

# Should You Expect a Secret Rapture?

**No question about it—the Bible *definitely* teaches that the saints will be “caught up” to meet Christ at His coming! But will this momentous event take place when the King of kings and Lord of lords visibly descends from heaven with power and great glory? Or will it occur several years earlier?**

The word *rapture* does not appear in the Bible. Nevertheless, words that mean the same thing as “rapture” *are* found in the scriptural text. To be “raptured” is to be “caught up” to meet Christ in the air. The apostle Paul says that when Christ comes for His church, the saints will be “*caught up*...in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The Greek term translated “caught up” is *harpazo* and means to “snatch out,” “seize,” or “catch away.” This is precisely the meaning Christian authors and lecturers have in mind when they speak of the rapture.

There can be no question as to *whether* the rapture will take place. The controversy is over *when* it will occur and *what* will happen immediately afterward. The three most debated positions are designated “pretribulationism,” “midtribulationism,” and “posttribulationism,” and refer to the views of those who believe that the saints will rise to meet their Lord *before* the final tribulation of this age (pretribulationism), those who believe that the saints will rise to meet Christ in the *middle* of the tribulation (midtribulationism), and those who believe that the saints will be caught up to meet the returning Lord at some point *after* the tribulation (posttribulationism).

For the sake of simplicity, we will reduce these debated views to two categories by combining pretribulation and midtribulation views under the heading of “pretrib,” since exponents of both views separate the rapture of the saints and the visible coming of Christ by a considerable amount of “tribulation” time—usually either three-and-a-half or seven years.

Pretrib exponents believe that Christ came to this earth once (as the Suffering Servant of God) and will come twice more, the first time to snatch away the saints and the second time to destroy the Antichrist and establish the millennial kingdom. These two comings will be separated by the end-time tribulation, or reign of the Antichrist. The rapture of the saints—supposedly occurring in the first phase of Christ’s two-part coming—is often called the “*secret* rapture,” since Christ’s coming for the saints is “as a thief in the night” and supposedly accompanied by no sign except the disappearance of the saints.

To support this separation of the rapture of the saints from Christ’s coming in glory, pretribulationists often claim that scriptures on the coming of Christ contradict each other if all of them refer to the same event—and since the Bible cannot contradict itself, the seemingly contradictory scriptures on Christ’s coming in glory and His coming to gather the saints must refer to two distinct events.

Here is an example of how this dichotomy is established: In the Olivet prophecy, Christ says that “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30). Yet, in the same discourse, Christ compares the time of His coming to the “days of Noah,” when life went on as usual with “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark” (verses 37,38), and says that at His coming “two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left” (verses 40,41).

Pretrib advocates claim that these two descriptions cannot possibly refer to the same event, for one “coming” takes place during a time when people are engaging in ordinary social and business activities and apparently enjoying the normal pleasures of life, but the other “coming” is preceded by cosmic upheaval (verse 29) and causes the “tribes of the earth” to “morn” as they witness the spectacular return of Christ to this earth.

With this dichotomy, pretribulationists are able to fit other passages on the Second Coming and gathering of the saints onto their prophetic timeline. John 14:3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:17 belong to the “pretrib” section of the chart, while Matthew 24:27 and 2 Thessalonians 2:8 fit that segment of the timeline designated “post-trib.” The first of these two interventions is to rapture the church; the second is to rescue Israel from the terrible reign of the Antichrist and establish the millennial kingdom upon this earth.

But do these events—the catching up of the saints and destruction of the Antichrist—require two distinct comings?

### **One Coming or Two?**

While the end-time tribulation will undoubtedly affect the world in general, it will not affect every nation equally. Both Old and New Testament prophecies indicate that the brunt of the tribulation will be felt in Judea. Before intervening to rescue a righteous “remnant of the people,” God “will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples, when they lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem” (Zechariah 12:2; 14:2). The book of Revelation tells us that the gentiles “will tread the holy city [Jerusalem] underfoot for forty-two months” (Revelation 11:2). The “great tribulation” of which Jesus spoke in the Olivet prophecy pertains particularly to “those who are in Judah” (Matthew 24:16,21), though its effects are not restricted to that area.

