

Some Final Thoughts on Rapture Theories

—Sam A. Smith

[This is the fourth in a series of four papers on the problems of pretribulationism. It draws heavily on conclusions presented in the previous three papers, and the reader is urged to read them in sequence. The first paper is titled: *Can Pretribulationism be Proven by Imminency?*, the second is titled: *Does Pretribulationism's Wrath Argument Prove Pretribulationism?*, and the third is titled: *How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency*. These titles, as well as other papers and books by the author are available from Biblical Reader Communications (BiblicalReader.com).]

In the three preceding papers I have presented some of the major weaknesses of the pretribulational rapture theory. While these papers have not been directed specifically at the other major views (partial rapturism, midtribulationism, posttribulationism, and Rosenthal's pre-wrath theory), the reader should conclude from the discussion that if what has been presented is true, all of these views, not just pretribulationism, are seriously flawed. In this paper I would like to summarize and correlate the problems that have been identified, and suggest what went wrong in the development of rapture theology. In a sense, it is unfortunate that the blessed truth of the rapture has been overshadowed by discussion of its timing, rather than the nature and significance of the event. However, we must recognize that to a very great degree, the rapture's blessedness is connected to its timing. The real question is this: Does the Bible give us any concrete information regarding the timing of the rapture? I believe it does; but first let us try to understand what has gone wrong with previous rapture theologies so that we do not repeat the same mistakes.

a. Reductive thinking

Prior to the emergence of pretribulationism in the mid-eighteen hundreds, there was no theology of the rapture, as such. There were very few premillennialists, and they made no distinction between the rapture and the second coming; technically, they were posttribulational, but that had little meaning in the absence of a developed rapture theology. By the late eighteen hundreds pretribulationism had emerged as a prominent view. Now there were two major views, and the contrast gave better definition to both views. Proponents of each view reasoned that disproving the opposing view made the case for their view stronger, and theological argumentation proceeded along those lines. In fact, it has been observed that the case for posttribulationism has been almost entirely based on the denial of pretribulationism (John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 144). Soon, partial rapturism emerged on the scene, and then mid-tribulationism and Rosenthal's pre-wrath theory. Of course, proponents of each view projected positive arguments, but it has been acknowledged that no view has been able to provide conclusive evidence. As late as the mid-1970s John F. Walvoord confirmed this when he said:

In the study of the relative merits of arguments supporting pretribulationism and posttribulationism, it becomes evident that not all the arguments for either conclusion are necessarily decisive. If either the pretribulational or posttribulational rapture was unequivocally taught in Scripture, it is doubtful whether worthy scholars would divide on the question. The conclusions reached necessarily are based on the total weight of the supporting evidence and the extent to which each view solves its problems. (Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 144)

In other words, according to Walvoord, the positive arguments for the major views are inconclusive, and one must base a decision about the merits of a view on "the total weight of the

supporting evidence.” However, this very procedure assumes that the correct view is among the views being considered, and as such, exemplifies the reductive error that has dogged rapture theology. (Reduction is the over simplification of a problem—in this case, assuming that one of an arbitrarily limited number of possibilities must be correct.) What if all the views that have been suggested are incorrect? If we simply pick the best view, comparatively, we still do not know if we have the correct view, for there may yet be a better option that has not come to light, or a view or views may only be partially correct in some respect. Yet much weight has been attached to picking “the best” from among a limited set of views (*i.e.*, the theory with the least problems). As I think back over my thirty-five years as a committed pretribulationist, I can remember many an occasion on which I said something like this: “Pretribulationism may have problems, but it is the best view by far.” (By “best view” I meant the best of the views that had been proposed.) Even though I was aware that pretribulationism had problems, I was reassured by the fact that it seemed far more likely to be correct than any of the other views that had been proposed. Yet it should be apparent that one view cannot be established by the exclusion of any number of other views (except where the law of negation is applicable, which is not the case here).

