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The Rapture Promise

Its History and Fulfillment
at Christ's Return

A Defense of Post-Tribulationism

J. Paul Tanner

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Abbreviations

<i>2 Bar</i>	2 Baruch
AB	The Anchor Bible Commentary
<i>Ad Att.</i>	<i>Ad Atticum</i> (Cicero's Letters to Atticus)
Aesch.	Aeschylus
<i>Ag.</i>	Agamemnon (Aeschylus)
<i>Ant.</i>	Antiquities of the Jews (Josephus)
<i>Apoc. Mos.</i>	Apocalypse of Moses
<i>ApSedr.</i>	Apocalypse of Sedrach
<i>As. Mos.</i>	Assumption of Moses
<i>b. Ketub.</i>	Ketubot (in Babylonian Talmud)
<i>b. Pesah.</i>	Pesahim (in Babylonian Talmud)
BCH	Bulletin de correspondance hellénique
BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (3d ed.)
BDB	Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, <i>Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BibSac	Bibliotheca Sacra
CBC	Cornerstone Biblical Commentary
CHR	The Catholic Historical Review
<i>Chrest. Wilck.</i>	L. Mitteis and U. Wilcken, <i>Grundzuge und Chrestomathie der Papyruskunde</i>
DBSJ	Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal
<i>Deut. Rab.</i>	Deuteronomy Rabbah
EBC	The Expositor's Bible Commentary (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein)
EBTC	Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary
<i>Eccles. Rab.</i>	Ecclesiastes Rabbah
EEC	The Evangelical Exegetical Commentary series
<i>Ep. Arist.</i>	Epistle of Aristeas
EQ	Evangelical Quarterly
EsdA	Esdras A
EsdB	Esdras B (the books of Ezra and Nehemiah)
Eurip. <i>Alc.</i>	Alcestis (Euripedes)
<i>Exod. Rab.</i>	Exodus Rabbah
GTJ	Grace Theological Journal
HNTC	Holman New Testament Commentary
ICC	The International Critical Commentary
IVPNTC	InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

JGES	Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
Just. D.	Justin Martyr (Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew)
<i>Lam. Rab.</i>	Lamentations Rabbah
LXX	Septuagint
Macc	1 or 2 Maccabees
<i>Mo'ed Qaṭ.</i>	Mo'ed Qaṭan (in Mishnah)
MSJ	Master's Seminary Journal
MT	Masoretic Hebrew text
NA28	Nestle Alland Greek Text (28 th ed.)
NAC	The New American Commentary
NBC	New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NET2	The New Bible, 2 nd ed.
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary of the New Testament
NIDNTTE	The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	The New International Version (1984; 2011)
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
NT	New Testament
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae</i> . Ed. W. Dittenberger.
OT	Old Testament
<i>Pers.</i>	The Persians (Aeschylus)
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary
Polyb.	Polybius
<i>P.Petr.</i>	The Flinders Petrie Papyri
<i>Pss. Sol.</i>	Psalms of Solomon
<i>PTebt</i>	Papyrus Tebtynis
RHG	Robertson's <i>Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research</i>
SB	Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
Tat.	Address of Tatian to the Greeks (2 nd cent. AD)
TB	Tyndale Bulletin
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
<i>Test. Abr.</i>	Testament of Abraham
<i>Test. Ben.</i>	Testament of Benjamin
<i>Test. Levi</i>	Testament of Levi
<i>Test. Sol.</i>	Testament of Solomon

TLNT	Theological Lexicon of the New Testament
TMSJ	The Master's Seminary Journal (alternative to MSJ above)
TNCBC	The New Century Bible Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TrinJ	Trinity Journal
UPZ	Urkunden der Ptolemaerzeit
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	Westminster Theological Journal
ZECNT	Zondervan Evangelical Commentary on the New Testament

1

Why This Book on the Rapture Controversy?

