A TRINFINITY MINI BOOK

Living in Hope of the Return of Christ

The Rapture, the Tribulation, and the hope we share

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About this book

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Introduction

I believe Jesus is coming back. He will come personally and visibly, just as He said. I also believe He will first gather His church to Himself before the seven years of Tribulation the prophets describe. That view is called the pre-tribulation Rapture, and this book explains why I hold it.

I also want to be fair to Christians who read these passages another way. Good, Bible-believing people have landed in different places on the timing. You will find each of the main views here. Most of all, I want you to see that none of these views decides whether a person is saved. Your salvation rests on something much firmer than a timeline, and the last chapter shows you what that is.

1 What all Christians share

Before we look at where Christians differ, it helps to see how much we agree on. When Jesus went up into heaven, two angels told the disciples what to expect next.

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 just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.

Acts 1:11 (NASB)

The same Jesus. In the same way. Believers across the centuries have confessed this. The Apostles' Creed says that He will come to judge the living and the dead. The dead will be raised, God will judge the world in righteousness, and those who belong to Christ will be with Him forever.

Every view in this book agrees on those things. Where Christians differ is in the order of events and how to read some of the prophetic passages. Those are real questions and worth studying. They are not the center of the faith.

2 The hope I hold

The word Rapture is not in most English Bibles. It comes from the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where caught up was rendered with a form of the verb rapio, to snatch or carry away. The idea is very much in the text.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (NASB)

I believe this gathering happens before the Tribulation begins. Here is the order as I understand it. Christ comes for His church and meets us in the air. The seven-year Tribulation follows on earth. At the end of it, Christ returns to the earth with His saints, defeats His enemies, and reigns for a thousand years. Then comes the final judgment and the new heaven and new earth.

Why do I think the church is gathered first? Jesus promised to come and take His people to the place He is preparing (John 14:2-3, NASB). Paul wrote that God has not destined us for wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9, NASB), and the Tribulation is a time when God pours out His wrath on a rebellious world. To a faithful church Jesus said, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world (Revelation 3:10, NASB).

I also believe His coming for the church is imminent. Nothing on the prophetic calendar has to happen first. That is why Paul could call it the blessed hope (Titus 2:13, NASB) and why the change he describes happens in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, NASB). We are told to live ready every day.

3 The Tribulation and what follows

Daniel's prophecy of seventy weeks ends with a final week, a period of seven years. A ruler makes a firm covenant with the many for one week and breaks it in the middle of the week (Daniel 9:27, NASB). Revelation describes that time in two halves of forty-two months each (Revelation 11:2-3; 12:6, NASB).

For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.

Matthew 24:21 (NASB)

Even in that dark time God is still saving people. Revelation 7 (NASB) describes 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel, whom I understand

as Jewish believers. It also describes a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation. The elder says, These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14, NASB). I understand them as people who come to Christ after the church has been gathered.

At the end of those seven years, John saw heaven opened and a rider on a white horse called Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11, NASB). The armies of heaven follow Him (Revelation 19:14, NASB). This is the Second Coming to the earth. Then come the thrones and the thousand-year reign of Christ (Revelation 20:4, NASB), the great white throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-12, NASB), and the new creation where God dwells with His people (Revelation 21:3, NASB).

4 How other Christians read it

I hold the pre-tribulation view because I believe it fits the passages best. Other believers have studied the same Bible with the same care and reached other conclusions. Here are the main views on the timing of the Rapture, stated the way their own teachers would state them.

Mid-tribulation. The church is gathered at the middle of the seven years, before the worst judgments of the second half. Many who hold this view connect Paul's last trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52, NASB) with the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15 (NASB).

Pre-wrath. The church goes through the first part of the Tribulation and is gathered before the Day of the Lord's wrath begins, sometime in the second half. This view separates the persecution believers suffer from the wrath God pours out.

Post-tribulation. The church goes through the whole Tribulation. The Rapture and the Second Coming are one event at the end. Believers rise to meet the Lord in the air and return with Him to the earth. Those who hold this view point to Jesus gathering His elect immediately after the tribulation of those days (Matthew 24:29-31, NASB) and to Paul's statement that the day of the Lord will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, NASB).

Partial Rapture. A smaller group teaches that only believers who are watchful and ready will be taken before the Tribulation.

Christians also differ on the thousand years in Revelation 20. Premillennial believers, both dispensational and historic, expect Christ to return before a future reign on earth. Amillennial believers understand the thousand years as a symbol of Christ's present reign, from His first coming to His second. Postmillennial believers expect the gospel to spread until the world sees a long season of righteousness, with Christ returning after it. Preterist believers hold that much of the prophecy in Matthew 24 and Revelation was fulfilled in the first century, when Jerusalem fell in AD 70. Most of them still look for Jesus' future, bodily return.

I disagree with some of these readings. I do not doubt the faith of the people who hold them.

5 Why the timing does not decide your salvation

I want to say this as plainly as I can. A person's view of the Rapture does not determine whether that person is saved. You can be wrong about the order of the last days and be right with God. You can be right about every detail of prophecy and still be lost.

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Matthew 24:36 (NASB)

Jesus did not give us a calendar. Anyone who sets a date has already gone beyond what He said. One study I have used puts it well: whether you believe in a pre-tribulation Rapture or believe Christians will go through the whole Tribulation, the signs of the times should have the same effect on all of us. They should push us to reach as many people as we can with the time we have.

Paul asked the believers in Rome, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:10, NASB). Prophecy is never a reason for contempt. The goal of studying it is to love Jesus more and to live clean while we wait.

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

1 John 3:2-3 (NASB)

6 What your salvation depends on

If your salvation does not rest on your view of the end times, what does it rest on? It rests on Jesus Christ and what He has done. Paul called this the message of first importance.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (NASB)

It does not rest on how good you have been, which church you attend, or how much you know. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23, NASB). Salvation is a gift you receive, not a wage you earn.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB)

Paul tells us how to receive it: if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:9, NASB). There is salvation in no one else (Acts 4:12, NASB). The thief on the cross had no time to study prophecy or be baptized. He simply asked Jesus to remember him, and Jesus said, today you shall be with Me in Paradise (Luke 23:42-43, NASB).

If you have never trusted Christ, you can do it right now. Tell Him you know you have sinned. Tell Him you believe He died for you and rose again. Ask Him to forgive you and be your Lord. There are no magic words. He hears an honest heart. Then you can have the assurance John wrote about: He who has the Son has the life (1 John 5:12, NASB). Whenever He comes, you will be ready.

Living in Hope of the Return of Christ

Jesus is coming back. This book explains the pre-tribulation hope, looks at the Tribulation and what follows, lays out the other views Christians hold with respect, and shows why none of them decides your salvation. Then it points you to the One who does.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

1 Thessalonians 4:16 (NASB)

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