

Rapture and Resurrection

by: Ronald L. Dart

An old friend of mine used to say, "If the devil can't get at you any other way, he will waste your time."

I got a letter recently asking me to do a radio program on the question of the "Pre-tribulation rapture of the Saints." This is the whole idea that is behind the very successful "Left Behind" series of books. So I did the mandatory Internet search on this phrase "rapture theory." I got nearly a million and a half webpages that used that expression. So I searched on "pre-tribulation rapture," and I got nearly a quarter of a million on that. Now I'm not going to tell you that I did a comprehensive search to determine who was on which side of the issue or where the majority of the argument lay, but trust me, there were exhaustive and exhausting arguments being raised on both sides of it. It struck me as I looked at it, I thought what a massive amount of time has been wasted on this issue.

Now reason and common sense should say something to us when we encounter something like this. If the Bible were all that clear on the issue, do you suppose that we would have this breath of disagreement or all the hyperventilating about the disagreement?

Actually, it turns out that there are four theories on the rapture not just two. They have managed to create a schism across a wide range of believers.

Origin of the Rapture

Now until I decided to waste time on this issue, I didn't know that the doctrine had never been advanced before the year 1830. By accounts, it came in a private vision to the Scottish lass named Margaret McDonald. She was a prophetess in the Catholic Apostolic Church. The theory was picked up and carried forward by one John Nelson Darby of the Brethren Movement, and he refined it into something like what is taught today in any number of churches.

Christian journalist Dave McPherson wrote a book on the subject of "The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture", and he said this. "We have seen a young Scottish lass named Margaret McDonald had a private revelation in Port Glasgow, Scotland, in the early part of 1830, that a select group of Christians would be caught up to meet Christ in the air before the days of Antichrist."

The Inner Circle

Now the words I want to call your attention to are these, "A select group of Christians." It may surprise you to learn this, although after you think about it, it will make sense. Underlying most schisms in the Christian faith, is this idea that there is a select group. Never mind that all Christians are a select group, these people are the best of the best, the select of the select. It is an almost irresistible appeal to being an insider.

It reminded me of something that C.S. Lewis said. He was speaking before a college group and he spoke of what he called "The Temptation to the Inner Circle." Lewis describing this desire of being in the inner ring said, "Of all the passions, the passion for the inner ring is the most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man, do very bad things." And one of the bad things that can be done and has been done is to divide brother against brother.

Prophecy is not of a Private Interpretation

Now the rapture is a prophetic theory, and there are a few things about prophecy that ought to be obvious, but apparently are not. Let me point them out. 2 Peter chapter 1 verse 20, Peter writing says this, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation, for prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

So don't ever imagine that because someone begins to interpret the Bible in a given way, that this comes from God. That's not the way prophecies in Scripture comes about. Now, someone will say yes, but this girl McDonald was carried by the spirit. Maybe? But here is what the apostle John says about that. First John chapter 4 and verse 1, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Do you mean someone might show up and say that they have had a vision from God and lie about it? Yes, apparently they would.

Would it be possible that someone may have had a bad dream and interpreted this from being from God? Yes, that is entirely possible. Now if we are supposed to test the spirits, to try them, what standard can be used to try them? Well, all we have that we can really depend on is the Bible, the Holy Scriptures.

Prophecy Can Fail

Paul writing to the Corinthians in First Corinthians 13, verse eight, writing about love, said, "Love never fails but where there are prophecies, they will cease, where there are tongues, they will be stilled, whether there be knowledge, it'll pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." Now the word for

'perfection' in the original Greek is 'teleios', which means 'that which is complete, as opposed to something that is in part.'

All Prophecy is Incomplete

I want to put a statement out on the table for you to think about. Here it is, 'All prophecy is incomplete.' I'm not saying it's wrong, I am not saying it's mistaken. I'm not saying that your ideas about it are right, wrong or indifferent. All I'm saying is that when the prophecy manages to make its way down to our consciences it comes there incomplete. Paul just said it, didn't he? "We prophesy in part, but then, that which is complete comes that which is in part disappears" (1 Corinthians 13:8-9).

Unfortunately the purposes of prophecy are not fully understood among Christian folk. Consider for example, why should God reveal anything about the future to us in the first place? What's the point? I guess if He's going to reveal to us a big bank crash next Tuesday, it would be useful for us to know if we had stock to sell it, but God doesn't do that. He couldn't care less if you lose a little money in the stock market. So why does he tell anybody anything about the future? Is it to turn us into insiders? So we could say I know something you don't know. No, of course not.

Two Points of Prophecy

There are actually two important purposes served by prophecy, one, it gives us a chance to repent and change the outcome. One of the great classics of this is the book of Jonah, where Jonah comes wandering into Nineveh and says, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." He wasn't there just to tell them what was going to happen. He was there to give them a chance to turn it around and turn it around they did.

They repented, 40 days came and went, and Nineveh didn't fall.