The days of Noah were days of widespread wickedness, a time when “the thoughts of [man’s] head was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5), and when the earth was “corrupt before God” and “filled with violence” (verses 11,13). Because man’s wickedness was so great, God determined that He would “destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life” except Noah and his family (verses 17:18). Yet, interestingly, the horrendous violence and corruption that characterized the days of Noah did not prevent

the construction of the ark. Jesus tells us that the day-to-day affairs of life—eating, drinking, marrying, and so forth—continued right up to the day Noah entered the ark.

The point is that the day-to-day affairs of life can coexist with widespread corruption. In other words, life goes on even in the midst of tribulation. We need not assume that the “coming” of Matthew 24:30 occurs at a time different from the “coming” of Matthew 24:36-44.

Notice the order of events described in this section of the Olivet

prophecy:

- 1) Spectacular heavenly signs immediately follow “the tribulation of those days” (verse 29).
- 2) The “sign of the Son of Man” appears; the nations mourn; and Christ is seen “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (verse 30).
- 3) Christ sends His angels to gather His elect (verse 31).

Next, Christ tells His followers that “these things”—the things He just spoke of: heavenly signs, the sign of the Son of Man, and His appearance in the clouds of heaven—will signal the end. “When you see these things,” He says, “know that it is near—at the very doors!” (verse 33). What is the “it” that is near when “these things” begin to occur? Luke’s parallel account reads, “Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because *your redemption* draws near” (Luke 21:28); and, “...when you see these things happening, know that *the kingdom of God* is near” (Luke 21:28,31). Both the redemption of the saints and the establishment of the Kingdom of God are imminent when “these things”—the heavenly signs, sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and actual appearance of Christ in the sky—begin happening.

Then, Christ speaks of “that day and hour.” Which day and hour? Obviously, the “day and hour” He has been talking about—the day and hour in which He is *seen* coming on the clouds of heaven! “But of that day and hour,” Christ says, “no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (verse 36). Because the day of Christ’s coming is unknown to all but the Father, Christ urges His followers to “Watch” (verse 42), which means to always “be ready” (verse 44), to abide continually—faithfully, without wavering—in a state of preparedness. It means to avoid allowing ourselves to become “weighted down with carousing, drunkenness, and the cares of this life” (Luke 21:34). (It does *not* mean to search news sources in order to gather headlines and reports that seem to fit prophesied events! Such an interpretation of Christ’s exhortation to watchfulness is a *corruption* of the plain and simple meaning of the text.)

Now, if the “day and hour” of verse 36 refers to the time of the “coming” Jesus has just described (verse 30)—and it obviously does!—then the “coming of the Son of Man” described in verses 37 through 44 is the *same* “coming.” Christ comes only *once* in the

end of the age. He comes to gather His saints *and* destroy the Antichrist—and it all occurs “*after* the tribulation of those days” and the shaking of the “powers of heaven.”

To keep their prophetic timeline intact, pretrib exponents must place the “coming” described later in the text *before* the “coming” described earlier. Also, if their theory is correct then the gathering of the elect (verse 31) cannot refer to the resurrection and transformation of the saints from all past ages—the pretrib theory has that event occurring several years earlier—but must refer to the gathering of a separate class of believers (called “tribulation saints” by pretrib exponents) at the time of Christ’s visible coming.

As we should be able to see, making the pretrib rapture theory fit the Olivet prophecy is comparable to rearranging a jigsaw puzzle—it can’t be done without seriously distorting the pieces. It requires making one coming into two, reversing the order of the text, separating the “elect” from the church of history, and assuming that the tribulation and the ordinary pleasures and activities of life cannot exist at the same time on the same planet.