Perhaps the most phenomenal event of all human history is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The fact that God could and would descend into our earthly existence in human form is more than astonishing. It demands our utmost attention, reflection, and response of faith. To think that Jesus is God in the flesh—the very Creator walking about in human form—is simply too staggering to flippantly dismiss. By His incarnation, I am referring to all that might be included concerning His time on earth . . . His miracles, His teaching, His righteous life, His atoning death on the cross for the sins of all humanity, and finally His resurrection and ascension. This is all too amazing to even describe in words. Even skeptics are forced to admit that never has there been a solitary life that has impacted human history as has Jesus of Nazareth. Those of us who have been saved by His grace through faith rightfully acknowledge that He—and He alone—is Lord!

Those who knew Him best in His relatively short time on earth (that is, the twelve minus Judas) also became the witnesses of His ascension to heaven following the days of His post-resurrection appearances. Luke records it for us in the opening chapter of Acts:

⁹ And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were watching, and a cloud took Him up, out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, then behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them, ¹¹ and they said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

Understandably, they were saddened to have witnessed the agony of His sufferings on the cross and the relative brevity of His earthly life. But they had the promise that they would see Him again, for the Lord Himself had revealed this to them in the Upper Room Discourse when He said, “I will come again and receive you to Myself” (Jn 14:3). They also had the Lord’s teachings from the

Olivet Discourse (e.g., Matt 24) that He would come again to earth at some future point . . . though how far in the future that might be, they did not know. The Lord had simply told them, “Be ready; be on the alert.”

Now in Acts 1, we read of the apostles witnessing His departure. Apparently it was not instantaneous, because the text tells us that they continued watching Him being lifted up until finally the clouds blocked their being able to see Him any longer. **The** final statement of the “two men in white clothing” (undoubtedly angelic messengers) was profound: “This Jesus . . . will come in the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” The apostles would not live long enough to witness this, but others would. The point is that this announcement of His return served in helping form the expectation of the early Church that Jesus would be coming back, and He would do so personally, bodily, and visibly . . . in the same way He went into heaven.

Of course the return of Christ—the second coming—must be understood in light of the many other things that the Bible reveals about the future. There will first be a time of Tribulation on earth and the rise of an individual the Bible identifies as the Antichrist. This will be a time of intense persecution for true believers living then as well as a time of divine judgments that will come forth from the throne of God. The challenge to all students of the Bible is to understand how all these predicted events relate to one another *chronologically* and when and how the Lord’s descent to earth will take place. Complicating this even more is the revelation that there will be a removal or *taking up* of Christians to meet the Lord in the air at some point in this scheme of things. Passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 make this abundantly clear. The term “rapture,” although not a biblical word, is used to describe this event. Alan Hultberg explains how the English word “rapture” came to be used for this:

The *rapture* is a theological term that refers to the “catching up” of the church to meet the Lord in the air in association with his return and with the resurrection of believers. The term comes from the Latin verb *rapio* (“I seize,” “I [violently] carry off”), which is the Vulgate’s equivalent of the root Greek verb *harpazō* (“I seize,” “I snatch away”) that Paul

uses in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, the primary text that teaches this concept.¹

That there will be a rapture, all Bible-believing Christians agree. Yet there is a great difference of opinion as to when this will happen in relation to the second coming of Christ. The traditional opinion has been to understand the rapture and second coming as being one and the same event. Over the past couple of centuries, however, several different views have emerged:

- The pre-tribulational view - The rapture will take place prior to the Great Tribulation (commonly thought to be seven years before the second coming). This is the common view of most (but not all) dispensationalists.
- The mid-tribulational view – The rapture will take place prior to the second coming, some three and a half years beforehand (the mid-point of the final seven years known as Daniel’s 70th “week”).²
- The partial rapture theory – Although there are variations of this view, the general idea is that only some—but not all—Christians will be raptured before the Great Tribulation (e.g., only those who are obedient and ready), while others will be resurrected at a later time.
- The pre-wrath rapture view – In this view, Christians will be present during the time of the Antichrist’s reign and go through most of Daniel’s 70th “week,” but will be raptured before the time of God’s wrath (said to be at the latter end

¹ Alan Hultberg, “Introduction,” in *Three Views on The Rapture; Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 11.