b. Sequency and contingency

Another problem found in every major view (pretribulationism, posttribulationism, partial rapturism, mid-tribulationism, and Rosenthal’s pre-wrath theory) is that the rapture is viewed as a sequent event. By “sequent” I mean that it is viewed as occurring within a sequential stream of prophesied future events. Naturally, when the rapture is viewed in this way it could only be imminent if it is the first event in the sequence. Viewing the rapture as a sequent event explains why pretribulationists have always assumed that only pretribulationism is consistent with imminency—because it is the only theory that views the rapture as the first event in the sequence of prophesied future events. In fact, if the rapture is viewed as a sequent event, and if imminency is true, then only pretribulationism could be correct. Interestingly, since all the other theories also view the rapture as a sequent event, they are all compelled to deny the imminency of the rapture. In this respect, all of the major views share a common thread—they are all sequent views. Likely, the tendency toward viewing the rapture in this way has been driven by the desire to pinpoint the time of the rapture in relation to the stream of prophetic events. We should, however, note that this is not the only way to view the rapture, nor is it the way in which the scriptures view the rapture. The rapture could be viewed, and indeed the scriptures do view it, as “non-sequent,” at least up to the point that the wrath of God is manifested. If God chose not to reveal the specific timing of the rapture (*i.e.*, its precise place in the order of prophetic future events), it would then be imminent with respect to the other prophesied events, since its place in the sequence would be unspecified. Simply put, it is not necessary that the rapture occur first in order for it to be imminent; there need only be the reasonable expectation that it could occur at any moment. (For a more detailed discussion of sequency, see the previous paper in this series: *Is the Doctrine of Imminency Capable of Proving Pretribulationism?*)

Clearly, good people disagree profoundly on the timing of the rapture. As the previous quote from Walvoord indicates, there is a great deal of confusion on this topic among many well-intended and learned people. As anyone who has made a study of theology knows, theologians are prone to disputation, not because they are disagreeable people, but owing to the nature of the task. Disputation is how the community of faith thinks out loud about truth; and generally that process leads us closer to *the* truth. However, in this case we have not grown closer; if anything, we have grown further apart. In trying to resolve this issue, we find ourselves between “a rock” and “a hard place.” Could it be that for the last one hundred and fifty years we have been struggling to move “the rock,” rather than accept the fact that God has not revealed the precise

information we seek? Might not God have had a reason to reveal the truth, and thus the hope of the rapture, while at the same time concealing certain specifics regarding its timing? I do not claim to know for certain why God would intentionally do that, but a reason could be suggested. The rapture is a component, or phase, of the second coming; on this point there is virtually no disagreement, even from pretribulationists. We know that angels will be actively involved in the gathering of both the elect and the non-elect at the second coming proper (Matt. 24:31; 13:41, 49-50). We also know that angels will be involved in some capacity at the rapture (1 Thess. 4:16). It would not, therefore, be unthinkable that angels could play some role in the removal of believers from the earth at the rapture. Why Christ wouldn't just speak, and have the rapture occur "by fiat" rather than through angels, I do not know; but the same objection could be raised against the use of angels at the second coming were it not for the fact that we are specifically told of their participation. God often chooses to employ intermediate means to accomplish divine purposes, and I know of no good reason why he could not use angels to effectuate the rapture if he chose to do so. We also know that fallen angels have the capacity to obstruct the work of holy angels (Dan. 10:1-21, esp. v. 13; Rev. 12:7-10). Christ made a curious statement in Matthew 24:43. He said:

But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. [NASB]

This passage has been interpreted to mean that believers are to be alert for the coming of Christ, just as the head of a house should ever be alert for a thief (see, John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 194); but why would a believer need to prevent his house from being broken into by Christ? If, as Walvoord insists, this is the second coming, the analogy would be all wrong. Would a thief appear unexpectedly in the night, take out the trash, sweep the house, setting it in order, and remain to rule the house as Christ will do at his second coming? Certainly not! A thief comes suddenly, at a time when the head of the house is not expecting, and he takes something of value and flees before his plan can be prevented. It is certainly no coincidence that the word Paul chose in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to denote the rapture of the church is *harpazō*, a cognate of which (*harpagē*) means "to rob." Thieves do not come to set things right, they come to plunder. Christ is here "the thief," and Satan is "the head of the house." [The word translated "the head of the house" (NASB) is *ho oikodepotēs*, meaning "the despot," or "the ruler of the house" (there is no implication of "uprightness" as implied in the KJV translation, "goodfellow"). Satan is the ruler, *i.e.*, "the god of this world." In Matthew 12:29, Christ stated that this world is (for the present time) Satan's house—*i.e.*, "the house of the strong man" (*tēn oikian tou ischurou*).] It is critically important that Satan not know the time when Christ will suddenly appear to remove his church, and for the same reason neither can the church know. Therefore, the only way for believers to be prepared for an imminent event is to be always ready. Whether or not this interpretation has merit—and I believe it does—it at least illustrates that God may have a reason for keeping the timing of the rapture secret; and if that is true, then all of our efforts to discover the timing of the rapture have only worked at cross-purposes to his divine intent.

c. The problem of partial truth

We are all acquainted with the story of the three men who having never seen an elephant were blindfolded, brought to examine an elephant, and asked for a description. One man grabbed the tail and said, "An elephant is long and thin, like a snake." The second man felt the ear and said, "An elephant is flat and smooth." The third man put his arms around one of the legs and said, "An elephant is tall and round like a tree." Of course, all of the men were both right, and wrong. They were right about some aspect of the elephant, but they were wrong in their general

characterization. Just so, there is in every major rapture theory some element of truth. Of course some have more truth than others, and all are flawed in some respect.