### **The Church and the Antichrist**

As explained above, the pretrib scheme separates Christ’s coming for His church from His visible coming in great power and glory. Pretrib exponents say that Paul wrote of both comings in his epistles to the Thessalonians. Notice the first one:

*For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those, who sleep 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 by no means precede those who are asleep. FOR THE LORD HIMSELF WILL DESCEND FROM HEAVEN with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 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 thus we shall always be with the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

Pretribulationists point out that this passage does not say that Christ and the believers who meet Him in the air will descend to the earth the same day (or same general time) the meeting takes place. This is true, but—note this well—neither does the passage say that Christ will return to heaven after gathering His saints. Standing alone, the passage neither proves nor disproves the “secret rapture.” However, the description of Christ descending with a shout and a trumpet blast casts doubt on the notion that Paul envisioned a “secret” rapture.

Now, notice the second passage on the coming of the Lord:

*Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or*

*by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the BRIGHTNESS OF HIS COMING (2 Thessalonians 2:1-8).*

This text, pretribulationists claim, pertains to the *visible* coming of Christ, not to His coming for the church. The “mystery of lawlessness” is presently being restrained, but when the restrainer is “taken out of the way” the “man of sin”—the Antichrist—is revealed. Christ destroys Him at His coming.

But is this “coming” separate from the “coming” Paul describes to the same church in his previous epistle? We need not guess at the answer; Paul’s own understanding of the coming of the I Lord is plainly revealed in this same epistle.

Paul assures the troubled believers of Thessalonica that God will give them rest “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels” (2 Thessalonians 1:7). Surely this must be referring to Christ’s coming for His church, for the text tells us that God will give the saints rest at that time—and the believers needing relief (or rest) from their troubles are not “tribulation saints” only. They include the Thessalonian believers as well as Paul himself: God will “give *you* [Thessalonian believers] who are troubled rest *with us* [Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy—verse 1] when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven...”

If the saints enjoy the bliss of heaven for seven (or three and one-half) years before this coming occurs, then Paul’s assurances of a promised rest from their troubles is pointless. So this coming is definitely the time when Christ will gather all His saints.

But we have not read the entire passage! Let’s read verse 7 again, but this time let’s include surrounding verses:

*[I]t is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those Who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire TAKING VENGEANCE on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be PUNISHED WITH EVERLASTING DESTRUCTION FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD and front the glory of His power; WHEN HE COMES, in that Day, TO BE GLORIFIED in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).*

This passage alone should settle the matter completely! This coming of the Lord is the coming described in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, which speaks of the saints rising to meet the descending Lord. It is also the coming described in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, which speaks of the destruction of the Antichrist. It is THE Second Coming of Jesus Christ! There is no “third coming” or “phase two” of the Second Coming.

### **The Restrainer of Lawlessness**

Pretribulationists have been known to seek support for a pretrib rapture in obscure scriptures. One such scripture is 2 Thessalonians 2:6,7 (quoted above). Pretrib advocates say that the restrainer of lawlessness is the Holy Spirit, who will continue to restrain “until He is taken out of the way.” The argument goes like this: Since the Holy Spirit indwells the church, His restraining influence is present only as long as the church is present. But once the church is removed, the Spirit’s special presence is also removed. He has been “taken out of the way,” and no longer restrains lawlessness through His earthly agency, the church.

Here, then, is another piece of evidence for a pretrib rapture—or so we are told. But in order to use this argument in favor of a pretrib rapture, it is necessary to reshape some important pieces to make them fit the prophetic jigsaw puzzle.

Pretrib exponents have to conclude that the Holy Spirit is not with the 144,000, who will become believers during the tribulation, in the same special way He was with the church. Yet, the Bible tells us that the 144,000 are the “servants of our God” (Revelation 7:3), and are “sealed [with the “seal of the living God”] on their foreheads” (verses 2,3). Many commentators link this sealing for protection with the reception of the Holy Spirit, pointing out that believers are “*sealed* with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:13), and “*sealed* for the day of redemption” by the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). If the 144,000 are believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then how is it that the Spirit’s influence as the restrainer of lawlessness has been taken away? The only way pretribulationists can answer is by saying that the 144,000 do not have the Spirit in the special way the church had it.

