

# 5 WHEN WILL THE RAPTURE HAPPEN?

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**What?/** The Rapture is one of the most hotly debated topics related to the end times. Although this is not an issue which should be a core doctrine, it is a doctrine which has caused much division and fighting among theologians.

**Why?/** That there will be a rapture (instant translation of those who are alive at the Lord's return) is not debated. What is debated is when this will happen. **What is problematic** is that many Christians in America are influenced more by popular views of the Rapture than the Scriptural exhortations and have developed a "Rapture mentality" that may make them near-sighted about the reality of the times in which we live.

**How?/** In order to understand the complexity of this issue, we will first consider the relevant Biblical passages then explore the major views that seek to explain the meaning and relationship of all the relevant texts.

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## 5.1 IS the Rapture a Biblical Idea?

It is true that the term "rapture" is not a biblical term; but neither is the word "Trinity." The term "rapture" comes from the Latin translation (*raptus*) of the Greek term "harpzo" that appears in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 which is generally translated as "suddenly caught/snatched up." So although the term is not found in the Bible, the concept which the term represents is:

### 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Now we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also we believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep as Christians. 15 For we tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord, will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be **suddenly caught up** together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

## 5.2 WHAT is the Rapture?

The Rapture is used as a short-hand reference for the what the Scriptures reveal about the fate of those who will be alive at the return of the Lord. When Jesus returns, those who are alive and belong to Him will be instantly transformed

or translated into their *immortal glorified bodies*. Paul summarizes this in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52:

**1 Corinthians 15:50-53** Now this is what I am saying, brothers and sisters: Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I will tell you a mystery: ***We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed*** 52 in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

### 5.3 WHAT Other texts may be referring to the Rapture?

#### 5.3.1 Some understand Jesus to be referring to the Rapture in John 14:

**John 14:1-4** “Do not let your hearts be distressed. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 There are many dwelling places in my Father’s house. Otherwise, I would have told you, because I am going away to make ready a place for you. 3 ***And if I go and make ready a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me, so that where I am you may be too.*** 4 And you know the way where I am going.”

#### 5.3.2 Jesus may be referring to the Rapture in His address to the Philadelphian Church in Revelation.

**Revelation 3:7-13** “To the angel of the Church in Philadelphia write the following:

“This is the solemn pronouncement of the Holy One, the True One, who holds the key of David, who opens doors no one can shut, and shuts doors no one can open: 8 ‘I know your deeds. (Look! I have put in front of you an open door that no one can shut.) I know that you have little strength, but you have obeyed my word and have not denied my name. 9 Listen! I am going to make those people from the synagogue of Satan -- who say they are Jews yet are not, but are lying -- Look, I will make them come and bow down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

10 Because you have kept my admonition to endure steadfastly, ***I will also keep you from the hour of testing that is about to come on the whole world to test those who live on the earth.*** 11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have so that no one can take away your crown. 12 The one who conquers I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never depart from it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God (the new Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from my God), and my new name as well.

13 The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the Churches.’

## 5.4 WHAT can we know for certain from the above texts?

- » *The Rapture is simply the immediate transformation/translation of those who are live at the time of Christ’s arrival (parousia).*
- » *The Rapture will take place at the same time as the resurrection of those who have “fallen asleep” in Christ. (1 Thess 4)*
- » *The Rapture will be a sudden, even instantaneous event. (1 Cor 15)*

## 5.5 WHAT is the debate on the Rapture about?

That there will be a “rapture” is not debated. What is hotly debated is the timing of this Rapture.

