

Issue 13: When Will Jesus Return? The Rapture Debate¹

When it comes to the issue of the end-times, most evangelical believers wholeheartedly agree on at least one thing: Jesus Christ is going to return one day! Jesus himself promised his return (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; John 14:3). At Jesus' ascension, two angels proclaimed, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). This hope is consistently witnessed to throughout the New Testament (e.g., Acts 3:19–21; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Thess. 4:15–16; Titus 2:13).

It is when we turn to the question of when in the course of end-times events Jesus will return that we find an array of differing perspectives. One central debate, especially among premillennialists, is whether Christ will return before or after the tribulation period. Many believe this future period was prophesied by Jesus when he said: "For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short" (Matt. 24:21–22).

The two major views held by premillennialists are pre-tribulationism and post-tribulationism. Pre-tribulationists have several core convictions. First, they have a two-stage understanding of Christ's return. They believe that Christ will return to remove (or "rapture") his church out of the world before the tribulation. He will then return with his saints to judge the world after the tribulation. In the first stage, Christ will not be seen by the world, though the world will of course notice the miraculous and instantaneous disappearance of every Christian. In the second stage, everyone will behold the Lord returning in glory. Pre-tribulationists find support for their belief in a

¹ Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, 2nd Edition (Baker Academic, 2009), Appendix.

literal rapture, prior to the tribulation period, in the words of Paul: “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:16–17).

Pre-tribulationists emphasize the difference between passages they believe refer to the rapture (e.g., Matt. 24:40) and those that all agree refer to the *final* coming of Christ (Rev. 19). The rapture passages speak of a secret, instantaneous snatching-away of believers—one shall be “taken” and one “left behind”—while other passages speak of an event that everyone will see.

Second, pre-tribulationists point to passages in the Bible that they believe teach that believers will be kept from having to endure the wrath of God. For example, Paul states that Jesus will “[rescue] us from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thess. 1:10; see also 5:9; Rev. 3:10). Since the tribulation period is a time when God’s wrath will be poured out in judgment on the wicked, they believe the rapture must take place before this time.

Finally, pre-tribulationists highlight the fact that many texts clearly state that Christ’s return could happen at any moment and that Christians are not to be caught off guard (e.g., Matt. 24:42–51; 25:1–30; 1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 4:5; Titus 2:13). But if Christ will not return until after the tribulation period, as post-tribulationists maintain, how could his return be imminent or surprising? If the post-tribulationists are correct, we should not expect Christ to return until after the rather obvious events of Christ’s prophecy are fulfilled.

Post-tribulationists, on the other hand, deny that there are two stages to Christ’s return. He will return once, after a final tribulation period, at which time he will set up his millennial kingdom. Post-tribulationists support their view with several lines of argument.

First, many passages of Scripture tell believers to expect persecution (e.g., Acts 14:22; Rom. 5:3; 1 Thess. 3:3). Jesus told his disciples, “In

the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33). What is more, post-tribulationists emphasize the fact that Jesus explicitly prayed that his Father would *not* take his church out of the world. He asked that he protect them from the enemy in the midst of a hostile world (John 17:15). Indeed, according to post-tribulationists, Jesus explicitly taught that the church would endure the tribulation period, for he said, “at that time there will be great suffering. . . . And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but *for the sake of the elect* those days will be cut short” (Matt. 24:21–22, emphasis added). The elect are clearly present during the tribulation period.

Second, post-tribulationists argue that the passages cited in support of a pre-tribulation rapture do not teach what the pre-tribulationists suggest. For example, Paul’s teaching that the church will meet “the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:17) does not mean that Christians will literally ascend into the clouds. The passage rather refers to the common ancient practice of people going outside the gates of their city to welcome home a victorious general with triumphant jubilation. The imagery of the Lord coming in clouds was frequently used to speak of the Lord coming in glory and power (e.g., Ps. 68:4; Jer. 4:13; Dan. 7:13). What is more, if the passage is taken literally, it can hardly refer to an unnoticed coming. Paul says the Lord will descend with “a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet” (1 Thess. 4:16). The images suggest that the return will be loud—like the call of a general returning home.

Finally, passages that speak of one being taken while another is left behind (e.g., Matt. 24:40) do not refer to a secret rapture. If read in context, post-tribulationists argue, the one taken is likened to those who were judged in Noah’s flood, not to one who is rescued from judgment (Matt. 24:38–39). Jesus is speaking about how suddenly people will disappear under persecution during the tribulation period, not how they will be raptured away from persecution before the tribulation. Hence, post-tribulationists argue that Christ will return only once, and he will come after the world has gone through a final tribulation period.