This doesn’t fit the biblical description of this group. In fact, it doesn’t even fit the description offered by many pretrib exponents. At least one well-known pretribulationist says this group is like “144,000 Jewish Billy Grahams.”

And what of the two witnesses? Do they not have the Holy Spirit in the same special way the church had it? God works powerfully through them, giving them power to perform spell-binding miracles similar to the miracles that occurred under the ministries of Moses and Elijah (Revelation 11:5,6). When they are killed, “those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three-and-a-half days....And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth” (verses 9,10).

There is hardly a lack of evidence for the Spirit's special presence in the ministry of the two witnesses; and the widespread knowledge of them and rejoicing over their deaths indicates that their influence is not restricted to some remote corner of the world. If the two witnesses and the 144,000 do little or nothing to restrain the mystery of lawlessness, it is hard to see how the church's presence on the earth would prevent or even hinder the reign of the Antichrist.

Paul always speaks plainly of the Holy Spirit, so it is not likely that he had the Holy Spirit in mind when he spoke of the restrainer of lawlessness.

What, then, is the restrainer of lawlessness? We cannot be certain, but Paul is possibly speaking of the Roman government, which acted as a restrainer of lawlessness until ungodly emperors abandoned the principles of sound government and began persecuting the righteous. Paul says that legitimate governing authorities are from God, that the ruler who is "not a terror to good works, but to evil" is "God's minister to you for good" (Romans 13:1-4). Caesar, as long as his government was for the common good, served as a restrainer of lawlessness. When the ruler abandoned the principles of good government and permitted the oppression of godly men and women, he became an antichrist and his government became a corrupt, demonic system.

In principle, the same applies to any government. To a great extent, many governments in today's world restrain lawlessness by punishing criminals and establishing checks and balances to prevent tyranny. When the restraining powers are removed, the lawless run amok, terrorizing society and bringing to ruin the last vestiges of liberty. This is the situation that will result in the revealing of the "lawless one" (2 Thessalonians 2:8), or Antichrist.

This view of the restrainer of lawlessness seems more plausible than the interpretation that identifies the restrainer as the Holy Spirit. Again, we find no real support for a pretrib rapture.

### **Revelation and the Rapture**

Pretribulationists are fond of pointing out that the church is mentioned nineteen times in the first three chapters of Revelation, but is not mentioned at all in the fourth through twenty-first chapters. This, they claim, suggests that the church is not on the earth during the turbulent times described in the largest portion of the book.

One of the problems of this view is that the book of Revelation makes repeated references to the "saints" who are on earth throughout the tribulation. The saints are those "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17; cf. 14:12; 19:10). They are obviously Christians—committed believers, members of the true church—who find themselves at odds with the Antichrist (see Revelation 13:7-10).

To prevent such details from interfering with their prophetic timetable, pretribulationists create a distinction between the church and the saints. The saints of the book of Revelation, they claim, are the “tribulation saints”—those who repent and turn to Christ in faith *after* the church has been snatched out in the rapture. They become believers *after* the close of the dispensation known as the “church age.”

The proof? There is none, just *inferences* based on preconceived ideas. If the preconceived ideas are wrong, then the inferences are wrong as well.

Here are some examples of such inferences:

1) After John receives the messages to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3), he is taken to heaven in vision. The seven churches symbolize the “church age,” which from the pretrib point of view ends just before the tribulation begins. John’s visionary ascension symbolizes the rapture of the church at the conclusion of the church age.

2) Many commentators understand Revelation 1:19 as the outline for the entire book. The “things which you have seen” are the things John had seen in his vision of Christ (verses 9-18); the “things which are” concern the seven churches (chapters 2-3); the “things which will take place after this” refer to future events. Since there is no mention of the “church” or “churches” in any of the descriptions of the tribulation, which belongs to the category of “things which will take place after this,” the church must have been “caught up” before the tribulation began.

3) God promises to keep the faithful believers of the Philadelphia church “from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10). This suggests that the pretrib saints (represented by the Philadelphia church) will not be on the earth when the “hour of trial” occurs.

