

The Rapture — A Question of Timing

by Anthony Buzzard

THE PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED:

Are Christians to be on the earth during the time following the appearance of the Abomination of Desolation, which all futurists agree is placed at the mid-point of the Septennium (the seven year period just before the end—Dan. 9:27), OR:

Will Christians be taken to heaven by a return of Jesus to raise the dead *before* the appearance of the Abomination of Desolation? (i.e., *before* the tribulation).

The following data must be looked at:

According to Matthew 24:15ff., Mark 13:14ff., and parallels in Luke 21:

1. Christians are to flee to the mountains when the Abomination is placed (Matt. 24:15, Mark 13:14).

Question: How would this fit with the thesis that Christians are to be *removed to heaven before the Abomination appears*?

2. During the tribulation which begins with the placing of the Abomination, Christians are to be careful not to be deceived by false prophets and false Christs (Matt. 24:23; Mark 13:21).

Question: How would this apply to Christians if they are to be removed from the earth to heaven before the Abomination appears?

3. During the tribulation which begins with the Abomination expectant mothers and nursing mothers will experience difficulty (Matt. 24:19).

Question: Does this fit with the hypothesis that Christians will be removed before the Tribulation?

4. *After the tribulation* the same “elect” who are warned not to be deceived during the tribulation (Matt. 24:23) are gathered from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Matt. 24:31). (Isa. 13:5 speaks of an army of nations coming from the end of heaven — showing this expression to be an idiom for a gathering from all over the earth.)

Question: Does the gathering of the elect *after* the tribulation fit with the idea that our gathering together to Christ is to happen before the tribulation?

5. The Christians who see all the troubles of the tribulation time (Luke 21:21) are to *look up* and to expect their approaching redemption following the time of trouble.

Question: Why would Christians be looking up towards the sky if they have been removed before the time of trouble?

SUMMARY QUESTION: Why, if Christians are to be removed to heaven before the Tribulation, does Jesus give explicit instructions to Christians for coping with conditions **during** the Tribulation?

In other words, Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21 all describe (in a total of about 60 verses) the conflict between Christians and the forces of evil during the Tribulation. How can this fit with the theory that Christians will be removed before the Antichrist appears?

PAUL'S LETTERS

1. Paul promises that Christians will receive relief from tribulation “when the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who do not know God” (2 Thess. 2:7).

Question: How does this fit with the theory that Christians will be relieved from suffering seven years earlier than this revelation of Jesus in flaming fire?

2. Paul specifically warns the Christians that two things — the apostasy and the arrival of the man of sin — have to happen before the Day of the Lord and our gathering together to him (II Thess. 2:1-3).

Question: How then can it be maintained that nothing has to happen before our gathering together to meet Jesus?

SUMMARY: What is the relevance of all the warnings about flight to the mountains, pregnancy, deception *during the tribulation* if Christians are to be removed before the Abomination is placed? Why do Christians look up *after the tribulation* (Luke 21:28) in expectation of their salvation, if they should expect to be removed before the Tribulation? Why are Christians found *in* the tribulation (Matt. 24:15ff, Mark 13:14ff, Luke 21:20ff) if Christians are going to be removed to heaven *before* the tribulation?

THE PROPOSITION WHICH MUST BE EXAMINED IS SIMPLY THIS:

The Bible describes the activities of Christians at the beginning, during and after the tribulation, viz:

Before: “When you see the Abomination...flee.”

During: “Then shall be great tribulation...those days shall be shortened...then if anyone says to *you*...”

After: “Immediately after the tribulation, the sun will be darkened...and the angels will gather the elect...look up, for *your redemption* draws near.”

This is a description of Christians on the earth during the tribulation. How then can we say that they are not on the earth but in heaven during the tribulation? (Matthew, Mark and Luke all speak of Christians on the earth during the tribulation, and of their being gathered **after** it.)

