Session 6

Understanding the Rapture

This session covers:

- An overview of the rapture
- A look at the rapture controversy
- The danger of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory

This session corresponds to:

- Session 6 of Prophetic Vision for the End Times CDs

An Overview of the Rapture

1. The rapture is one of the most important end-time events to understand.

   - While the word rapture is not found in the Bible, this word is frequently used by teachers, preachers, and scholars to refer to the time when believers in Christ are caught up to meet the Lord in the air.
   - The term rapture comes from the Latin word *rapturo*. This is the Latin translation of the Greek verb “caught up,” which is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.
   - The concept of a rapture, where believers in Christ are caught up to meet the Lord in the air, is found in Matthew 24:29-31, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4, and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

2. Jesus introduced the rapture concept while teaching His disciples about the end times.

   - Jesus first revealed that believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air in Matthew 24:29-31. Jesus said,

     But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE
MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Matt. 24:29-31).

- In this passage, Jesus was teaching about His second coming.
- First, He described the cosmic disturbances that will take place when He returns. He said that the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the demonic powers in the heavens will be shaken.
- Second, He prophesied that every unbeliever on the earth will mourn when they see Him returning on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.
- Third, Jesus revealed for the first time the concept of a rapture. He said that the angels will be sent out with a great trumpet blast. Then the angels will gather together His people from one end of the sky to the other, implying that believers will be caught up in the air when Jesus returns.
- When will all of this take place? Jesus said plainly “immediately after the tribulation of those days.”
- As we have seen in this class, the Tribulation refers to the seven years immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. Recall our discussion in Session 2 about the three prophetic timeframes. The Tribulation begins when the Antichrist signs a peace treaty with Israel for seven years (Dan. 9:27). The Great Tribulation begins when the Antichrist breaks this treaty and commands the whole world to worship him.
- Jesus taught that the Tribulation period ends when He returns. He also revealed that the rapture will take place at His second coming—after the Great Tribulation.

3. Paul also taught about the rapture.

- In Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, he wrote:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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 Thess. 4:13-17).

- First, Paul taught us that the dead in Christ (those who are asleep) will return with Jesus when He comes again.
- Second, Paul said that the people who are alive when Jesus returns will not precede those who have died. Paul is implying that the dead in Christ will receive a resurrected body at the time of their resurrection and before those who are alive at Christ’s coming (Rev. 20:4-6). Paul explicitly said that “the dead in Christ will rise first.”
- Third, Paul taught that those who are alive when Jesus returns will be caught up together with the dead in Christ—who just received resurrected bodies—to meet the Lord in the air.
- Revelation 20:4-6 makes it clear that the first resurrection of the dead takes place when Jesus returns. This reinforces the belief that the rapture of the saints takes place after the Great Tribulation.
- In Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul taught about the rapture again:

  Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God (2 Thess. 2:1-4).

- In this passage, when Paul used the phrase “our gathering together to Him,” he was referring to the rapture. How do we know? Because Paul used the Greek word episunagoge, which is derived from the word Jesus used to describe the rapture when He said, “They will gather together [episunago] His elect” (Matt. 24:31). In this passage, Paul was clearly referencing Christ’s teaching about the rapture.
- Additionally, Paul did not have to explain the rapture in detail in his second letter to the Thessalonians because he had already done so in his first letter, which we looked at previously.
- With that clarified, let’s summarize Paul’s teaching.
- First, Paul warned us not to be deceived about the coming of the Lord—including the rapture. This is a very important warning because the timing of the rapture has become such a controversial topic.
- Second, Paul said that “it” will not come unless two things happen. What is “it”? “It” is the return of Christ and the rapture.
- Third, Paul says that Christ will not return and the rapture will not take place until the apostasy occurs and the Antichrist is revealed as a man of lawlessness by sitting in the Jerusalem Temple and proclaim-
ing that he is God.

Therefore, the rapture, as we have seen clearly in the two previous examples, takes place after the Great Tribulation when Jesus returns.

