

# Endtime Theology and the “Rapture”

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This paper is to provide a simple presentation on the doctrine of the Rapture. Since many denominations (the evangelical Reformed and the Holiness churches especially) believe that the rapture is but the first in a series of 10 events which will culminate in the Judgment Day, it would be a good investment of our time to briefly overview their entire “endtime” theology. A few definitions of terms might also help.

## Step One – The Rapture of the Church

Richard De Haan (a definite millennialist) says in his publication, *Look Up: Christ is Coming*: “The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is coming again. When He does, we shall see the complete unfolding of God’s plan for mankind. In spite of the tremendous impact made by Christ in the world, He is still ignored or rejected by the masses. The vast majority are not even nominally Christians. Of those who are, only a fraction are true believers who know Him as Savior and Lord. From that standpoint, *His first coming might seem to be a failure* (emphasis mine). It’s well to remember that the program of God was not to win the entire world to Christ in *this present* dispensation. Not at all! The outlook for this age is not world conversion. Rather, it’s the formation of a believing remnant, a chosen minority called the church, the body of Christ. When that elect number is complete according to God’s sovereign plan, the Lord Jesus will appear and take all living and dead believers to a with Him. We call this event the rapture.” (DeHaan, p. 2) Now you can understand why the millennialists put so much emphasis on their “endtime” theology.

Some specifics concerning the rapture are: 1) that Christ will return - but he will not return to earth. He will rather stay in the sky (“in the air”). 2) At the time of the rapture, the dead believers (and believers only) will be bodily raised, given glorified bodies and snatched (i.e. captured) up to heaven to meet the Lord in the air. This, they refer to as the first resurrection. (The second resurrection will involve only the unbelievers and will not take place until right after the millennium - some 1007 years later.) 3) The Christians still living at the time of the rapture will be snatched up (raptured) or translated to meet the Lord in the skies. From there they will go to be with the Lord in heaven until He comes the second time. 4) The rapture will be silent and visible only to the believers - the unbelievers won’t know what happened except for the fact that many people will be suddenly and unexplainably gone. 5) The purpose of the rapture is to allow the Christians to escape the Great Tribulation. 6) Those captured will be with the Lord for 7 years - the length of time of the Great Tribulation based on Daniel 9:27. 7) Finally, they view the coming of the rapture in the same way that we view Christ’s coming on Judgment day - that is, suddenly and unexpectedly. In fact the same passages that we say talk about the Last Day they - say are talking about the rapture. They refer to their belief that all signs are ready for the rapture to occur any moment as the doctrine of imminency.

## Step Two – Revelation of the Antichrist

The next step is the revelation of the Antichrist. This they see as happening right after the Christians have been captured. Here their reference point is 2 Th. 2. While we see the revelation of the Antichrist in 2 Th. 2 as already being revealed in the office of the papacy, they see it as something that will not be fulfilled until right after the rapture when a powerfully, wicked world leader (the Antichrist) will arise and declare his enmity with God and Jesus Christ and will bring great destruction and tribulation on those “unraptured” people still remaining.

### **Step Three – The Great Tribulation**

In close relationship with the revelation of the Antichrist will be the third event of the end time: the Great Tribulation. While they are quick to agree that the Christian church has always experienced tribulation, they are just as eager to point out that what the Christian church has suffered to date will be nothing compared with what it will suffer during the Great Tribulation. The Great tribulation will begin immediately after the Christians have been ruptured and will last for 7 years (they cite Daniel 9:27). The Great Tribulation will be divided into two equal segments of 3 and ½ years. “In the first half, there is a period of protection, one of comparative rest and tranquility for Israel. They are protected from their enemies and granted religious freedom. With the beginning of the second half of the seven years, a period of persecution begins when the covenant is broken. Israel is plunged into the time of Jacob’s Trouble and the Great tribulation of which the Scriptures speak (Jer. 30:7, Daniel 12:1, Matt. 24:21 and Rev. 6:17)” (Walvoord p. 129).

Other names for the Great Tribulation besides Jacob’s Trouble are: “The Day of the Lord” and “The Time of Wrath.” “During the tribulation more than one third of the earth’s population will perish under the supernatural judgment of God. A multitude of believers will die as martyrs because of their faith in Christ. *But God will focus His attention on Israel.* (emphasis mine) They will bring them to the place of repentance and restoration” (DeHaan p. 19).

### **Step Four – The Battle of Armageddon**

The tribulation will end with the nations of the world assembling in Palestine to prepare for a great, climatic battle—Armageddon (means “Mountain of Judgment”). (They use Rev. 16:16) “So fierce will be that endtime battle that all organic life upon the earth would soon be in danger of extinction. But the destruction will be stopped by the sudden appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ from Heaven” (DeHaan p. 20).

### **Step Five – The Glorious Return**

Christ will gloriously and victoriously return to earth—specifically on the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:3)—thus ending the Battle of Armageddon. With this dramatic victory Satan’s armies (led by the Antichrist) will be completely conquered and destroyed. The Antichrist will be cast into the lake of fire. For a description of this glorious return of Christ, they cite Rev. 19:11-17.