The other reason why God tells us the future, in any degree at all, it enables us to see God's hand in history when it happens. We aren't left there with our tongue hanging out and saying, "That was just awful bad luck." No, because we have prophecy, we know why it happened, and we know that God did it.

Prophecy is like an Oil Painting

Now prophecy in the Bible is like an oil painting. The closer you stand to it, the less you see. Prophecy gives us an overview of what is coming so we can make better decisions and understand what is coming down. If you approach Biblical prophecy this way, you'll probably find the whole argument about the rapture, largely irrelevant.

So following my analogy of the oil painting, let's take a step back and get an overview of prophecy in this matter. As mysterious as the book of Revelation is, it does have an outline and anyone who looks at it really can see it. First, there is a scroll that is sealed with seven

seals (Revelation 5). John is carried off to heaven in a vision, and he said he saw one sitting on a throne in the middle of living creatures and elders, and he saw something in his right hand. It was a book, a scroll, written inside and on the backside and sealed with seven seals. "I saw a strong Angel proclaim with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book and to loose the seals thereof," and no one in heaven, no one on earth, no one under the earth was able to open the book or even to look on it.""

John is weeping, as if his heart would break, because nobody was found worthy to open and read the book or look at it, even I suppose the one sitting on the throne. One of the elders said to him, "Oh, don't weep, behold, the lion of Judah, the root of David, has prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals thereof, and John turned and he looked and there out of the middle of all this, stood a lamb as if it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent forth into all the earth."

Now you have to realize that when you're reading Revelation you are seeing all kinds of symbolism. The seven horns probably means all power. Seven eyes means all seeing. Let's continue in verse 7, "He came and took the book out of the right-hand of him that set upon the throne and when he had taken the book, the four beasts, and twenty four elders all fell down before the Lamb. They had harps and vials full of odors, which is the prayers of all the saints, and they sang a song saying "You are worthy to take the book and open the seals thereof." Why? "You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every kindred and tongue, and people and nation." The Lamb of God had earned the right to open this book by dying. No one else could do it.

Now the logical assumption follows, that this event takes place at a point in time, and the sequential opening of the seven seals follows, in time. One seal follows on the heels of another and perhaps having been open, the first seal remains open, while the second one is being opened, but nevertheless, there is a sequence so we can begin to find the format of the outline of the book of Revelation.

When the seventh seal is finally opened, this is talked about in Revelation 8 verse one, "When he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about the space of half an hour, where everything was quiet and I saw seven angels that stood before God and to them were given seven trumpets, and another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden sensor and to him was given much incense, that it should be offered with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne."

Now we have come down through the seven seals. The opening of the seventh seal introduces another set of seven and now the seven angels will sound their trumpets in succession and all hell breaks loose upon the earth.

So the seventh seal is comprised of seven trumpets, and thus far, one event seems to follow on the heels of another. Then comes the seventh and last trumpet. By this time, you would

think that every organized activity on the face of the earth has come to a halt, but probably not.

Return of Christ

Now, in Revelation 11 and verse 15, "The seventh angel sounded, and there was great voices in heaven, saying, the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

You don't have to know a lot about the Bible to know where you're at. We have now come to the establishment of the kingdom of God under Christ, to the return to Christ and His control over this Earth. "The twenty-four elders, that were before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give you thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which are, and were, and are to come, because you have taken to you, your great power and have reigned."

Now we come to the pivotal point in time. It has been preceded by two sets of seven and we finally come to the end of that. "The nations were angry and your wrath is come and the time of the dead, that they should be judged that you should give reward to your servants the prophets, and of the saints, and to them that fear your name, small and great, and you should destroy them which destroy the earth."

Wow, it looks like the environmentalists will have their day.

"The Temple of God is opened in heaven and there was seen in His Temple, the ark of his testament, there were lightnings and voices and thunderings, and earthquakes and great hail." So following the seventh trumpet, there then follows the seven last plagues which are said to be the wrath of God.

But wait, we have passed up an important event. It is hinted at in what we just read, that God will judge the dead, and will give reward to his saints. But we now have to back up to first Corinthians chapter 15 for something that takes place in this context.

The First Resurrection

First Corinthians 15 is called the resurrection chapter, because it seems to be about the resurrection from front to back.

Paul writes in chapter 15, and verse 21, "For since by man came death, by man also, came the resurrection of the dead, for in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. Every man in his own order, Christ, the firstfruits, afterward, they that are Christ at His coming." So when do we get to be raised from the dead? At Christ's coming.

Later in verse 51, Paul says, "Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep." (Notice that death is compared to sleep.) "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump. For the trumpet shall sound, and the

dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed, for this corruptible must put on incorruption. This mortal must put on immortality, so when this corruptible shall put on incorruption, when this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory."

So at the last trumpet, the dead are raised, and we, and the way Paul uses this, I think he is talking about those who are alive, shall be changed. The resurrection takes place at the last trumpet. I don't know where you could find any serious disagreement among Christian folks on that.