### 5.5.1 Setting the Context for Discussion

“The truth of the imminent coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is an important and indispensable element of biblical truth. That this coming is to be premillennial the Scriptures plainly state. That a time of unprecedented Tribulation will immediately precede that coming and that living believers will be raptured into the presence of Christ at His coming are also plainly stated. But the *time* of that Rapture with respect to the Tribulation is *nowhere plainly stated*. No Old Testament or New Testament author *directly* addresses that question or states the nature of that relationship as a point of doctrine. What *I* think the Scriptures indicate about this relationship has been stated on the preceding pages. But, because this conviction is founded upon logic, inferences, and legitimately debated points of exegesis, I cannot, indeed *must* not, allow this conviction to represent any kind of barrier to full relationships with others who hold differing convictions on this point. May our discussions on this point enhance, not detract from, our common expectation of the “blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13)

(Douglas Moo, from *Three Views on the Rapture*, 211)

### 5.5.2 Key Points To Keep in Mind:

The teaching of the rapture is basically an “in house” debate among Premillennialists - those who believe that Jesus will return and rule on this present earth in a literal, historical kingdom. For both Amillennialists and Postmillennialists, the issue of the timing of the Rapture is irrelevant. Denying both the literal nature of the Great Tribulation and the Millennium, these groups are forced to see the rapture as being part of the appearing/return of Christ at the end of this

age with the New Heavens and Earth following.

Among premillennialists, there is really no debate about the reality of the Rapture. The debate is primarily concerned with the timing of the Rapture: ***When will it take place?*** This is the major question that we will consider.

Before moving forward, in the quote above Moo makes several good points that I think would be helpful to elaborate on to set the stage for our discussion.

» ***Legitimately Debated Points of Exegesis***

Unfortunately the issue of the timing of the rapture has been a hotly debated and often divisive topic. This is unfortunate because it is part of the “blessed hope” that we have in the Lord’s return and our being gathered into His presence.

The first thing that we must do in thinking on this issue is to cultivate a *mind of humility*. Godly men and women have studied this issue for centuries now and have come to very different conclusions on the matter. I think that almost all would agree with Moo that the issue of the timing of the rapture is nowhere *explicitly* stated in Scripture. This issue is not settled by concrete points of grammar and syntax. This is largely a theological debate, not merely a linguistic debate. There are many pieces to this “puzzle” which must be logically fitted together with the other pieces. In the final analysis it is clear that we do not have all the pieces that we need to see the picture clearly.

» ***Logic***

The convictions that one holds about the time of the Rapture are largely determined (predetermined) by one’s *Ecclesiology* (the study of the Church) and therefore how one understands the relationship of Israel and the Church. Because of this everyone enters this discussion with certain logical and theological *presuppositions* than in a very real sense predetermine the outcome.

» ***Inferences***

Bringing the first two points together leads to the final reality: no matter what view one takes on the timing of the Rapture, the final conclusion *has to be based on certain inferences* drawn from the correlation of the relevant passages and the shape of one’s larger theology. What does this mean? It means that we cannot make the issue of the timing of the Rapture a firm doctrine. The Scripture seems to give us too much of the “Big Picture” without enough of the “details” that we need to see how it all fits together.

With these things in mind, it is important to understand that each of the views we will consider *solves certain problems while at the same time raising others*. At present there is no “perfect” solution. And there probably will not be one until all things fall into place as they must and Jesus appears to set us all right. For this reason, some are taking an “agnostic” position on the timing of the Rapture. This position says that Scriptures are intentionally unclear on this issue to motivate Christ’s people to faithfulness and watchfulness. This is a good exhortation to us all.

## 5.6 WHAT are the problematic questions that each view must face?

It is important to note that each of the views that we will consider have problems. This stems from the fact that we do not have all the details that we need to come to a final, absolute conclusion on the issue of the timing of the Rapture. Some views are better than others simply because they deal with the relevant passages in a more direct way while at the same time addressing issues raised by correlating passages.