Note: The only way in which the force of the above can be avoided is by saying that none of the descriptions of conflict affect the Church but only Jews who come to faith after the tribulation begins. We could then ask: If Jesus does not mean Christians when he says “you” in Matthew 24, how would we know that **anything** in the gospels addressed to “you” (disciples) applies to Christians? The theory that Christians are not addressed in Matthew 24:15ff (instructions for **going through** the great tribulation) sounds very much like an attempt to divorce Christians from what Jesus taught them in the gospels — indeed some ultra-dispensationalists have maintained that none of the material in the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) is for Christians! When Jesus tells the twelve to go into the world and preach everywhere we all take this as a command to us. It was given to Jewish Christians but the body of Christ constitutes their descendants. What is said to them applies directly to us. When Jesus addresses believers telling them how to cope during the tribulation, this must mean that they must expect to be on earth during the tribulation.

The Pre-/Post-Tribulation Rapture discussion can therefore be reduced to a simple question: Why do Christ and Paul give instructions to Christians for going through the final tribulation if they are going to be removed before the Tribulation begins?

If someone were to warn you of an approaching typhoon and give you instructions about what to do in order to survive the storm, it would be strange if at the same time he told that you will not be in the locality of the typhoon at all. Both the gospels and Revelation speak of saints battling the evil forces of Antichrist during the tribulation. Jesus gave specific orders to Christians in Judea about what to do when the “storm” was approaching. To say that Christians will observe the tribulation from heaven simply contradicts and renders pointless Jesus’ commands to Christians alive when the Abomination of Desolation appears (Matt. 24:15, Mark 13:14). There is no need to flee if you have been raptured.

The importance of this question is underlined by the following fact: Paul expressly warns Christians **not to be deceived** by anyone saying that the second coming can occur immediately (2 Thess. 2:1-3, KJV), or that it has already happened. Paul then distinctly explains that two things must happen “before the coming of the Lord and our gathering together to him” (v. 1). These two events are: 1) The Apostasy and 2) The appearance of the Man of Sin. It follows that unless the Man of Sin has already appeared the Coming of Jesus cannot happen. The passage deals deliberately with the **sequence of events** preceding the Coming of Jesus.

Paul's reference to the man of sin who "exalts himself above all that is called God" (2 Thess. 2:4) takes us back to Daniel 11:36 where we can identify the Man of Sin as the "King of the North." This "King" is the subject of a long prophecy beginning in Daniel 11:21. The King of the North, historically, was Syria or Assyria (these nations attacked Israel from the north. Their modern counterparts are Syria and Iraq). Fortunately we are told in the postscript to Daniel 11 (Dan. 12:7-11) that exactly 1290 days will elapse from the time that this King of the North places "the Abomination of Desolation" (Dan. 11:31) until the end of all the events of the vision, including the Tribulation (Dan. 12:1) and Resurrection (Dan. 12:2).

This critically important chronological data is found in Daniel 12:11: "From the time that the daily sacrifice is removed and the Abomination of Desolation is set up there will be 1290 days."

Remarkably, Jesus also refers to the career of this same final King of the North when he speaks of the Abomination of Desolation appearing in Jerusalem (see Matt. 24:15, where Jesus directs us to Dan. 11:31, 12:11, as well as Dan. 9:27, 8:13). The appearance of the Abomination means the onset of the great Tribulation — again Jesus refers to the same prophecy in Daniel 12:1.

The picture of the final time of trouble is very clearly laid out by Jesus and Paul who both base their understanding on Daniel, especially the prophecy of Daniel 11 and 12. If we **start** with Jesus' clear instructions (rather than our own preconceived systems of interpretation) we will find a simple prediction of a final tyrant whose career climaxes with the placing of the Abomination of Desolation (Matt. 24:15; Dan. 11:31). Following this the saints who have not escaped are cruelly persecuted: "The people that know their God shall be strong and do exploits. And they that be wise among the people shall instruct many; yet they shall fall by the sword and by flame and by captivity and by spoil for some days" (Dan. 11:32, 33).

The final tyrant comes to his end (Dan. 11:45) and the Kingdom of God is then established (Dan. 2:44, 7:18, 22, 27). For these terrible events of the end Jesus warns us to be prepared — though we do not know when they will begin. It is not helpful for Bible teachers to promise their students complete exemption from the time of final trouble when Jesus has gone to great lengths to instruct us on **how to survive in the coming time of trouble!** "He who endures to the **end** shall be saved" (Matt. 24:13).

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