4. **Believers who experience the rapture will immediately receive a resurrected body.**

- Teaching the Corinthians about the resurrection of the dead, Paul said, "Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep [there will be people who are alive when the resurrection of the dead takes place], but we will all be changed [both the dead in Christ and those who are alive will receive resurrected bodies], in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51-52).
- First, Paul taught us that there will be believers alive on the earth when the dead in Christ receive resurrected bodies.
- Second, Paul showed us that both believers who are alive and those who have died will “all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” when the last trumpet sounds. The change that Paul was talking about is when believers receive a resurrected body.
- Paul was showing us that the transformation that takes place when our bodies are changed from a “humble state into conformity with the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21) will be instantaneous—in the twinkling of an eye.
- Paul was teaching us that when the rapture takes place, believers who are caught up to the Lord in the air will immediately receive a resurrected body. Understanding this dynamic is important because it sheds more light on the timing of the rapture.
- When does the resurrection of the dead take place? John clearly showed us when he wrote:

> Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4-6).

- The “first resurrection” clearly takes place when Jesus returns—after the Great Tribulation.
- Believers who die in Christ before the rapture will go to heaven as a disembodied spirit.
- When Jesus returns, the dead in Christ—those with a disembodied
spirit—will receive a resurrected, glorified body and will reign with Christ for a thousand years.

- Following this, those who are alive at Christ’s coming are caught up into the air and are immediately transformed “into conformity with the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21) in the twinkling of an eye. In other words, they also get their resurrected body at this time.
- When we examine 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, and Revelation 20:4-6, we clearly see the following:
  1. The rapture of those who are alive at His coming takes place during the same event as the dead in Christ receiving resurrected bodies;
  2. The dead in Christ will receive resurrected bodies first;
  3. Then those who are alive at Christ’s coming will be caught up in the air to be with the Lord;
  4. At that moment, believers will instantly receive a resurrected body;
  5. This all happens when Jesus returns, after the Great Tribulation.

The Rapture Controversy

1. The timing of the rapture is one of the most controversial end-time subjects.

- The rapture itself is not controversial—most of the Church believes that the saints will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air.
- It is the timing of the rapture that has sparked so much controversy, so many heated debates, and so much widespread confusion in the Body of Christ.
- At issue is whether the rapture will take place before the Tribulation (Pre-Tribulation Rapture), before the Great Tribulation (Mid-Tribulation Rapture), or after the Great Tribulation (Post-Tribulation Rapture).
- We have already discussed the Post-Tribulation Rapture, which appears to be what the Scriptures clearly teach. Nevertheless, the most popular rapture theory in the Church today is not the Post-Tribulation Rapture, but the Pre-Tribulation Rapture.

2. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory teaches that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation begins.

- The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory is the most widely held belief in the Church today. This is the most popular theory taught in pulpits, magazines, books, movies, and on television.
- Made famous by the Left Behind series of books and movies, this theory is widely held in the Body of Christ.
- Predominantly, this theory is the most popular because it is the belief of many well-respected, intelligent, and articulate Bible teachers—not because it is clearly delineated in the Scriptures.
• Although there are no Scripture verses that directly teach that a rapture will take place before the Tribulation, the theory goes something like this:

The second coming of Christ is divided into two comings (Titus 2:13). Jesus will first come for His Church—known as the blessed hope. Later He will come with His Church—known as the glorious appearing.

This first part of the second coming involves a secret rapture with no signs indicating His return. The first part of the second coming is only for a brief moment to take believers to heaven before the wrath of God is poured out upon the world and before the Antichrist signs a peace treaty with Israel. People will know that a secret rapture has taken place when a large portion of the world’s population is suddenly missing. The result will be widespread panic, chaos, and confusion. Based upon this theory, the rapture is the next big event in God’s prophetic calendar and could happen at any moment.

The second part of the second coming is very public. Jesus will return with His people, whom He took to heaven some years earlier, to destroy the ungodly and to setup His kingdom in Jerusalem.

3. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory grew in popularity after 1830.

• The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory was popularized by John Nelson Darby, who helped spread this theory throughout the world.
• After Darby persuaded Scofield to adopt this theory, Scofield incorporated it into the Scofield Bible, which combined interpretive commentary with the inspired text.
• Many people who read this Bible, which became a bestseller, had a hard time distinguishing between the commentary about the Pre-Tribulation Rapture and the inspired text. Thus, readers mistakenly assumed the Pre-Tribulation Rapture was in the Bible.
• This was one of the biggest factors in promoting the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory.