4) The catching-up of the church will involve both the resurrection of the dead saints and transformation of the living (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17), while the resurrection described in Revelation 20:4,5 involves only those who “had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image” (Revelation 20:4,5). Therefore the catching-up of the church and the raising of these martyrs must be two separate events, the latter occurring after the visible coming of Christ (described in chapter 19) and involving only the “tribulation saints.” The two events are two phases of the “first resurrection.”

Remember, these are *inferences*; they have been *read into* the text. If the secret rapture cannot be proven true from other scriptural texts, the book of Revelation offers no real support for the theory. Without pretrib assumptions guiding a person’s study of Revelation, it is extremely unlikely that he would understand the persecuted and martyred saints as separate from the church of history and the present. He would not think of John’s visionary experience of heaven as a symbol of a secret rapture; nor would divide the first resurrection into two phases.



Pretribulationists should carefully consider the following responses to the above arguments. (These responses correspond to the order of the four arguments above.)

### **John's Visionary Ascension**

1) All of John's visions of things to come do not occur while he is "in the Spirit" before the heavenly throne. At times he is on earth; at other times he is in heaven. In one vision he sees a "mighty angel *coming down from heaven*" (Revelation 10:1), and hears "a voice *from heaven*" (verse 4). The angel stands with "his right foot *on the sea* and his left foot *on the land*" (verse 2), and the voice "*from heaven*" tells John to "take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the earth" (verse 8). John is obviously on the earth when he sees the angel come down.

Then, John is told to "measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there" (Revelation 11:1). This is not a heavenly temple and altar, for John is told to "leave out the court which is outside the temple...or it *has been given to the Gentiles*. And they will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months" (verse 2). Again we find John on the earth.

If John's visionary translation to the throne room of heaven prefigures a pretrib rapture of the saints, what do his reappearances on the earth mean? These shifts from earth to heaven and back again dissolve the link between John's visionary ascension and the so-called "secret rapture."

### **The Church and the Tribulation**

2) There is no question that the "things which must take place after this" are future to the time John was told of them, and the "things which are" relate to the seven churches of Asia. However, it is important to understand that the "after this" events do not pertain exclusively to the final tribulation of the close of the age. During John's day and afterward, the seven-headed "beast" of Revelation 13 existed as the Roman Empire and its succession of emperors, who persecuted and killed Christians. The two-horned "beast" from the land was the pagan priesthood that promoted allegiance to Rome through worship of the emperor. Both these systems existed in history and will emerge again in the time of the end.

There can be no doubt that the first readers of the book of Revelation immediately recognized "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT" as imperial Rome, "that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth" (Revelation 17:5,18). The "Babylonian" system will manifest itself once again in the end-time.

The historical manifestations of these demonic systems should tell us something about their reemergence in the future. The fact is, Christians-Spirit-filled members of the true church—were *severely persecuted* by the historical “beast.” They were the “saints” of that period, and they certainly understood the call for patience and faith as an exhortation for them (Revelation 13:10). Why, then, would anyone think that the present church is distinct from the saints who are persecuted by the final manifestation of the beast?

The fact that the words *church* and *churches* do not appear after chapter three until near the end of the book is completely irrelevant. A church is simply an assembly of saints—and they are mentioned throughout the book of Revelation.

### **The Philadelphia Church**

3) The seven churches of Asia were literal churches, but the messages sent to them are not only for them, but are for the church universal. This is evident in the universality of the message as suggested in the repeated exhortation, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). The messages to the churches are for *anyone* who is willing to hear. It is not surprising, then, that the letters include references to a time far beyond that of the original readers. One such reference is found in The letter to the Philadelphian church: “Because you have kept My command to persevere,” Christ says, “I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

What is this “hour of trial”? Most pretribulationists claim that it is the tribulation, which begins with the appearance of the Antichrist. The church is supposed to be snatched out of the world—thus kept from the hour of trial—just before the Antichrist 1 appears and the tribulation begins. The arrival of the Antichrist I occurs at the opening of the first seal (Revelation 6:1,2).

