

The Rapture and the Day of Eternity

Michael P. McHugh

Introduction

The pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation and post-tribulation rapture theories all appeal to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 to support their respective positions. That should be enough in and of itself to alert the discerning reader to an exegetical error of some sort, somewhere. Despite what I have personally heard from one insignificant pulpit (“By the Word of the Lord”) it is impossible for all of them to be correct. It is my contention that in actuality none of them are. An analytical and unbiased examination of the texts will show that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is separated from 1 Thessalonians 4:16 by an undisclosed period of time. I believe that time to be the thousand-year reign of Messiah on earth, beginning with his physical return to the earth (Acts 1:11; Revelation 20:4). I believe that 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:17 refer to the time when time will yield to the end of time as we know it – at the end of that millennium.

Pre-tribulationism

The pre-trib rapture theory shares certain similarities with the mid-trib position. Debunking the pre-tribulation outlook discredits the mid-trib view as well.

Let us get clearly in mind the nature of the Tribulation, that it is divine “wrath” ... and divine “judgment” ... We know that our blessed Lord bore for us the wrath of God and His judgment; therefore we who are in Him “shall not come into judgment.” The antithesis of I Thess. 5:9 is conclusive evidence: “For God appointed us not to wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Wrath for others, but salvation for us at the Rapture, “whether we wake or sleep” (vs. 10).¹

This teaching of escape from judgment via “the Rapture” is the hallmark of dispensationalism. It has as its foundation a “distinction” between Israel and the “Church.”

The distinction between Israel and the Church leads to the belief that the Church will be taken from the earth before the beginning of the tribulation (which in one major sense concerns Israel).²

Pretribulation rapturism rests on one major premise – the literal method of interpretation of the Scriptures. As a necessary adjunct to this, the pretribulationist believes in a dispensational interpretation of the Word of God. The church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan.³

The Olive Tree

Although thus attributed to the literal method of interpretation, the “distinction” has no basis in reality. This is evidenced most clearly in the eleventh chapter of the book of Romans where Paul tells Gentile believers in Yeshua that they have been grafted into the olive tree of what can only be the true nation of Israel.

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 195.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 159.

³ Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 193.

those branches. If you do, consider this: you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved...

Romans 11:17-26

The context requires us to understand the cultivated olive tree as a representation of Israel. Three things are relevant to the question of our identity in Messiah with regards to it.

1. Branches were broken off the cultivated tree for unbelief.
2. Branches from wild, uncultivated olive trees were grafted in among the cultivated ones to become part of the cultivated tree.
3. Branches broken off the cultivated tree can and will be grafted back in when unbelief yields to belief.

This parable conveys the truth that those from among the nations who come to faith in Messiah Yeshua have become part of the Nation of Israel. That is our identity. It is not a Jewish identity according to the flesh, nor is it a Gentile identity. It is a Jewish identity according to the spirit, an identity based on a circumcised heart.⁴ There is no “distinction” between “Israel” and “The Church.” It is a mirage and it is error. While Paul uses an analogy to present this truth to us in Romans, he states the matter plainly in the book of Ephesians.

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Messiah Yeshua you who formerly were far off have been brought near by Messiah’s blood.

Ephesians 2:11-13

There is no analogy here: In Messiah Yeshua we are no longer “far off.” We are no longer excluded from the commonwealth of Israel. We are no longer strangers to the covenants of promise. We are no longer without hope and without God in the world. We have been “brought near” through Messiah’s blood. The main thrust of this paper, however, is not a comprehensive treatment of this subject, but one that flows naturally from it, namely, that “The Church” will indeed go through “The Great Tribulation” with “Israel.”

⁴ Romans 2:28-29, 9:6-7.

Imminence and the Return of Messiah

This imaginary dispensational distinction comes with another false teaching – that of a two-stage second coming. The following quote is representative.

Part of the confusion on this issue rises from a failure to distinguish two stages in Jesus' second coming. One passage of Scripture speaks of Christ's coming in the air and in secret, like a thief coming in the night. Another part of the Scripture describes Christ's coming in power and majesty to the earth, with every eye seeing Him.⁵

This doctrine does not originate with the literal method of interpretation. It is borne of necessity from the erroneous distinction between Israel and the "Church." Those who would in truth interpret literally would take the words of the Master and his angels at face value and would not entertain the erroneous, secret doctrines to which only dispensational theologians are privy. When asked specifically about his return, he stated that it would be *after* the Tribulation. His angels said he would return the same way he left. They are the clearest statements we have in Scripture as to the timing and the nature of it, and it is not in "stages" nor is there anything "secret" about it. In its proper context, the "Doctrine of Imminence," the idea that he could return at any moment, applies not to the beginning or the middle of the Tribulation period, but to the *end* of it.