Here are some main questions that raise problems for all of the views that we will consider:

1. What is the relationship of Israel and the Church in God's future plans? How should we understand the fulfillment of the "times of the Gentiles" and the fulfillment of the Romans 11:26 - "until the full number of the Gentiles have come in."
2. What is the relationship of the Rapture to the *Parousia* (the Arrival of Jesus)?
3. How will God protect the Church *from/through/in* the Great Tribulation?
4. Who will populate the Millennial Kingdom? How will both Jews and Gentiles make it through the Day of Wrath to enter the Kingdom in non-glorified bodies. (*Is it possible for the unrighteous to enter this Kingdom?*)

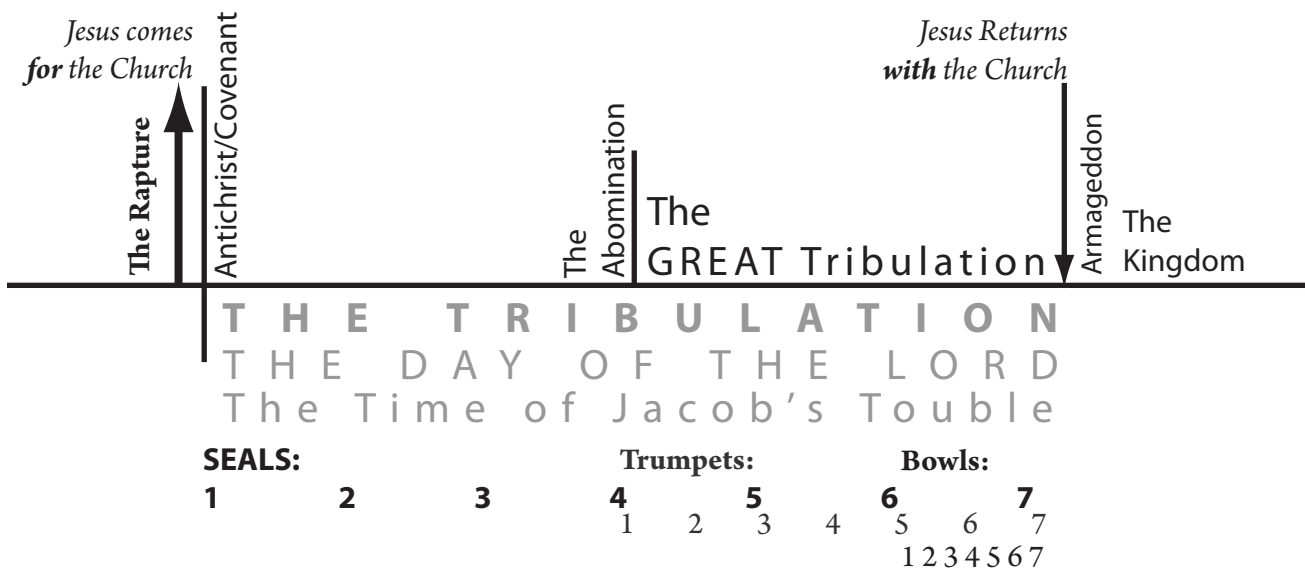
## 5.7 WHAT are the different views on the timing of the Rapture?

### 5.7.1 The Partial Rapture view

The partial rapture view is one that deals with the *extent* of the Rapture more than the timing of the Rapture. It states that only those who are waiting, watching, and faithful (those who are mature in Christ) will be raptured before the Tribulation. Then, Jesus will rapture the other immature believers as they wake up as well as those come to faith during the Tribulation. The parables in Matthew 24 and 25 are often used to support this view. Also Revelation 7:9, 14; 11:2; 12:5; 16:15 are verses presented as the times for these various raptures.

The problems with this view are multiple and overwhelming. First, it violates that nature of the Church as the Body of Christ - the baptism of the Holy Spirit binds us all together both mature and immature. Second, the Rapture is never presented as a "reward" for the mature as this view claims, Paul says clearly that we *all* will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51-51). Thirdly, in all of the Rapture passages, it is clear that Christians as a whole are in view, not just a group of mature or watching believers. This view is so problematic that it really does not warrant further discussion.

