satanic lawlessness.⁵ Rosenthal notes:

Speaking of this one who will hinder the Antichrist, Paul said, "only he who now *hindereth* will continue to hinder until he be taken out of the way" (2 Thess. 2:7). The word *hindereth* means *to hold down*, and the phrase *taken out of the way* means *to step aside*. Therefore, the one who had the job of hindering the Antichrist will step aside; that is, he will no longer be a restraint between the antichrist and those the Antichrist is persecuting.⁶

Pre-wrath rapturists are careful to note that only the wrath of man through the Antichrist or Satan's wrath have been exhibited up until this point of the Tribulation period. In other words, the wrath of God will be absent from the Tribulation period's first sixty-three months.

Third, the final section of the Tribulation period, according to pre-wrath rapturists, is known as the "Day of the Lord." The opening of the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:12-17), with its cosmic disturbances, will herald the rapidly approaching Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord will begin with the opening of the seventh seal judgment (Rev. 8:1-6) and will continue as the angels sound the various trumpet judgments (Rev. 8:7-11:19). It too will last twenty-one months, and it is during this segment that the world for the first time will experience divine wrath during Daniel's Seventieth Week. Pre-wrath rapturists are also quick to note that God's wrath is not mentioned in the Book of Revelation until the events surrounding the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:16-17). The rapture will occur prior to the Day of the Lord. Pre-wrath rapturists place the rapture at this juncture since they maintain that the Bible only promises that believers will be delivered from God's wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rom. 5:9) rather than from tribulation. Since, according to this scheme, the wrath of God will not exist until the Tribulation period's final twenty-one months, the church will be present for the Tribulation period's first sixty-three months. Thus, the seventh seal judgment will not only launch the Day of the Lord, or the Tribulation period's final twenty-one months, but also the rapture of the church.

⁵ Ibid., 256-61.

⁶ Ibid., 257.

While several excellent book-length and in-depth refutations of pre-wrath rapturism are available,⁷ the present brief critique will focus on only *seven* general problems with the pre-wrath rapture view. *First*, the pre-wrath rapture view places the church, a distinct spiritual organism, into Daniel's Seventieth Week, which is a time period when God will be exclusively dealing with national Israel (Dan. 9:24). Earlier in the series, we noted that the first of seven reasons why the church must be raptured before the Tribulation even begins is because the Tribulation period concerns God's unfinished program with Israel as given in the Seventy Week's prophecy rather than the church.⁸ Since God deals with Israel and the church on a mutually exclusive basis, the church cannot be present for any of Daniel's Seventieth Week. The pre-wrath rapture view ignores this fundamental principle by placing the church into three quarters of Daniel's Seventieth Week, which represents a time period comprising God's program with national Israel. As Robert Lightner well observes, "The prewrath Rapture view is different from the normal pretribulation view in that it does not consistently distinguish between God's program with Israel and His

⁷ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *A Review of Marvin Rosenthal's Book "the Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church"* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel, 1991); Paul S. Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is It Biblical?* (Langhorne, PA: BF Press, 1991); Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001). See also George Zeller, "Pre-Wrath Confusion," online: <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/proph/prewrath.htm>, accessed 01 September 2015.

⁸ See part 11 of this series.

program with the church. The way it differs is that it has the church in Israel's seventieth week..."⁹ George Zeller similarly offers the following excellent analysis:

The Pre-Wrath view **CONFUSES** the mysterious and parenthetical nature of the Church Age. It confuses CHURCH HISTORY with ISRAELITE HISTORY. God has a program for the Church and God has a distinct program for His people Israel. The two must not be confused. The clearest and most complete chronological prophecy that God has given to us is the 70-week prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27. These 70 weeks involve 490 years of **Jewish history**: "Seventy weeks are determined **UPON THY PEOPLE AND UPON THY HOLY CITY.**" These 490 years pertain to the Jews and to Jerusalem, not to the Church. Of the 490 years, the last seven years are yet unfulfilled. After the first 69 weeks the Messiah was cut off and we know that the Church Age began less than two months after the Messiah was cut off. Daniel's 70th week has remained unfulfilled for nearly 2000 years. The prophetic time clock has stopped ticking for all these years. The clock stopped ticking after the 69th week and has not yet resumed ticking. How can we explain this large 2000 year gap between the 69th week and the 70th week? The answer is revealed on the pages of the New Testament. **DURING**

⁹ Robert Lightner, *Last Days Handbook: A Complete Guide to the End Times, Including the Meaning of the Year 2000 in Bible Prophecy*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 95.