"But immediately after the tribulation of those days... they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory... Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that he is near, even at the door."
Matthew 24:29-33

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Yeshua who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you have watched him go into heaven."
Acts 1:11

Post-tribulationism

The post-trib position places Messiah's return and the rapture at the end of the tribulation period. While there can be no doubt that Messiah's return is *after* the tribulation, the rapture aspect of it is problematic considering Matthew 24-25 and Malachi 3:18-4:6.

Matthew 24-25 can be summed up as a collection of parables concerning the gathering of the elect (24:31) and the destruction of the wicked (24:31). The judgment will be universal in scope (24:37-39). Malachi 3:18-4:3 describes these two groups as well in the context of the Great and Terrible Day of the LORD (4:5).

Matthew 24 & 25

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Workers in the Field (24:31-41) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Two Men <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. One Taken ii. One Left b. Two Women <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. One Taken ii. One Left | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Ten Virgins (25:1-13) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Five Foolish <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Shut out of the Feast b. Five Wise <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Enter the Feast |
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⁵ Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1973), 77-78.

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| <p>3. Talents (25:14-30)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. 5 + 5 Talents = 11 Talents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Enters the Kingdom b. 2 + 2 Talents = 4 Talents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Enters the Kingdom c. 1 + 0 Talents = 0 Talents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Enters the Darkness | <p>4. Sheep and Goats (25:31-40)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Sheep on the Right <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Inherit the Kingdom b. Goats on the Left <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Inherit Eternal Fire |
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Malachi 3:18-4:3

1. Righteous (3:18)
 - a. Serve God (3:18) and fear his Name (4:2)
 - i. Will know healing and skip like calves (4:2)
 - ii. Will tread down the wicked (4:3)

2. Wicked (3:18)
 - a. Do not serve God (3:18)
 - i. *All* the arrogant and *every* evildoer (4:1)
 1. Will be chaff
 2. Will be set ablaze
 3. Will be left without root or branch
 - ii. The wicked (4:3)
 1. Will be trodden down
 2. Will be ashes under the feet of the righteous

If it is so that the righteous who live through the tribulation are given resurrection bodies at the time when the wicked are destroyed and *every* evildoer eradicated, as post-tribulationism teaches, who will bear children and who will die during the millennium (Isaiah 65:20-23)?

No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his days; for the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred will be thought accursed.
Isaiah 65:20 NASB

It is a fair question to which there is no answer apart from a hypothetically necessary third group. We must imagine this group, neither righteous nor wicked but neutral in nature, somehow making it into the kingdom without being given resurrection bodies along with the righteous. We must imagine it, as such is nowhere found in the Scriptures. I think those who are “neutral” can best be described as the “lukewarm” or “tepid” whose fate is not that of fellowship with the Master. One is either with him or he is not. One is either for him or against him. One either does the will of the Father or he does not. There is no neutral ground.

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are tepid, and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of my mouth.
Revelation 3:15-16

He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters.
Matthew 12:30

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven...
Matthew 7:21-23

The pre-trib and mid-trib rapture positions are patently erroneous, and yet the post-tribulation position yields problems of its own (though obviously not so serious). What then, is the solution?

ἔπειτα [*épeita*]... εἶτα [*éita*]

Perhaps the clearest indication of the dispensational error is found in the very passage so tenaciously forced to support it – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. We find here as well the solution to the post-tribulation problem. It requires attention to detail.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Yeshua died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Yeshua those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Master’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Master, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Master himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Messiah will *rise from the dead* first.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-16

After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Master in the air. And so we will be with the Master forever. Therefore, encourage one other with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:17-18

The key to understanding the rapture lies with the words, “rise” and “after that.” Taken together, they open the door to a proper understanding of the passage. The verb “to rise” in verse 16 does not signify to be raised “into the air,” but simply “to raise up from death.”⁶ This is the resurrection of the righteous *dead* at the Master’s return. Verse 17 tells us that “after that” those who have been so raised and those who still have mortal bodies will be caught up together to meet the Master in the air.

“After that” (vs. 17) translates ἔπειτα [*épeita*] which “is used only of sequence...”⁷ It denotes a succession of events without regard to the amount of time between them. These verses describe two groups and two distinct, corresponding events separated by an unspecified period.

The text says both groups will be caught up “together.” It does not say they will be caught up “to be together.” They are *caught up* together. In order for the dead to be raised *first*, and *afterwards* to have both groups caught up *together*, some period necessarily separates verse 17 from verse 16. No single event is here before us as is commonly taught, but two distinct events separated by an unspecified length of time.

In his enumeration of the resurrections for the righteous dead Paul uses this same word ἔπειτα [*épeita*] to represent the amount of time separating Yeshua’s resurrection from the resurrection of the righteous at his return – a span of almost two thousand years now.

⁶ C. L. Willibald Grimm, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. Joseph Henry Thayer (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1886), 47.