One problem with this scenario is the expansion of the “hour of trial” to include the entire tribulation period. By comparing Matthew’s account of the Olivet prophecy with the order of events (represented by the opening of the seven seals) in the book of Revelation, we will see strong evidence that the hour of trial does not take in the whole of the tribulation.

In Matthew 24, Jesus speaks of “tribulation” upon the saints (verse 9), the “abomination of desolation...standing in the holy place” (verse 15), and “great tribulation” upon Jerusalem (verses 16-22). Notice what He then says about the order of events leading up to His return:

*Immediately AFTER the tribulation of those days the sun will be*

*darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. THEN the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and THEN all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory* (Matthew 24:29,30).

Luke's account provides some additional details:

*And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory* (Luke 21:25-27).

In Mark's account, as in Matthew's, the heavenly signs occur "in those days, *after* that tribulation" (Mark 13:24). Notice the order of events: *First*, tribulation and martyrdom. *Then*, the heavenly signs appear, *Then*, because of the heavenly signs and what immediately follows, "the tribes of the earth mourn" and men's hearts fail "from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth." It is *these* events—the heavenly signs, sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and accompanying fear, mourning, and distress—that are closely associated with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. These are things that *God* brings upon the earth. The tribulation is brought about by *men*, under Satan's influence, hating each other and warring with one another. God permits it, and even intervenes to cut it short, but is not the direct cause of it.

This order of events perfectly fits the events described in the book of Revelation. The “fifth seal” represents the martyrdom of saints during the reign of the Antichrist (Revelation 6:9-11; cf. 13:7-10), a time of great tribulation. The “sixth seal” represents the heavenly signs. Let’s notice the description, comparing it with the passages quoted above:

*I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair; and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. And the kings of the earth, the great men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the WRATH OF THE LAMB! For the GREAT DAY OF HIS WRATH HAS COME, and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:12-17).*

Notice that the great heavenly signs *precede* and *introduce* the “great day of His wrath”! Fear befalls kings, great and mighty men, commanders, slaves, and free men—the *whole world!* Truly, *this* is the “hour of trial which shall come upon the *whole world*, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10),

But it occurs “*after* the tribulation of those days” (Matthew 24:29), The tribulation that precedes the great day of God’s wrath is *not* the hour of trial! It is then—during the day of God’s wrath—that the saints will be protected, Hated by the world, they suffer persecution and martyrdom up to that time; but they are protected—kept from the hour of trial—in the day God pours out His wrath upon the ungodly.

Notice that immediately after the heavenly signs (sixth seal) but before the great day of God's wrath (seventh seal), 144,000 "of all the tribes of the children of Israel" are "sealed," or marked for protection (Revelation 7:1-4; cf. 9:4). In other words, they are kept "from the hour of trial" that is coming "upon the whole world."

After John *hears* the number of those sealed, he *sees* a "great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" (verse 9). This follows John's pattern of *hearing* and then *seeing*. John *heard* a loud voice and turned to *see* the Source of the voice (Revelation 1:10,12). As the seals were opened, John *heard* one of the "living creatures" call his attention to the event and then looked to *see* the event (Revelation 6:1,2,5,7,8). He *heard* the number of an army of horsemen and then *saw* the horses and their riders (Revelation 9:16,17). Similarly, John *heard* the number of Israelites to be sealed and then *saw* an innumerable multitude from all the nations. It is conceivable that John turned to see the group whose number he had just heard; but since the first is from the tribes of Israel and the second is from all nations, it is more probable that the innumerable multitude *includes* the 144,000 Israelites, but are not restricted to them.

These saints are "before the throne" and serve God "day and night in His temple" (Revelation 7:9,15). This does not necessarily mean that they are literally in heaven. It can be understood as a symbolic way of describing the saints' *relationship* with God and the Lamb. As Paul puts it, God has "made us alive with Christ...and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:5,6). This is about relationship, not location.