## 5.7.2 The Pre-Tribulation view



The Pre-Trib view was popular by the teachings of John Nelson Darby in the mid 1880's. The view was spread in the 20th century by *The Scofield Reference Bible*, the writings of Leon Wood (*Is the Rapture Next?*), John F. Walvoord (*The Rapture Question*), and J. Dwight Pentecost (*Things to Come*). All of these men were significant movers in the spread of Dispensational Premillennialism in our times. More recently, the Pre-Trib position has been popularized by the *Left Behind* novel series. It is one of the "younger" theories on the Rapture.

This view teaches that the Rapture will occur before the seven year "tribulation" - before the beginning of the 70th Week of Daniel. Often the imagery of Jewish Betrothal and Wedding ceremonies are drawn on as the backdrop of what will happen. Jesus is betrothed to His Bride (the Church), He leaves to prepare a place for her, He returns (at an unexpected time) to claim her, He takes her away in private to consummate the marriage, the wedding guests celebrate for seven days.

### Positives:

1. Easily explains how the Church will be kept from "the hour of testing" coming on the whole earth and thus the Wrath of God (Revelation 3:10).
2. Keeps a strong distinction between God's future purposes for the Church and Israel.
3. Does a better job explaining who will populate the Millennial Kingdom. This view leaves an interval of time after the Rapture but before the End for both Jews and Gentiles to come to faith.

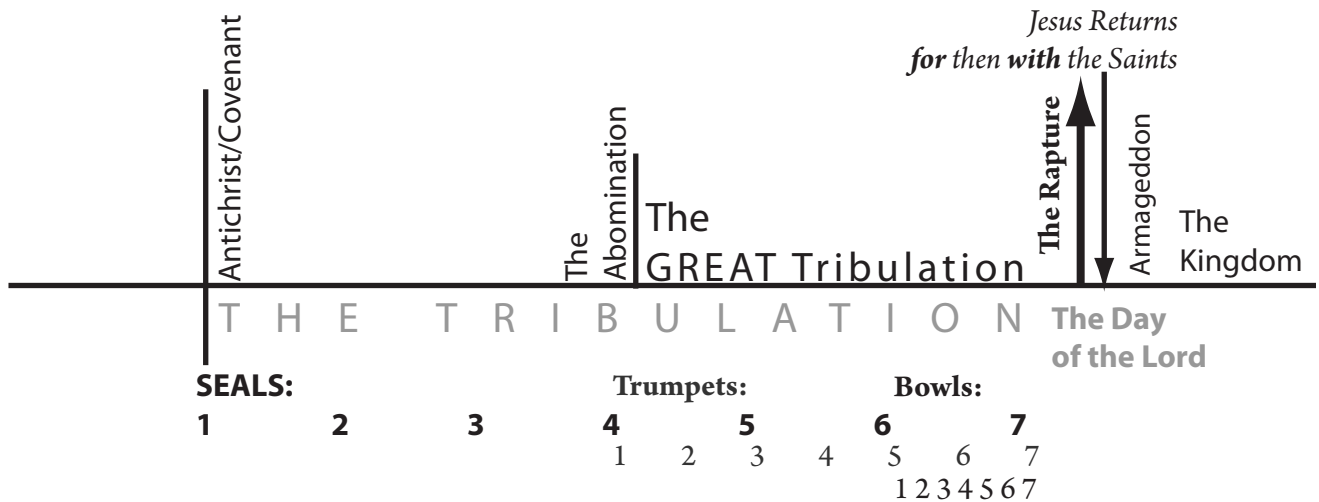
### Criticisms:

1. May keep *too strong* a distinction between God's future purposes for the Church and Israel. For this reason, this position must argue that Matthew 24-25 is not related to the Church in any specific sense but only to Israel in the End Times.
2. Has to make the *arrival (parousia)* of Jesus different from the Rapture. Paul, however, seems to relate the arrival of Jesus (*parousia*), our being

gathered to Christ (the Rapture) and the Day of the Lord as intertwined events.