### **Step Six – The Binding of Satan**

The next event on “God’s Prophetic Calendar” is the binding of Satan. After thousands of years of deceiving the nations, the devil will be literally bound for the exact and specific period of 1000 years. As textual support they use Rev. 20:1-3.

### **Step Seven – The Millennium**

During the 1000 years that Satan is bound, the stage is set for the millennium—a 1000 years of peace and prosperity. In that day the Nations will be under the righteous rule of Jesus Christ (Zech. 14:9). “With Satan bound and out of the way, and with the Lord Jesus Christ in full control, the people of the earth will give Him (at least outwardly) obedience and worship. Every knee shall bow to Him and every tongue will confess that He is Lord (Rev. 20:1-6, Isa. 65:19-25)” (De Haan p.22). We view the 1000 years of Rev. 20 as referring to the New Testament era in which the “devil binding power” of the gospel is preached—a message which will give the believers a “spiritual” peace with God which passes all understanding. By the same token the millennium will be over when the gospel is no longer preached. With the force of the gospel no longer a factor, the devil is unbound for the relatively short time before the end.

### **Step Eight – Satan’s Final Rebellion**

The millennialists see it differently. To them after the literal 1000 years have run out, Satan will then be loosed from the literal chains which had bound him during the millennium. He will use his freedom to gather one last army against the Lord. But he will suffer a complete and final defeat. They see this being described in Rev. 20:7-10.

### **Step Nine – The Last Judgment**

This second to the last step plays an important role in distinguishing our theology from theirs. While we contend that there is only one physical resurrection from the dead (I say “physical resurrection” because the Bible does speak of conversion as being a “spiritual” resurrection - from spiritual death to spiritual life) in which both the believers and the unbelievers will appear before the throne of God, the millennialists see two physical resurrections. The first one we already saw, the one which involved only the Christians at the time of the rapture. The second physical resurrection they see as happening right after the final defeat of Satan. This will be a physical resurrection of the unbelievers of all ages. Here, again, they principally cite Rev. 20:4-6 as textual proof. We simply see this as another reference to the one and only Judgment of the Last Day

### **Step Ten – The New Heaven and the New Earth**

“The climax of God’s time-table for the future will be the coming of a new heaven and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed.” (DeHaan p. 24) The phrase as well as the concept of the new heaven and the new earth is taken from Rev. 21:1-3.

In the preceding you will have noticed several scriptural references. The difference between the millennialists and us is not that they accept these passages and we disregard them. It is rather the way in which they are interpreted. While they see the Old Testament prophecies as yet unfulfilled (and as having their fulfillment in the “endtime”), we see the Old Testament passages as already fulfilled by the Babylonian Captivity and the post-exilic history up to the time of Christ’s first coming. (Christmas). As to the New Testament passages, we see them, for the most part, as referring to the Lord’s Second Coming—Judgment Day. The millennialists, on the other hand, see them as referring to the rapture and subsequent “endtime” stages prior to the Final Judgment.

The other main difference is that while they interpret prophecy literally, we, when the context so indicates, interpret it symbolically—what they would call “spiritualizing” prophecy. A good example would be Rev. 20. To the millennialist, interpreting prophecy literally, literally is not only a sign of faith in God’s Word, it is also a testimony to their belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. For our part, we feel that to interpret literally that which the Bible clearly indicates is symbolic is not an act of piety nor does it indicate a special regard for the Word of God. It is rather just as bad as interpreting symbolically (as do the liberal theologians) that which is clearly literal.

With that by way of lengthy background, we are in a good position to look theology. Here we must open our Bible to 1 Thess. 4:13-16, for this is the only portion of the Scriptures they use as direct support for their teaching on the Rapture. We read:

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:

then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

To draw the lines quickly, we say that this section of the Scriptures is simply referring to what will happen on the last day—that is, that first the dead in Christ will be raised and then after that, those still alive will be taken up (I suppose, if it wouldn't be misleading, you could say "will be raptured up") into heaven. The millennialists say that this could not possibly be a reference to the Last Day and must refer to the Rapture for the following reasons:

1. This passage speaks only of the resurrection of the believers "those who have fallen asleep in Christ." The fact that the resurrection of the unbelievers is not mentioned in this section they say is proof that there will be two separate physical resurrections—the first of the believers and the second of the unbelievers some 1007 years later at the end of millennium. For further proof that there will be two physical resurrections they cite Rev. 20:5 where it "clearly" says "The rest of the dead (that is the unbelievers) did not come to life until the 1000 years were ended." At any rate, once they have established in their own minds that there are two physical resurrections, it is easy for them to come to the conclusion that since this speaks of the resurrection of the believers it can't possibly be referring to the Last Day (for that is when the unbelievers will be raised). It must rather be a reference to the rapture.

In a related argument they reason:

2. A. Since his second coming will be public in that he will be seen by both believer and unbeliever alike ("every eye shall behold him" - Rev. 1:7) and
  - B. Since this section speaks of him as being seen only by believers, therefore:
  - C. This cannot be a reference to Christ's second advent or the Final Judgment. It must rather be a separate incident prior to His second coming. And that "separate incident" they refer to as the rapture.
3. Then there is the argument which says that this section must refer to the rapture because at Christ's second coming; He will come to the earth where as this section says that He will come "in the air." Their conclusion, again, is that this section cannot refer to His second coming. It must rather refer to a special separate event preceding it; namely, the rapture.