² The period known as Daniel’s 70th “week” derives from a prophecy given to Daniel in Dan 9:24-27. In this prophecy, a future time of seventy *weeks of years* is revealed to Daniel in which certain prophetic things are to occur. The word “week” (שָׁבִיעִי) —meaning a *period of seven*—is understood in this context to mean a period of seven years. Hence, 70 “weeks” would imply 490 years. The first 69 “weeks” (483 years) concluded with the death of Christ on the cross. The final week—the final seven years—is thought by many to be suspended until the eschatological future. That is, they represent the seven years leading up to the second coming of Christ. Some scholars regard the whole seven years as the Great Tribulation, while others (this author included) limit the Great Tribulation to only the final three-and-a-half years of Daniel’s 70th “week.”

of the Great Tribulation). According to this view, there is a gap of time between the rapture and the second coming of Christ (but much shorter than seven or even three-and-a-half years as in the first two views).

- The post-tribulation view – According to this view, the rapture and the second coming are one and the same event, both occurring at the conclusion of Daniel’s 70th “week.” Following the Great Tribulation, the people of God are caught up to meet Jesus in the sky in order to participate in His glorious descent to earth. This is the traditional view of the Church.

Of these five views, only three have a sizeable following in today’s world. These are the pre-tribulation view, the pre-wrath view, and the post-tribulation view. In this book, I will be directing most of my attention to the pre-tribulation and post-tribulation views, particularly in regard to the premillennial understanding of Scripture (that once Christ returns, He will rule as king on earth for a *millennium*, i.e., a thousand years in accordance with Revelation 20:1-6). I will divide this book into two major parts. In the first part (chapters 2-7), I will explore the historical background that has given rise to present-day eschatological theology. Although the Church in the earliest centuries was predominantly premillennial, this gradually changed, so that by the time of Augustine (early fifth century AD), a shift occurred to amillennialism. The amillennial approach meant that the rapture and second coming were simultaneous, with a general judgment of both the righteous and the wicked immediately following (and no millennial reign of Christ but rather entrance straight-way to the eternal state). This held sway for other 1000 years, and even the reformers continued to hold to the basic amillennial approach laid down by Augustine. By the late 1500’s and early 1600’s, a form of premillennialism began making a comeback, especially among British evangelical scholars. For some two hundred years, this took the form of *premillennial historicism*. According to this approach, Daniel’s prophecies as well as the seals, trumpets, and bowls of Revelation were thought to be fulfilled progressively throughout church history. It was not until the second or third decade of the 1800’s that some began to advocate a type of *futurist premillennialism*. Once students of the Bible opened up to a futurist view (that most of the book of Revelation still pertains to a future time), other aspects of

eschatology began to be reexamined. Out of this climate arose the view that the rapture of the Church would take place several years prior to the second coming of Christ. Although there is debate as to who first advocated this view and when, there can be no doubt that John Darby became the champion of this view that came to be known as the pre-tribulational rapture. For those who wish to know more of the historical details of the rise and spread of the rapture doctrine (and emergence of alternative views), I would refer you to the helpful introductions by Richard R. Reiter and Alan Hultberg in the two books on the rapture published by Zondervan.³

The second part of this book (chapters 8-21) is an attempt to grapple with all the most relevant passages of Scripture that have a bearing on the subject of the rapture of the Church. I include a chapter on the topic of “imminency,” since this is such an important argument for many who take the pre-tribulational view (though I differ with the conclusions they have come to). This is followed by a chapter discussing a number of Old Testament passages that set the stage for the final eschatological events, particularly as they pertain to the Jewish people. Although resurrection of God’s people is revealed in the Old Testament, the particular aspect of the rapture is not. From that point, I attempt to proceed somewhat chronologically through the relevant New Testament passages that touch upon the return of Christ and the rapture of God’s people. Finally, I include an appendix on the Greek word *parousía* (παρουσία), the word that Jesus used of His second coming in Matthew 24:27 (and which the Apostle Paul used for the time of the rapture in 1 Thess 4:15).