⁷ W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphants, Ltd., 1952), 124.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Messiah all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Messiah the first fruits, *after that* (ἔπειτα [*épeita*]) those who are Messiah's at his coming, *then* (εἶτα [*êita*]) comes the end, when he delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when he has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

1 Corinthians 15:22-24

Paul's use of *after that... then* (ἔπειτα [*épeita*]... εἶτα [*êita*]) denotes a "sequence."⁸ The word translated "the end" in verse 24 can thus legitimately be understood as the final phase of the resurrection program for the righteous dead. Paul says, "In Messiah all will be made alive, but each in his own order." That order includes, of necessity, believers at the end of the Millennium who will have died during the Millennium (Isaiah 65:20).

It seems to me that our main question ought to be, "What period of time does ἔπειτα [*épeita*] represent in 1 Thessalonians 4:17?" Does it stand for two seconds, two minutes, two days, or even two thousand years as it does in 1 Corinthians 15:23? The answer to this question comes with an understanding of what will happen both to believers and unbelievers when Yeshua comes back, taking into consideration as well, certain conditions which will exist during his thousand-year reign on earth.

1. The unrighteous will be destroyed when Yeshua returns.
Malachi 4:1; Isaiah 66:15-16 Luke 17:26-37
2. The Messianic Kingdom will last a thousand years.
Revelation 20:4
3. There will be birth and death during that Millennium.
Isaiah 65:20-23

Death during the Millennium is a fact to which John also bears witness, for not until he describes the creation of the new heavens and new earth at the end of the Millennium does he write, "There shall be no more death (Rev. 21:4)."

I believe it is the Millennium itself which gives us the final definitive answer as to how much time is represented by the ἔπειτα [*épeita*] of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, for we know that the dead who are raised when Yeshua returns will reign with him for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4). Does it not fit that the "rapture" of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 would take place a thousand years after Messiah's return to earth? The "rapture," then, is an event associated with the *end* of the Millennium, not the beginning. It is not a second-coming event. This can be ascertained another way.

The New Heavens and the New Earth

Let us imagine ourselves at the end of that thousand years for a minute, living at the time when the eternal state is to be ushered in. We are either Believers who survived the Great Tribulation or are children of Survivors living in mortal bodies. There are those Believers from all ages interacting with us who were raised from the dead when Yeshua returned a thousand years prior. There will have been those of us who have died during that time. What happens to us all when the time comes to usher in eternity? What happens to Believers resurrected at the Second Coming, who have been interacting with the earth for a thousand years? What happens to Survivors

⁸ Grimm, *Lexicon*, 188.

of the Great Tribulation and/or their children living during the Millennium? What happens to the Believing dead?

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

1 Corinthians 15:50-54

... *After that*, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:17

Then I saw a new heaven and new earth, for the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Revelation 21:1-4

Post-tribulationism sees a resurrection of the living righteous at the second coming. Of necessity there must also be another one a thousand years later, when these heavens and earth are destroyed by fire. Does the post-tribulationist then, believe in two "raptures," two resurrections of the living righteous who will never taste death?

There is yet another very familiar verse which I believe also points to the Day of Eternity as the time for the "translation" or "rapture." One would not know it, though, by the way it has traditionally been translated.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

1 John 3:2 NIV

I believe this translation obscures John's intended meaning and leaves the reader with the false impression that the "rapture" will occur at the second coming. What I believe to be a more accurate rendering of John's words is found in the footnote of the NIV.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when *it* appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

1 John 3:2 NIV footnote

In this verse John is discussing the appearance of what we will be when we see Yeshua as he is. If those who saw him alive from the dead did not see him as he is (for if they had they would have become like him, right?), then neither will those who survive the tribulation see him as he really is when he returns to rule. When it *does* appear, the text says, we shall be like him, for that is when we shall see him as he truly is. The revelation of that is reserved for the Day of Eternity,

when what is mortal will be swallowed up forever by immortality. Only then will mortal flesh see him as he is. Peter also speaks about this period in his second letter. What he has to say on the subject is pertinent to our discussion and ties everything together.

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

2 Peter 3:3-16 NASB

Peter is discussing the Master’s return (vss. 3, 9, 10 & 12), the new heavens and earth (vss. 7, 10, 12 & 13) and the kind of lives we are to be living in light of these things (vss. 11 & 14). Peter says quite plainly that Paul speaks “of” these things in all his letters (vss. 15-16). “Of” translates *περὶ* [*peri*] and means, “*about, concerning, as touching... as respects... with regard to, in reference to.*”⁹ We are all familiar with the places where Paul addresses the subjects of the second coming and the godly lives we are to be leading in view of it. But where does he discuss things pertaining to or in reference to the ushering in of the eternal state? I am convinced that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 are two places that fit the bill.

Concluding Remarks

The “Rapture of the Church” is a fairy tale and a serious error. The sooner we come to grips with this, the sooner we can start becoming what we need to be in preparation for Messiah’s return.

And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her seed, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Yeshua the Messiah... Here is the patience of the holy ones; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Yeshua... Blessed are those who do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter the city through the gates.

Revelation 12:17; 14:12; 22:14

⁹ Grimm, *Lexicon*, p. 501.