3. May equate too many details of the End: The Tribulation = Daniel's 70th Week = Day of the Lord = The Wrath of God. *Scripture seems to make some distinction about these. It is probably better to see them as different aspects of the same general period of time with different purposes.*
4. Makes the Rapture "secret" - only "seen" by believers.
5. Places too much emphasis on Revelation 3:10 referring to the Rapture and that it must mean "kept **from** the hour..."

### 5.7.3 The Post-Tribulation view



The Post-Tribulation view simply states that the Rapture will occur *after* or at the end of the Tribulation. The Rapture occurs at the same time as the return of the Lord Jesus to the earth. *A form of this view is most likely the oldest of the views.* It was held *in part* by the early Church Fathers. (The Fathers did not debate this issue in the same way it has been debated in recent times.)

In recent times, this view has gained wide acceptance among scholars due to the link of the language used in 1 Thessalonians 4 to similar language used in the Greco-Roman world about the visit of an Emperor or King to a city. The "appearing/arriving" (*parousia* - 1 Thess 4:15) of the dignitary was met with a delegation from the city who would go out to "meet" (*apantēsis* - 1 Thess 4:17) then accompany him back to the city. Robert Gundry, Douglas Moo, and Ben Witherington III are prominent and respected theologians who hold this view.

**Positives:**

1. Makes a strong point about the passages that seem to indicate that the Church should be prepared for the Day of the Lord which seems to be part of the parousia, "arrival" of the Lord Jesus.
2. This view is the *least complicated* in terms of simply taking the language in all the relevant passages at face value.

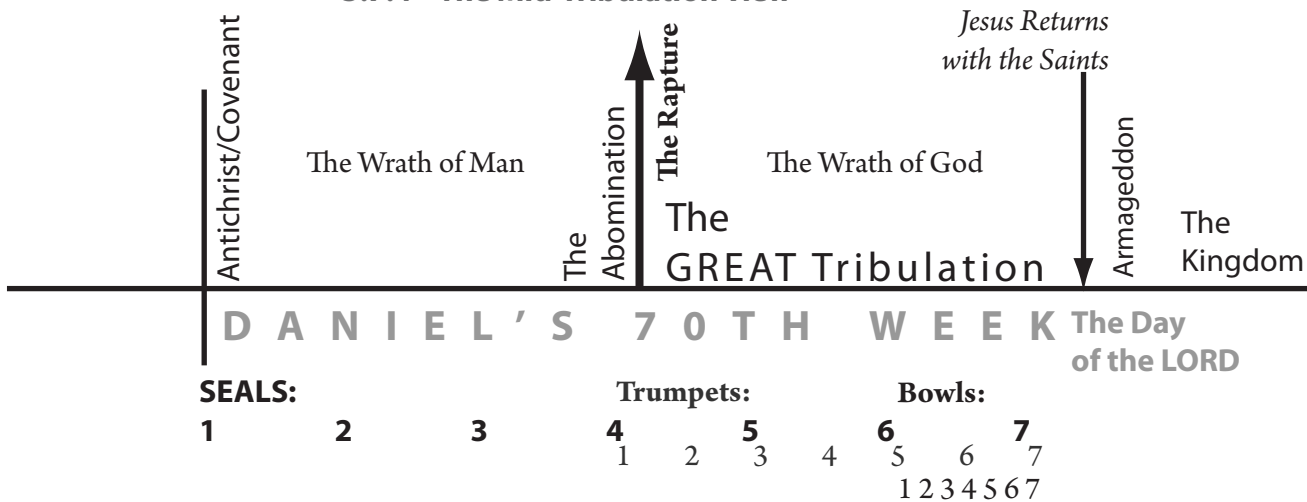
**Criticisms:**

1. This view is the *most complicated* in terms of how it must address certain

logical and inferential questions.