If this understanding of the 144,000 and great multitude is correct, then the entire group is "sealed," or marked for protection from the plagues that befall the ungodly during the day of God's wrath. They have "come out *of* the great tribulation" (Revelation 7:14), which means that they must have been in it. But now, because they have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (*ibid.*), they are entitled to the protection promised to the Philadelphia church. If they are literally in heaven and completely removed from the place where the plagues are falling, then the command given to the "locusts" to harm "only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (Revelation 9:4) makes little sense.

The tribulation is well underway when the hour of trial begins, and the only place in the book of Revelation that describes divine protection from that hour shows the servants of God being "sealed," or shielded from wrath, not whisked away in a secret rapture.

### **The First Resurrection**

4) Why would anyone claim that the "first resurrection" (Revelation 20:5,6) takes place in two phases? There is only one explanation: It's the only way to make a pretribulational, secret rapture fit into the text of Revelation. Since chapter 19 describes

the coming of Christ in great power and glory, and the events of chapter 20 (including the first resurrection) are associated with Christ's return, pretribulationists must divide the first resurrection into two phases, the first occurring before the tribulation and the second taking place after the tribulation. That way, they can retain their pretrib rapture theory.

Why are only the martyrs—"those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God" (verse 4)—mentioned here? The answer should be clear to anyone who has read the letters to the seven churches and the exhortations to a life of patience and faith in the face of persecution. The martyrs are the representative group—the overcomers *par excellence*. They exemplify the life to which the saints are called.

Revelation 20:4-6 is designed to provide encouragement to those who find themselves under persecution and the threat of being put to death for their faith. John's purpose is not to reveal that only a special category of saints—the martyred "tribulation saints," according to the secret rapture theory—will be resurrected at this point. Rather, it is to provide encouragement to *all* the saints by reassuring them that no matter how badly they are treated by the judges and rulers of this world, ultimately "judgment [will be] committed to *them*"—the saints—and *they* "shall reign with [Christ] a thousand years."

The first resurrection is the resurrection Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15:51-54:

*Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."*

### **Wrongly Dividing the Word**

At this point, it should be clear that the secret rapture stands on shaky theological grounds. The texts so often cited as support for the theory provide no real support at all. Even pretribulationists—at least some of them—admit that the theory depends heavily on

a particular system of interpretation. The system is known as *dispensationalism*. Even the well-known author and pretribulationist Hal Lindsey admits that this method of interpretation is “absolutely essential” to resolving the question of whether the rapture occurs before, during, or after the tribulation (*The Rapture: Truth or Consequences*, Bantam Books, 1983, p, 53).

What is dispensationalism? It is a method of interpretation based on the view that the divine plan is made up of several distinct economies, or dispensations. The promises and commandments God gives to men under one dispensation do not necessarily apply to the promises and commandments He gives under another dispensation.

Generally, dispensationalists divide God’s plan into seven economies, which are as follows: (1) the dispensation of innocence, which takes in the period between the creation of man and the fall; (2) the dispensation of conscience, which takes in the period between the fall and the flood; (3) the dispensation of human government, which begins in the post-flood period and ends with the confusion of languages at the tower of Babel; (4) the dispensation of Israel under promise, which begins with Abraham and ends with the giving of the law at Sinai; (5) the dispensation of Israel under law, which begins with the giving of the law and ends with Christ’s death; (6) the dispensation of grace, which covers the period between Christ’s death and the final tribulation; (7) the dispensation of the Millennium, which takes in the thousand-year reign of the Messiah.

No one denies that the different periods of redemptive history have distinguishing characteristics, but we should avoid making these distinctions so sharp that we fail to see the unity and smooth flow of God’s unfolding plan. Dispensationalists tend to make such a sharp distinction between the “dispensation of Israel under law” and the “dispensation of grace” that they establish a radical discontinuity between Israel and the church. This is very important, for this radical distinction between Israel and the church is the foundation upon which the pretrib structure is built. If the foundation is faulty, the structure is in danger of collapsing—and dispensationalists are guilty of *wrongly* dividing the Word of truth (cf. 2 Timothy 2: 15).