There is no evidence that the early, apostolic Church believed in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture. They believed that the rapture would take place when Jesus returned—after the Great Tribulation.

4. There is not one Scripture that clearly shows the rapture taking place before the Tribulation.

• As we have already seen, the Post-Tribulation Rapture theory is
clearly revealed in the Scriptures whereas the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory is based upon implicit references and human reasoning.

- We must be careful to believe what the Bible teaches and not to use our predetermined beliefs and hopeful wishes to create theological theories.
- David Pawson gave an excellent warning about this when he said, “When doctrine is built upon inference rather than clear statements, there is a much greater risk of reading into Scripture (eisegesis) what is not actually there, rather than reading out of Scripture (exegesis) what is actually there.”
- If you have accepted the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory without thoroughly examining the Scriptures, take a step back and challenge this theory with the Word of God.
- Only accept what the Bible clearly teaches. Don’t accept a theological claim just because someone is popular, articulate, intelligent, is on television, has written books, is a preacher, or a seminary professor. Don’t accept any teaching unless you see it clearly in the Word of God.

The Danger of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Theory

1. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory creates a spectator mentality toward end-time events.

- The Bible clearly reveals that we are called into partnership with God in the end times. We are to be participators—not spectators—in end-time events.
- The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory creates a spectator mentality toward the end times. Since this theory teaches that we will watch the end-time drama unfold from heaven—with no role to play on the earth—many believers who accept this theory become passive about the end times.
- As we discussed in Session 1, we have a mission-critical role to play in the end times. We are called to partner with God in end-time events (Rev. 5:8; 8:1-6; 18:20; Joel 2:17-32; Isaiah 62:6-7).

2. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory makes the subject of the end times irrelevant and unpractical.

- At first, understanding end-time prophecy can be a little confusing. It takes time reading books and commentaries, searching the Scriptures, praying through complicated issues, and discussing the end times with others.
- Many people don’t study the end times because they don’t believe they will have to live through this challenging period. Why? Because they have bought into the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory. Their thinking goes something like this: “Why bother reading the book of Revelation. If I am going to be out of here before all of these really bad things happen, then I am not going to worry about trying to understand this complicated book.”
In the minds of many who believe in the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory, the prophetic Scriptures have become an optional subject. They might read these Scriptures out of curiosity, but there is no real urgency when reading.

Imagine two people going to boot camp. Let’s call them Bob and Jim. Before boot camp begins, Bob is told that he will never have to go to war. The army will give him an honorable discharge right after boot camp is over. Jim, on the other hand, is told that he will be sent directly into frontline combat in the Middle East. Who do you think will get the most out of boot camp? That’s right—Jim. For Bob, the information and training that he receives from boot camp will never have any practical value. However, for Jim, what he receives from boot camp will be a matter of life or death. Jim will take everything from boot camp to heart.

The same is true with us. If we are like Bob—and have believed that we will be raptured before the trouble hits—then the prophetic Scriptures will not have that much of an impact on our lives. Like Bob, we will view them as impractical and irrelevant.

However, if we have searched the Scriptures with an honest and humble heart, laying down our preconceived ideas, we will see that the Church will live through the Tribulation period. Then we will be more like Jim. The prophetic Scriptures, like the book of Revelation, will not just be an optional book that we read out of curiosity. The material in this book will be a matter of life and death for us. We will read with a real sense of urgency.

3. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory will probably cause many in the Church to be offended at God in the end times.

If we believe that we are going to escape the tough and difficult times of the Tribulation—that we will be raptured away before things get too difficult—then we might become offended at God if we actually have to go through them.

The Bible says that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). As we have seen in this session, this includes going through the Tribulation.

Jesus warned that many people would be offended in the end times (Matt. 24:10). Could this include the believers who accepted the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory? Believing that they would escape the end-time trouble, perhaps they will find themselves living through the Tribulation unprepared for this crisis.