By way of personal testimony, I came to a saving faith in Christ while a senior university student studying engineering over fifty years ago. In my early years as a Christian, I read numerous books on eschatology and the second coming of Christ. Since most of what I read had been written by pre-trib scholars, not surprisingly that is what I became convinced of. Following military service, I was very blessed to attend Dallas Theological Seminary, a school that was staunchly dispensational and pre-trib. I will always be

³ Richard R. Reiter, “A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions,” in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* 9-44 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984); and Alan Hultberg, “Introduction,” in *Three Views on The Rapture; Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, 11-24 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

thankful for the training that I received at Dallas, especially in Bible study methods, hermeneutics, the biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek), and biblical exegesis. During those years, I was privileged to study under great men of faith—men such as John Walvoord, Howard Hendricks, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, Kenneth Barker, Harold Hoehner, and Stan Toussaint. In eschatology class with Dr. Walvoord, we were even required to read (among other things) the post-tribulational book by Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*. Yet as I graduated from Dallas and ventured on into my early years of ministry as a seminary professor, I remained committed to the pre-trib view of the rapture. In the course of time, other Dallas men began to articulate a fresh understanding of biblical theology which came to be labelled “progressive dispensationalism.” Although I found myself in agreement with this newer approach (and still do to this day), I would contend that this has not played a factor in my understanding of the rapture. In my years of teaching at the seminary level, I have had the privilege of teaching courses on eschatology, as well as the books of Daniel and Revelation. In addition, I have had ample time to exegete and carefully think about all the passages pertaining to the return of Christ and the rapture of the Church. The outcome of this has been a shift in my understanding from a pre-tribulational view of the rapture to that of a post-tribulational view.

This present book is an attempt to explain to others why I—as a biblical scholar—now embrace the post-tribulational view of the rapture. I don’t pretend to have the final word on the subject, and I do hope that I can make my case with earnest humility. Since we are dealing with things yet to take place in the future—and since so many throughout the course of church history have espoused such widely different views—I certainly do not wish to come across unduly dogmatic about these matters. Nevertheless, the discussion is important, and not limited to one’s hope of knowing *the truth*. Practically speaking, there are seminaries in which one cannot serve on faculty without professing a belief in a pre-trib rapture. There are also a great many churches in which one cannot serve as pastor or an elder (in some cases even be a member) if one does not believe in a pre-trib rapture.

Finally, I do plead guilty to the fact that this present book is rather lengthy and often quite technical, but this is by design. I have not

written this to be a popular-level book. Rather, I am attempting to speak to pastors and seminary-trained men and women who want to have a robust discussion that energetically dives into the details of eschatology. Others—such as George Ladd, Robert Gundry, and Douglas Moo—have written at the popular level in defense of post-tribulationism.⁴ I appreciate their contributions, though I differ with each of them on certain points. Nevertheless, I stand upon their shoulders in my attempt to take the biblical investigation to a higher level. If I have contributed in any way to the Church having a better understanding of our Lord’s glorious return, then all the effort made in the research and writing of this book will have been worth the effort. To Christ Jesus be all the glory!

⁴ George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope; A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956); Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation; A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973; CEP Edition, 1977); and Douglas J. Moo, “A Case for the Posttribulation Rapture.” in *Three Views on The Rapture; Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, 185-274 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

Since the beginning of the Church, believers in Christ have longed for the return of the Lord to defeat the forces of evil and usher in the promised kingdom. Over the past two-hundred years, however, there has been ongoing debate as to the timing of the resurrection of believers in relation to the second coming. Based on a careful study of historical developments and meticulous exegesis of all relevant passages, Dr. Tanner defends the historic view of the Church that the rapture will be post-tribulational.



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Dr. Tanner is uniquely qualified to write on the topic of the rapture in relation to Christ's return. He is the author of the highly-acclaimed commentary on the Book of Daniel for the Evangelical Exegetical Commentary series, as well as having authored *The Book of Revelation; The Return of Christ to Reign Victoriously*, and a commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews for *The Grace New Testament Commentary*. He has authored numerous articles addressing eschatological topics that have been published in evangelical journals, including *Bibliotheca Sacra*, the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, and *Trinity Journal*.

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