According to dispensationalism, Israel’s prophetic clock stopped ticking at the death of Christ, but will resume ticking seven , years before the millennial reign commences. This means that the dispensation of Israel was interrupted at the death of Christ, leaving seven years unfulfilled. The final seven years will begin when the Antichrist arrives on the scene and conclude with the visible return of Jesus Christ. The long interim between the stopping and restarting of Israel’s prophetic clock is called the “great historical parenthesis.” It is the “church age,” or “age of grace,” and was supposedly unforeseen by the prophets of old. As soon as Israel’s dispensational clock starts ticking again, the church age ends. To dispensationalists, the end of the church age means the removal of the church from this world by way of the “secret rapture.”

The theory works only when we establish an extreme distinction between Israel and the church, and fail to recognize the continuity between God’s purpose for Israel and His purpose for the church. The truth is, the New Testament applies Israel’s prophecies,

promises, and symbols to the church, thus demonstrating the unity of God's purpose for these two entities, and showing that God has *one* program—not two separate programs and purposes—which involves both Israel and the church.

Paul informs us that “not all Israelites truly belong to Israel” (Romans 9:6, NRSV). This means that not all the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are citizens of the true Israel. But who is the true Israel? Paul answers: “And if you are Christ's”—if you are a Christian, if you have put your faith in Christ as Savior, if the Holy Spirit resides within you—”then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

The identity of the true Israel of God is clarified in Paul's analogy of the olive tree:

*And if some of the branches were broken off and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted*



*into their own olive tree?* (Romans 11:17-24).

In this analogy, the cultivated olive tree is ethnic Israel. The natural branches that have been broken off are the unbelieving Israelites. The remaining branches are the believing Israelites, and the wild olive branches grafted into Israel's tree are the believing gentiles. Those broken off are no longer partakers of the root of Israel's tree, but those grafted in are now a part of the tree. The latter are now true Israelites, having been grafted into Israel's tree. The former are no longer true Israelites in that they no longer partake of the root of Israel's tree. However, this does not mean that ethnic Israelites have no more place in God's redemptive purpose. Indeed, they do! When they recognize the Messiah promised in their Scriptures, and turn to God in repentance and faith, He is able to graft them into their own tree, thus making them members of the true Israel of God.

The true Israel of God, then, is made up of all—both Jews and gentiles—who put their trust in the Messiah promised and sent to Israel. Membership in this body is not based on national boundaries or Old Covenant signs (such as circumcision), but on a life-transforming faith in God and His provisions for redemption. This is what Paul has in mind when he writes, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:15,16, NIV).

### **In Conclusion**

If you have carefully analyzed the texts cited above, comparing them with arguments for pretribulationism, then you should be able to see that the so-called “secret rapture” has no solid biblical support. It rests upon the faulty foundation of dispensationalism; it requires its adherents to read two comings (separated by several years) into the Olivet prophecy; it calls for a strained interpretation of Paul's descriptions of the Second Coming in his epistles to the Thessalonians; it redefines the saints of the book of Revelation and misses the real purpose of the book; and it adopts the dubious notion that its relatively late “discovery” was really a recovery of a longlost prophetic truth.

Make no mistake! The Bible *definitely* speaks of a time when the people of God will be “caught up”—*raptured*, if you will—but that event will not take place *before* the prophesied tribulation. But let's not fall into the trap of assuming that we know all there is to know about the events of the end-time. Rather, let's simply *obey* the instructions of our Savior.

“Keep awake therefore,” Jesus Christ says, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house

be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matthew 24:42-44, NRSV).

We “keep awake” by keeping our minds on the things of God, by prayer, Bible study, and Christian fellowship, *not* by constructing fantastic and elaborate theories about the end-time and then making daily news reports fit our theories. (Remember the sensational Y2K predictions?) No, we keep awake—or “watch,” if you will—by doing precisely what the apostle Paul admonishes in Ephesians 6:11-18. Read it carefully—and prayerfully:

*Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh*

*and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of*

*evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God,*

*so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your*

*ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the*

*breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with*

*the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish*

*all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation*

*and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in*

*the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.*

*With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints (NIV).*

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