If you're dead, you'll stay dead until the return of Christ and when the seventh trumpet in the sequence of seven is blown.

When Is The Rapture?

So when does this rapture take place? This time when the saints are caught up, that's what the word 'rapture' means, it comes from the word to 'catch away'. When are the saints carried off? When? This takes us back to first Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and verse 13, mind you we are stepping back, we're not going to get the magnifying glass out to look at the brush strokes yet. He says, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep but you sorrow not, like others who have no hope, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, those who sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who are asleep."

Now this is a fascinating statement that Paul makes here because on the face of it, he assumes the possibility of the return of Christ in his own lifetime. This should not be a surprise to anyone, because after all, Jesus said, no man knows the day or the hour. That means Paul didn't know, but at the same time he says, "If it is going to happen that way, this is the way it would be." Verse 15, "Those of us who are alive and remain to the coming of Christ are not going to precede those who are dead, for the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, the voice of the arch Angel, the trump of God and the dead in Christ shall rise first", not last. "Then we who 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, now comfort one another with these words."

Now you can parse this anyway you want, but the overview is plain enough. All the saints living and dead are caught up, raptured, at the same time altogether and when is that? It is at Christ's return at the last trump (1 Corinthians 15:52).

Now I fully understand, there are explanations, there are proof texts for all the pre-tribulation rapture theories, but for me they are like a person who is shown a fine oil painting, a still life,

a bowl of fruit that is so real you can almost taste the apple. And this person says, "Well, wait, just look at it with this magnifying glass and you can see those brush strokes, that's no Apple, it's just paint."

Well, yes it is, but there's more.

Two in the Field, One was Taken and the Other One Left

There's one enigmatic statement of Jesus that sometimes people use, or think that this applies to the rapture. Jesus in the Mount Olivet prophecy, in Matthew 24 and verse 36, is talking about the time of His return and He says, "Of that day and hour knows no man, no not the angels of heaven, but my father only. But as it was in the days of Noah, so shall also be the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they didn't have a clue till the flood came and swept them all away, so also the coming of the Son of Man shall be. Two will be in the field. One was taken and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill, one shall be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you don't know what hour your Lord does come."

This is a serious warning that every Christian should take seriously, we should be living our lives day by day, as though Christ's coming might come at any moment. In a way for you or I we could step off the curb and look the wrong way and He could come for us right there, right then, when the car hits us.

You know, it makes you think about the bumper stickers that you see on cars sometimes, it says, "In the event of the rapture, this car will be driver-less." I see that and think, "Well, wait a minute, they don't want me driving my car talking on my cell phone. Maybe it should be that people who believe in the rapture and that they might leave their car driver-less should give up their drivers license!"

What is Jesus' point in saying that "two will be in the field, one was taken and the other one left?" The point is simple enough. You need to be ready, my friend, because you just don't know when you are going to die. And that's the whole point. We just saw that the resurrection takes place at the return of Christ and that is what He is talking about in this passage of Scripture.

Now mind you, there is an argument that can be made, and there are people, in good faith on both sides of this issue of the rapture, but the question I have to ask is, why bother with it? What value is there in knowing that one person may be caught away, and another one left there to ride his car into a brick wall somewhere. The value is only in knowing that you need to be ready for Christ all the time and don't we know that?

I Will Keep You From the Hour of Temptation

There's another Scripture, that is sometimes used in this regard. It's in Revelation, chapter 3 and verse 7, it is the letter from Christ to the Angel of the church of Philadelphia, "These things saith He that is holy, He that is true. He that has the key of David, he that opens and no man shuts and no man opens. I know your works, I have set before you an open door, and no man can shut it, because you have a little strength, and you've kept My word, and have not denied my name."

Here are two extremely important things. These people had maintained Christ's word, and they had not denied their relationship. They had not denied Him in any shape, form or fashion. He says, "Look, I'm going to make those of the synagogue of Satan, that say they are Jews, and aren't but lie, I will make them come and worship before your feet and to know that I have loved you." Then comes this statement, "Because you have kept the word of My patience, I will also keep you from the hour of temptation that shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell on the earth." (Notice that there is nothing in this passage that says anything about a rapture or a resurrection).

So there is after all a promise here that some people will be kept from the hour of temptation. But why? The answer is because they have kept the word of my patience." Now I would think the important thing for us to understand from this, the thing that would save our lives, is knowing that we have to be patient in keeping His word. We need to persevere in keeping His word. This is what makes the difference, not the fact that we know this or that about some obscure Scripture. "Behold, He said, I come quickly, hold fast what you have, that no man take your crown."

I take away from this Scripture one important thing, and that is, that it is important how I live my life that is going to make all the difference at the time of the end, not whether I have figured out this or that prophecy.

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Ronald L. Dart is an evangelist and is heard daily and weekly
on his Born to Win radio program.
You can contact Ronald L. Dart at Christian Educational Ministries
P.O. Box 560 Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: (903) 839-9300 — 1-888-BIBLE-44

www.borntowin.net