

Lesson 11

The Historical Basis For The Various Views On The Rapture

This section (chapters 11-16) is designed to deal with the whole rapture question. It is a matter that only concerns those that are premillennial in their eschatology. The term “rapture” is derived from the Latin *rapio*, meaning “to seize or to snatch.” Theologically, it is derived from the Latin translation of First Thessalonians 4:17, when the living and resurrected Christians are said to be “caught up” together to meet Jesus Christ.

The issue is when does this rapture take place? Is it pretribulational, midtribulational or posttribulation? This section will not deal with midtribulationalism or other views like the partial rapture theory (only the spiritual will be raptured before the tribulation period). It seems there are just two logical positions—posttribulation or pretribulation.

While church history can help us understand what the church has believed throughout the centuries, it is not the final criterion for determining any doctrine. The final authority is the inspired, infallible Bible. However, any new doctrines not known in the history of the church should be examined closely, since the Holy Spirit has been the teacher of the church for centuries.

HISTORIC PREMILLENNIAL THEORY IN HISTORY

The evidence is overwhelming that the predominant view of the early church in the first two centuries was premillennial and posttribulational (See Lesson 2).

Justin Martyr (150 A.D.)

“O unreasoning men! understanding not what has been proved by all these messages, that two advents of Christ have been announced: the one, in which He is set forth as suffering, inglorious, dishonoured, and crucified; but the other, in which He shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians.” (Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I, 253-54)

Irenaeus (Late Second Century)

“And he (Antichrist) shall speak words against the most high God, and wear out the saints of the most high God, and shall purpose to change times and laws; and (everything) shall be given into his hand until a time of times and a half time, that is, for three years and six months, during which time, when he comes, he shall reign over the earth. Of whom also the Apostle Paul again, speaking in the (Epistle) to the Thessalonians, and at the same time proclaiming the advent, thus says: ‘And then shall the wicked one be revealed, whom shall slay with the spirit of His mouth, and destroy by the presence second cause of his the Lord Jesus of His coming.’” (Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I, 554)

“For all these other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in (the time of) which (resurrection) the righteous shall reign in the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord: and through Him they shall become accustomed to partake in the glory of God the Father, and shall enjoy in the kingdom intercourse and communion with the holy angels, and

union with spiritual beings; and (with respect to) those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, a waiting Him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked One.” (Ibid, p. 565)

Tertullian (200 A.D.)

“In the Revelation of John, again, the order of these times is spread out to view . . . that the beast Antichrist with his false prophet may wage war on the Church of God.” (Tertullian, “On the Resurrection of the Flesh,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III, 563).

“For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven, if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked;’ which means, before we put off the garment of the flesh, we wish to be clothed with the celestial glory of immortality. Now the privilege of this favour awaits those who shall at the coming of the Lord be found in the flesh, and who shall, owing to the oppressions of the time of Antichrist, deserve by an instantaneous death, which is accomplished by a sudden change, to become qualified to join the rising saints.” (Ibid)

Hippolytus (early Third Century)

“It is proper that we take the Holy Scriptures themselves in hand, and find out from them what, and of what manner, the coming of Antichrist is; on what occasion and at what time that impious one shall be revealed; and whence and from what tribe (he shall come); and what his name is, which is indicated by the number in the Scriptures; and how he shall work error among the people, gathering them from the ends of the earth; and (how) he shall stir up tribulation and persecution against the saints; and how he shall glorify himself as God; and what his end shall be; and how the sudden appearing of the Lord shall be revealed from heaven; and what the conflagration of the whole world shall be; and what the glorious and heavenly kingdom of the saints is to be, when they reign together with Christ; and what the punishment of the wicked by fire.” (Hippolytus, “Treatise on Christ and Antichrist,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, V, 205)

“Now concerning the tribulation of the persecution which is to fall upon the church from the adversary . . .” (Ibid., p. 217)

Premillennial posttribulationism has been part of the history of the church since its beginning. Even at the Westminster Assembly (1642), there were so many premil posttribs that the Scottish divines complained to the Assembly. This is probably the reason the Westminster Confession allows for eschatological freedom. Posttribs have been very prominent in English and American church history in many denominations.

PREMILLENNIAL DISPENSATIONAL THEORY IN HISTORY

The pretrib theory does not have much support in the early church. In fact, there is only one reference and that may be suspect.

Pseudo-Ephraim (Second Century)

“All the saints and elect of God are gathered together before the tribulation, which is to come, and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins.”

For the first seventeen centuries of the church, there is no evidence supporting premil pretibs. Pretribulationism had its practical beginnings in 1830 when John Darby, an Irish clergyman, claimed to have discovered this new truth on the coming of Christ.

Modern day dispensationalists say that their system is merely a refinement of historic premillennialism based on the new truth discovered and made popular by John Darby.

The pretrib rapture theory spread to America, and this stimulated great interest in the coming of Christ. Today there are many dispensationalists in almost every denomination, except those that are reformed in theology. (See Lesson 2)