2. Has a hard time explaining how this keeps us from the Wrath of God in the Great Tribulation.
3. Does not clearly distinguish God's plans for the Church and His plans for Israel in the Last Days.
4. Has difficulty explaining *who will populate the Millennium*. If everyone is Raptured at the end, there is no one righteous left in non-glorified bodies to populate the Kingdom. Also, the "sheep and goat" judgment of Matthew 25:31-46 seems to occur after the 70th week but before the Millennium. This judgment will keep the unrighteous from entering the Kingdom. **This is a significant problem for this view.**

### 5.7.4 The Mid-Tribulation view



The Mid-Trib view is in some sense a mediating view between the Post and Pre Trib views. This view begins by making some distinction between the 70th Week/Seven of Daniel and the Great Tribulation. Emphasis is placed on the Middle of the Week/Seven and the events surrounding the revealing of Antichrist. The first part of the 7 years is characterized as the time of the “Wrath of Man,” the second half as the “Wrath of the God.” Thus it is only necessary for the Church to be raptured before the events of the final 3 ½ years of the Great Tribulation.

This view sees Revelation 14 as a description of the events “behind the scenes” of the Rapture. First there is the vision of 144,000 standing with Jesus. These are taken to be Church age saints, not the 144,000 of Israel described earlier in the book. After this vision, three angels come forth declaring the Gospel and the eternal destruction that will come upon those who worship the Beast. After this, there are two reapings of the Earth. The first (14:14-16) is taken to be Jesus “reaping” His people from the Earth (the Rapture), the second (14:17) is taken to be a reaping of the wicked for wrath. This view is held by J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. and Gleason L. Archer.

**Positives:**

1. Is probably correct in distinguishing Daniel's 70th Week/Seven and the

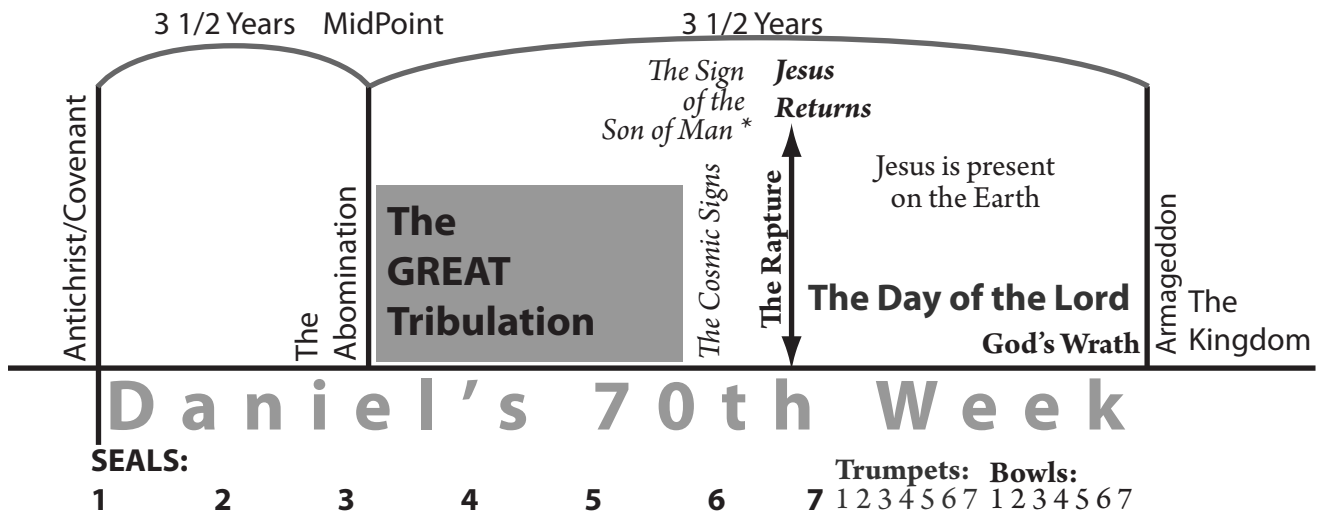
Great Tribulation.

2. Is right to focus things toward the middle of the Seven years; this does seem to be the beginning of the end.
3. Is able to explain how the Church will see the rise of “The Man of Sin” (2 Thess 2) and be removed from the Earth before the Wrath of God.