Can you imagine what the believers who accepted the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory might think if they are alive during the Tribulation? Perhaps their thoughts will be something like this: “What kind of God would allow me to go through something like this? I thought you loved me; why are You making me suffer like this?”

It is better to work through these types of issues now rather than when the crisis hits so that we do not become offended at God.
4. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory could cause many in the Church to fall away from the faith when the trouble comes.

- The Scriptures describe a great falling away from the faith that will take place before the Lord returns. Notice some of these references:

  Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come [the Day of the Lord] unless the apostasy comes first (2 Thess. 2:3).

  But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

  Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another....Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved (Matt. 24:9-13).

- When believers buy into the idea that the rapture will take them away before the Tribulation, then the urgency to prepare for the end times disappears.
- Perhaps believers who are unprepared for the coming crisis will not be able to embrace the suffering and persecution that will be rampant in the end times and will turn from God to follow the Antichrist.
- Maybe some believers will not be emotionally prepared to suffer the financial challenges of refusing the mark of the beast and will cave in to the pressure.

5. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory teaches escapism rather than endurance.

- The Bible clearly encourages us to endure through our tribulations—not to escape from them.
- Notice some Scriptures that encourage patient endurance in the end times:

  But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved (Matt. 24:13).

  By your endurance you will gain your lives (Luke 21:19).

  Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus...."Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them" (Rev. 14:12-13)
If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints (Rev. 13:10).

- We are not called to escape trials, tribulations, and tests—we are called to endure through them and to overcome them.
- The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory encourages escapism rather than endurance. It does not prepare us to go through the unprecedented difficulties that will come upon the earth.
- Consider the following testimony from Corrie ten Boom:

  I have been in countries where the saints are already suffering terrible persecution. In China the Christians were told: “Don’t worry, before the tribulation comes, you will be translated, raptured.” Then came a terrible persecution. Millions of Christians were tortured to death. Later I heard a bishop from China say, sadly: “We have failed. We should have made the people strong for persecution rather than telling them Jesus would come first.” Turning to me, he said: “Tell the people how to be strong in times of persecution, how to stand when the tribulation comes—to stand and not faint.” I feel I have a divine mandate to go and tell the people of this world that it is possible to be strong in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are in training for the tribulation.²

- What a powerful testimony! Rather than waiting to escape the troubles that are coming in the future, we should be “in training for the tribulation.”

While much of the Church is waiting to “go up,” God wants us to “grow up” and release His judgments against the Antichrist and his empire.

Notes
2. Ibid., p. 199.
Review Questions

True or False

_____ 1. The word “rapture” is found three times in the Bible.

_____ 2. The rapture is the time when believers are caught up to meet the Lord in the air.

_____ 3. Paul was the first person to introduce the rapture concept.

_____ 4. In Matthew 24:29-31, Jesus taught that the rapture would take place after the Great Tribulation.

_____ 5. Those alive at Christ’s coming will receive a resurrected body before the dead in Christ.

_____ 6. Believers who experience the rapture will immediately receive a resurrection body.

_____ 7. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory is clearly taught in the Bible.

_____ 8. The Post-Tribulation Rapture theory is clearly taught in the Bible.

Fill in the Blanks

9. The _______ of the rapture is one of the most _____________ end-time subjects.

10. There is no evidence that the early, _________ ________ believed in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture.

11. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory creates a ___________ __________ toward end-time events.

12. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory makes the subject of the end times ____________ and ____________.

13. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory teaches ____________ rather than ______________.

14. The concept of a rapture is found in _____________________,
                _____________________, _____________________, and
                ____________________.
15. The rapture of those who are alive at His coming takes place during the same ________ as the dead in Christ receiving resurrected bodies.

16. The early Church believed that the rapture would take place when Jesus ________—after the ________ ________________.

From the choices on the right, choose the statements that are true.

_____ 17. Possible Matches for 17-20

_____ 18. a. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory is clearly taught in the Bible.

_____ 19. b. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory creates a spectator mentality toward end-time events.

_____ 20. c. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory teaches that the rapture will take place when Jesus returns.

d. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory grew in popularity before the 1700s.

e. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory was not taught by the early Church.

f. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory is the most popular view in the Church today.

g. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory teaches escapism rather than endurance.