

What is Your Position on the Timing of the Rapture?

Answered by Randy Alcorn

I'm not sure of the rapture's timing. I affirm the second coming of Christ and am premillennial, but depending on what Scriptures one goes to, a case can be made for pre-trib, post-trib, mid-trib and various adaptations of those positions.

It's a complicated issue, as there are several positions as to the time of the rapture that can be defended biblically. There is historic pre-millennialism in which the rapture is believed to be synonymous with the second coming of Christ, part of the same event (and therefore after the tribulation). But if you take the pre-tribulational rapture position of modern dispensationalism (a recently held position, but that doesn't mean it's wrong) taken by Hal Lindsey and the authors of the *Left Behind series* (two men I both know and appreciate), there's the belief that all true Christians will be taken up in the rapture. Then there is a "partial rapture" position, only faithful believers taken, but very few hold to this.

I would recommend Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology's* handling of the second coming of Christ. It presents the different positions very well. (It also deals with different positions on the millennium. Many committed Christians, including men such as J. I. Packer and R. C. Sproul, are amillennial, which is another issue.)

If forced to take a position, I personally think the best arguments lie in historic pre-millennialism, which believes in **one return of Christ rather than a rapture, followed by a physical return seven years later**. That's the position taken by the majority of believers throughout church history (along with the amillennial position). I'm intimately familiar with the arguments for the pre-tribulational rapture, as it was the position I was taught in Bible college and seminary, and which I used to teach others. It could certainly be correct, **but I believe the biblical evidence is stronger for a single return of Christ at the end of the tribulation period**. Could I be wrong? Of course. Could pre-tribulationalists be wrong? Of course.

I have no desire to argue this position, as I'm uncertain about it, and there's so much that the Bible is absolutely clear on, that's what I want to focus on. But since you asked, one way to put it is this: If you had never heard anyone teach on the subject and you only had the Bible, would you believe there were two second comings (or two stages to a second coming) of Christ, separated by seven years, or would you believe the biblical references refer to a single second coming?

History demonstrates the answer, since prior to the 19th century there is only one historic reference to someone believing in a rapture that was separate from the final return of Christ. I read an article on this by a pre-trib advocate in a Dallas seminary publication who was refuting the claim that there was no reference to a pre-trib rapture prior to the 19th century. He thoroughly searched all the historic Christian documents involving eschatology and came up with one such reference. But what struck me is that it was only one. Is it possible that the truth was withheld from virtually all believers throughout all time until the 19th century? Yes, it's possible. Is it likely? I don't think so.

I actually think this is a minor point of disagreement, as the timing of the tribulation has never been a major doctrine of the church. The implications of going through the tribulation would be

major to believers, of course, but Christians all over the world, throughout church history have undergone unspeakable tribulation, so it will not mean much extra hardship for them—and if the rapture is pre-tribulational, then believers will all be taken home, which is what happens at death anyway. The important thing is not in the details, but that we believe in the return of Christ, and that we live lives of eternal perspective and godliness in light of our immanent deaths and his immanent return (2 Peter 3). Not a single duty or calling of the Christian life changes should change according to what I believe about the rapture's timing.

I do know some Christians who are obsessed by the current prophecy literature (I was myself as a young Christian in the 1970's when all of us were reading *The Late Great Planet Earth* and proving to each other that Christ had to return by 1980). But when believers put too much emphasis on issues such as the timing of the rapture, the identity of the Anti-Christ, etc., it distracts us from our more important callings, such as loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbors as ourselves, and living lives characterized by justice, mercy and humility. The primary focus of each day should be, "God, as I seek your face in prayer and though your Word, and as I yield my life to you, please use me for your eternal purposes and for your glory," not, "here's fifty reasons why I believe the rapture will happen before/during/after the tribulation."

Hope this makes sense. I'm not in a position to go deeper on this, but there are plenty of books and websites that take the various viewpoints. One book is *Three Views on the Rapture* by Gleason L. Archer (Editor), Paul D. Feinberg, and Richard R. Reiter.

http://www.epm.org/articles/qa-rapture_timing.html