**Criticisms:**

1. Many of the arguments made by this view would fit a post-trib view better.
2. May make too sharp a distinction between the “Wrath of Man” (first half of the seven years) and the “Wrath of God” (second half).

**5.7.5 The Pre-Wrath view**



This view is the “youngest” of all the views. It was first presented in Marvin Rosenthal’s book *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* in 1990. The view was expanded in the writings of Robert Van Kampen (*The Sign and The Rapture Question Answered: Plain & Simple*). Recently a detailed presentation and defense of this position was given in H. L. Nigro’s *Before God’s Wrath: The Bible’s Answer to the Timing of the Rapture*.

Of all the views, this one is probably the most complex in terms of its analyzing the relevant texts and correlating them to supporting texts. We can summarize this view under the following points:

1. God has only promised to keep the Church from His Wrath, not suffering and persecution. Therefore, the Church can expect to endure part of the persecution under the reign of Antichrist.
2. There are three periods of Judgement in Revelation: Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls.
3. The first four Seals represent God setting the stage for the end. The Fifth Seal (The Cry of the Martyrs) represents the Great Tribulation.
4. The Day of the Lord and thus the Wrath of God **begins** with the Sixth

Seal. This Sixth Seal also “includes” both the Trumpet and Bowl judgments.

5. Jesus will come for the Church (The Rapture) *after* the Fifth Seal (The Great Tribulation) but *before* the Sixth Seal (The Day of the Lord’s Wrath).

**Positives:**

1. Does bring a healthy critique of the accuracy of the other views in actually dealing with the particulars (details) of the relevant texts.
2. Gives an internally coherent presentation of the all the facts given the framework of its argument.
3. *Generally* gives a more detailed analysis of the particulars of the judgments in Revelation.

**Criticisms:**

1. This view is overly complicated and difficult to follow.
2. Probably **over analyzes** many of the texts and draws too many inferences about the relationships of the different events. For instance, this view argues that Jesus’ return in Matthew 24 *is not the same* as the one described in Revelation 19. This is a extreme minority view.
3. Separates Jesus return to the Earth at the time of the Rapture from His “return” in Revelation 19 to destroy the Beast and his armies. *Thus this view has Jesus present on Earth during much of the latter part of the 70th week during the Trumpet and Bowl judgments!* This too is based on many inferences and assumptions that may or may not be accurate.
4. Has a lot of “minority opinions” that seem to be special pleading.

## 5.8 WHY does this whole issue make any difference?

**M**any times we simply believe what others have taught us to believe. This is an important part of tradition and passing our story and worldview from one generation to the next. However, in issues like the doctrine of the Rapture we must give a critical evaluation to the things that we have been taught to make sure that “these things are so” (*remember the Bereans Acts 17:11*).

In our times, the teachings on the Rapture have solidified into major traditions. This means that they also bring with them a lot of “baggage.” Since our view on the timing of the Rapture will help us prepare for the events of the End (*if we are present during the final days*) we must carefully evaluate each of these traditions to see what is in line with Scripture and what is not. *I am convinced that presently there is no one view that gets everything right:* each has strengths, each has weaknesses.

In the West (particularly America) many hold to a Pre-Trib position because it brings comfort. This is understandable. However, we cannot fall into the trap of believing that Jesus will rescue us from all forms of suffering, affliction and persecution. *This is clearly not the case.* Many of our brothers and sisters throughout

the World *are already enduring persecution and suffering on a level that most of us in the West have never been exposed to.* When we hear stories of brothers and sisters in Christ watching their families being burned alive, having their fingernails plucked out, imprisoned for years, starved, beaten, mutilated, etc., we have to ask, “Does Jesus promise to protect His people from all forms of suffering?” The answer is clearly, “NO!” Jesus will deliver us from the coming Wrath of God but He never promises to deliver us from persecution, suffering and affliction.