THIS 2000 YEAR GAP GOD IS INVOLVED IN THE FOLLOWING PROGRAM: 1. He is building His Church (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:47). 2. He is taking out a people for His Name (Acts 15:14). 3. He is bringing in the fullness of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:25). 4. He is placing believers into a living organism (1 Cor. 12:13). 5. He is saving a "showcase" that will eternally display His matchless grace (Eph. 1:7). 6. He is manifesting Himself through His body which is upon the earth (1 Tim. 3:15-16). Just as the Church had an abrupt beginning on the day of Pentecost shortly after the conclusion of the 69th week, so it should be expected that the Church will have an abrupt removal shortly before the beginning of the 70th week. The Pretribulational model harmonizes perfectly with Daniel's 70th week prophecy while at the same time recognizing the parenthetical and mysterious nature of the Church Age. It is "mysterious" in the sense that Church truth was unrevealed on the pages of the Old Testament and the Church Age was not foreseen by the prophets. The Old Testament prophets did not tell us about the gap simply because they did not see the gap. It was unrevealed to them. They saw only the two mountain peaks which represent the first and second comings of Christ but they did not see the large valley in between. The Pre-Wrath view sees the Church as being on earth during a large part of Daniel's 70th week (the Church will be on earth, according to Rosenthal's charts, for approximately 3/4 of the last

seven years, or approximately five years or more). This mixes up and **confuses** God's purpose for Israel and God's purpose for the Church. **THE CHURCH HAS NEVER AND WILL NEVER BE PRESENT ON EARTH DURING ANY OF ISRAEL'S 70 WEEKS.** The Church began after the 69th week ended and the Church will be raptured before the 70th week begins.¹⁰

Second, the pre-wrath rapture of the church denies the imminent return of Christ. Earlier in this series we noted how the rapture is the very next event on the prophetic horizon.¹¹ It is a signless event that can transpire at any moment. This is why the New Testament constantly exhorts New Testament believers to be looking for Christ's imminent return in the rapture (John 14:3; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:15; 1 Cor. 1:7; 15:51; Philip. 3:20; Titus 2:13; Jas. 5:8) rather than to be focused on the Antichrist, the rebuilding of the Temple, or some other prophetic sign as the very next event on the prophetic horizon. The pre-wrath rapture of the church, by placing the rapture in the middle of the second half of the Tribulation period, denies the idea that the rapture is imminent and in fact can happen today. An entire prophetic scenario consisting of roughly three-fourths of the Tribulation period must first transpire according to pre-wrath rapturism. Kessinger well explains the signs that first must transpire before the rapture can occur according to the pre-wrath rapture scheme and how this notion

¹⁰ Zeller, "Pre-Wrath Confusion," 5-6.

¹¹ See part 9 of this series.

represents a gross violation of the doctrine of imminency:

The doctrine of imminence holds the Christ can come to rapture His church at any moment. Believers in the early church, including the apostle Paul, believed that Christ could come in their lifetime (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13-15; Titus 2:13). The church sees this doctrine as an incentive for ministry and godly living. Does this mean the Christ's return for His church will be at any moment, without any sign, and with no yet to be fulfilled prophesied event to precede it? Pre-wrath rapturists argue that Christ could come in any generation but that signs will herald the general time. Those signs include (1) the emergence of the antichrist, (2) wars and rumors of war, (3) famine, (4) pestilence, and (5) cosmic disturbance. Pre-wrath rapturists emphasize Christians' expectancy of Christ's return rather than its imminency. This expectancy of Christ's return is the catalyst for holy living.¹²



Source: SpiritAndTruth.org

(To Be Continued...)

¹² Tony Kessinger, "Pre-Wrath Rapture," in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy: Over 140 Topics from the World's Foremost Prophecy Experts*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2004), 293.