Such are the arguments that the millennialist employ as proof of the rapture. But let us take a closer look at these arguments. When we do, we will see that the first two are really arguments based on silence. An example of an argument based on silence is that of the scoffers who love to ask the question: "where did Cain get his wife when he was cursed by God and driven away?" They assume that because the Bible at that point has mentioned only 4 people (Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel) and is silent about anyone else, that therefore no one else did exist—including a wife for Cain. Their conclusion is that the Bible is contradicting itself.

In the same way, the millennialists say that because this section is silent about the unbelievers also being raised that, therefore they weren't. This would be a fair conclusion if the Bible in several other passages (which we will see later) did not clearly indicate that there is going to be only one physical resurrection. But since these passages do exist, a much more harmonious conclusion would be that while Paul does not specifically refer to the resurrection of the unbelievers in this section, neither is that to be taken as proof that he is denying that they will be bodily raised at the same time as the believers—that is, on the Last Day. As to the question: "Why didn't Paul specifically refer to the unbelievers in this section?" the answer is that they were not a part of the point that Paul was trying to make. (Paul's purpose in writing this section was to comfort the believers concerning their friends, relatives and neighbors who had died as believers.)

At this point a millennialist might say, “You are not being fair to us. While it is true that the rapture makes sense only if there are two physical, bodily resurrections, you make it sound as if this were the only passage or section of the Bible on which we base our teaching of two, separate, physical resurrections. If you will open your Bibles to Rev. 20:4-6, you will see that this is not the case. Let us look at that section:

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the worship of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.

At first blush it does appear that there are two resurrections separated by a 1000 years. But let us take a deeper look. In the first place, what John saw in his vision was the souls (not the bodies) of the martyrs. The reason he didn't see the bodies of the martyrs was because the bodies were (are) still in the ground. As Ecc. 12:7 says, “And the dust returns to the ground it came from and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

What then do the terms “first resurrection” and “second death” refer to then? And what does the phrase “the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished” mean? The “first resurrection” can either refer to conversion (be resurrected from spiritual death to spiritual life - cf. Eph. 2:1-6 or Col. 2:12-13) or it can refer to the fact that when a person dies, while his body goes straight to the ground, his soul is immediately taken up or resurrected from the body to heaven. Continuing, the term “second death” is a reference to the eternal separation from the love of God in hell. While all people experience the “first death” (temporal death) only the unbelievers experience the second death (hell). Then there is the parenthetical phrase of verse 5 “the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished.” Here again, we must see the context. St. John is speaking of the souls of the martyrs as being in heaven. The words “the rest of the dead” then refers to the souls of the unbelievers. They are in hell—locked into a state of eternal spiritual death, torment and separation from the love of God. When the Last Day or Judgment Day comes, they will “live again” in the sense that their bodies will be raised and reunited with their souls.

The main conclusion to be drawn is that while Rev. 20 may (and does) speak of two resurrections, it does *not* speak of two *bodily* resurrections separated by a 1000 years. It rather speaks of only one physical or bodily resurrection which will take place on the Last Day of believer and unbeliever alike. (Simply read the last part of this chapter—especially verses 12 and 13 where it speaks of both believers and unbelievers alike being judged at the same time.)

Finally we must open our Bibles to Matthew 24. For the millennialists also use this chapter in support of their doctrine on the rapture—especially verses 40 and 41:

Two men will be in the field, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill, one will be taken and the other left.

This really deserves little comment. The entire 24th chapter of Matthew is clearly speaking about the tribulations prior to the Last Day and the final Judgment. Verses 40 and 41 simply refer to the fact that on the Last Day the believers will be separated from the unbelievers. Some will be taken to heaven—others won't. This is the thought of the 24th chapter of Matthew. It does not teach a secret rapture.

Lastly, we come to their third argument. (This is the one which said that since this section speaks of Jesus coming “in the air” [as opposed to coming to earth], therefore it must refer to the rapture [as opposed to second coming or the Last Day].) This argument dissolves, however, when you compare this section in Thessalonians to other similar passages (similar in the sense that they refer to Jesus coming in the clouds) which clearly speak, not of a rapture, but rather of the Last Day in which every eye (of both believer and unbeliever

alike) will see the Lord and be judged by Him. (Such passages are: Mark 14:62, Matt. 24:30, Rev. 1:7, Acts 1:9-11—and there are many others.) Thus, while 1 Thess. 4:13-18 may not (does not) make specific reference of Christ’s coming to earth, when you take these other passages into account, neither is it fair to base a whole “rapture theology” on the fact that He didn’t.

On the basis of what we have seen, comparing this portion of the Scriptures with other similar sections, and when we view this Thessalonian section in the light of its background and context, it becomes clear that the very sections of the Scripture they use as proof of a rapture are much more easily and better interpreted as a reference to the one and only physical resurrection that will take place on the Last Day.

### **Bibliography**

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