I am concerned that many in the West are placing their hope in a Pre-Trib rapture scenario rather than Christ Himself. It may be that America dissolves long before the End and we who are Christians will face suffering like that our other brothers and sisters are enduring in the present. *Jesus plans for His Kingdom do not rest on the continuing on of the American Way (or the Pax Americana).*

One final word about the coming Wrath of God. Exemption from God’s Wrath does not exempt us from His judgment. In the letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation it is clear that Jesus calls these assemblies to repentance lest they face His disciplinary judgment. Peter also gives us a sobering exhortation:

**1 Peter 4:17** For it is time for judgment to begin, ***starting with the house of God.*** And if it starts with us, what will be the fate of those who are disobedient to the gospel of God?

In the context, Peter is discussing the suffering that the believers are presently facing that the reality that they are sharing in the suffering of Christ that makes them fit for His Kingdom. Whatever view we take on the Rapture, we must never think that this doctrine promises to protect us from the refining fire of suffering that God allows for His people which makes them worthy of His Kingdom:

**Acts 14:22** They strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, “We must enter the kingdom of God through many persecutions (*tribulations*).”

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## Preparing for Next Week:

For next week, take some time to think about what we have covered in class this week. Read through all of the notes for this week and read through the passages that are listed. We will conclude our discussion of the Rapture next week and bring the study to a close.

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## 5.9 APPENDIX: The Relationship of the Seals, Trumpets and Bowls in Revelation

The follow chart seeks to correlate the Seal, Trumpets and Bowls of Revelation. What is clear is that the seventh seal, trumpet and bowl each come to the same conclusion: the Day of the Lord and completion of His wrath. It seems to me that the Seals are universal, big picture judgments that lay out the framework for the times of the end. The Trumpets are preliminary judgments announcing the final series in the Bowls. It is clear that in the Bowls the wrath/anger of God is completed (Revelation 15:18). Thus the Bowls are final and cataclysmic, bringing an end to this present order.

<b>SEALS:</b> <i>The seals seem to be universal (big picture) visions of the End</i>	<b>TRUMPETS :</b> <i>The trumpets represent judgments that seemingly last for a series of months. (i.e. The 5th Trumpet)</i>	<b>BOWLS:</b> <i>By the 3rd bowl, it will be impossible for life to be sustained upon the Earth. Thus these judgments seem to take place at the very end of the 7 years.</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>The Conqueror</b> (Antichrist?)</li> <li>2. <b>Violence</b> (and warfare)</li> <li>3. <b>Inflation</b> (injustice)</li> <li>4. <b>Death and Hades</b> (<math>\frac{1}{4}</math> killed)</li> <li>5. <b>The Martyrs Cry</b></li> </ol> <p>6. <b>Signs of the End &amp; The Day of Wrath Arrives&gt;</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <b>Silence</b> (Trumpets prepped) <i>Thunder, Lightning, Earthquake</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <math>\frac{1}{3}</math> of the Earth Burned</li> <li>2. <math>\frac{1}{3}</math> of the Sea Destroyed</li> <li>3. <math>\frac{1}{3}</math> of the Rivers poisoned</li> <li>4. <math>\frac{1}{3}</math> of Lights darkened <i>Woes pronounced</i></li> <li>5. <b>Fallen Star and the Abyss</b> (torture for 5 months)</li> <li>6. <b>Demonic Army kills</b> <math>\frac{1}{3}</math> of Earth</li> </ol> <p><i>Thunder, Lightning, Earthquake</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Sores</b></li> <li>2. <b>Sea</b> turned to blood</li> <li>3. <b>Water</b> turned to blood</li> <li>4. <b>Sun</b> Scorches all</li> <li>5. <b>Darkness</b> on the Beast's kingdom</li> <li>6. <b>Gathering</b> the Kings of the East at Armageddon.</li> <li>7. <b>The End</b> (All is destroyed) <i>Thunder, Lightning, Earthquake</i></li> </ol>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <b>Vision of the KINGDOM INAUGURATED</b> <i>The Beginning of the Millennium</i></li> </ol>	