Posttribulationists insist that the rapture occurs in connection with the second coming, and so it does. Indeed the second coming occurs in connection with the first coming, from a certain perspective—at least that was the perspective of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 61:1-3, which includes elements of both comings without distinction in the same sentence. Even Christ’s teaching in Matthew 24-25 contains elements of the rapture and the second coming that are not there distinguished as discrete events (see my previous paper in this series, *How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency*). Pretribulationists have, from the beginning, insisted that the rapture is an imminent event, and they are right. They are also correct that the church is promised deliverance from the wrath to come, specifically through means of the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:10). In fact, that deliverance seems to be the principal purpose for the rapture. The mid-tribulationists and the Rosenthal pre-wrath rapturists are right that deliverance from the wrath to come is not the same as deliverance from the entire seven-year tribulation period. And, the partial rapturists are right that only those who are watching for Christ’s coming will participate in the rapture—not, as they suppose, because part of the church will be taken, but because those watching are the only ones that are truly saved. [Of course they are not saved because they watch; rather they watch because they are saved. I do not mean to imply that a certain level of eschatological knowledge is required for salvation, for in that case few indeed would be saved—only that the truly saved have within them the indwelling Holy Spirit who ever inclines their hearts and eyes heavenward.]

There is also error in each rapture theory. The posttribulationists are wrong in asserting that the church will endure the wrath of God; and they are also wrong in seeing the rapture as occurring at the time of the second coming proper, as the particulars of the events differ greatly, and there must be a span of time for a group of people to be saved after the rapture who will enter the millennium in natural (untransformed) bodies, as indicated in Isaiah 65:17-25. Pretribulationists are wrong in asserting that the entire tribulation is divine wrath, since that assertion cannot be proven. They are also wrong in insisting that imminency proves pretribulationism. As we have seen, imminency only requires a pretribulation rapture if the rapture is viewed as a sequent event. Midtribulationists and Rosenthal pre-wrath rapturists are wrong in denying imminency (though as we observed in a previous paper, they were greatly aided in their rejection of the doctrine by the new pretribulationists who “pulled the rug” out from under the biblical support for imminency).

d. A biblical view of the rapture

We probably do not need another new theory. The profusion of theories seems to be a symptom of the problem itself—a clamoring for more specificity than scripture provides. We know from the irreconcilable descriptions of the rapture (1 Cor. 15:52-53; 1 Thess. 4:13-18) and the second coming (Zech. 14:1-15; Matthew 24:29-31; Rev. 19:11-20:3) that these events could not be the same, nor could they happen at the same time. [In fact, it is necessary that the rapture occur prior to the conversion of the Jewish nation, which possibly occurs sometime near, or just after the mid-point of the tribulation period, else they would be translated with the church and could not enter the millennium in natural bodies to repopulate the land as described in Isaiah 65:17-25.] To suggest that the rapture will occur late in the tribulation period, and that those who will enter the millennium in their natural bodies will be those saved immediately prior to the second coming proper (after the removal of the church), is an unworkable hypothesis given the spiritual darkness, deception, and delusion under which the world will fall as the end approaches (2 Thess. 2:8-12). As I have argued in the preceding papers, the rapture is imminent. Christ

explicitly taught the imminency of the rapture in Matthew 24:36-25:30. And, the rapture must occur before the wrath of God to be manifested at the day of the Lord; Paul explicitly taught this in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:10. Thus, here is what we can state confidently: The rapture is imminent—meaning that it could occur at any time, including pretribulationally; also since a non-sequent view of an imminent rapture does not require the event to be pretribulationally, and since it cannot be proven that the entire tribulation period is divine wrath, it is possible (though perhaps less likely) that the rapture could occur after the tribulation period begins. While I do have some thoughts regarding the terminal point of the window in which the rapture could occur, I will save those thoughts for future discussion. For additional information the reader is referred to my books, *What the Bible Says About the Future*, and *The Imminent Pre-wrath Rapture*; both are available free in digital form at Biblical Reader Communications (www.biblicalreader.com).

What has been written in this short series of papers isn't a complete discussion of the rapture; it barely scratches the surface of many issues. It is simply an effort to deconstruct some of the malformed theology that has obscured what was originally a very simply truth: that Christ is coming before the day of God's wrath to receive his own, and any day before that wrath begins (whenever it begins) could be the day of his appearing. While it is important to be right about the particulars of the rapture, it is even more important to be "ready;" and if we focus on that, we might have far less disagreement among brethren.

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