

JOHN PIPER AND THE RAPTURE

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

A new movie version of Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* novel is scheduled for release in movie theaters on October 3, 2014. This version features Academy Award winner Nicolas Cage cast in the role of pilot Rayford Steele. The announcement of this movie release has led to a number of articles critical of the pretribulation rapture. Morgan Lee produced a piece primarily quoting William Craig,¹ a Philosophy professor at historically pretribulation Talbot School of Theology in Southern California. Another article appeared a week later: "Nine Reasons Why John Piper Disagrees with Nicolas Cage's 'Left Behind' Movie's View of Rapture."² Apparently a number of folks within the Evangelical community are concerned that the new movie may have a great impact upon the thinking of the Christian community, so they are trying to get a head start on bashing the biblical basis for our blessed hope.

PIED PIPER

Retired pastor and author John Piper has a large following, especially among younger Evangelicals. While he is premillennial, he is decidedly anti-pre-trib and not a supporter of the modern state of Israel. According to Noske, Piper recently tweeted his nine reasons against pretribulationism. Even though space is limited, I will attempt to evaluate those reasons.³

1. "To meet" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 means to meet and accompany back to earth, thus, cannot be pretribulationist. The Greek word for "to meet" does NOT mean what Piper says. Piper's view was developed in the 1930s and more recent scholarship has disproved his speculation.⁴ "To meet" does not imply any direction on the basis of the word itself. Instead, spatial direction is indicated by the context of a passage.

2. 2 Thessalonians 1:5-7 refers to the second coming. I agree this passage refers to the second coming and not the rapture. Perhaps there are some pretribulationists who see the rapture in this passage but I have never met one. Many of Piper's objections, such as this one, are based upon a false understanding of what pretribulationists actually believe. He is chasing after windmills.

3. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 Piper equates the "gathering together to Him" and "the day of the Lord" as referring to the same event, the second coming. I disagree! They are separate items. The phrase "gathering together to Him" and "to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17) are identical concepts. Both refer to the rapture as a separate event from that of the "day of the Lord." The "day of the Lord" is used in the Old and New Testaments to primarily refer to the seven-year tribulation period and is not at all a synonym for the second coming. The phrase "great and terrible day of the Lord" is a reference to the second coming (Isa. 13:9; Joel 2:31; Zeph. 1:14-16; Mal. 4:1, 5). If Piper is correct concerning his view on this matter, then it would mean that the man of sin (the antichrist) would come after the second coming, which does not make sense within anyone's viewpoint.

Piper says further support for his view is that "gathering" is also used in Matthew 24:31, which is clearly a posttribulation event. He claims it is the same word as in 2 Thessalonians 2. Actually, both are from the same root but are not the same word. One is a noun (2 Thess. 2) and the other is a verb (Matt. 24). The contexts of the two

passages are very different, just like the rapture and the second coming are also very different events.

4. *If Paul intended to teach pretribulationism then why did he not just come out and say that in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?* I have been arguing in a number of articles⁶ over the years that the Greek word often translated “falling away” or “apostasy” is best translated “departure.” Since the context supports the idea of a spatial or physical departure in 2:3, then Paul is saying exactly what Piper suggests. Paul tells them that they are not in the day of the Lord or the tribulation since the departure of the church, which is the rapture, has not taken place. The false teachers in 2 Thessalonians are teaching posttribulationism and Paul corrects them with pretribulationism.

5. *Piper says no pre-trib rapture is found in Matthew 24 or Mark 13 or Luke 21.* I totally agree that the rapture is not found anywhere in the Olivet Discourse. That Discourse provides Jesus’ outline of the seven-year tribulation period leading up to the second coming with no mention of the rapture. The rapture of the Church is not revealed by Christ until the night before He was crucified. The Upper Room Discourse (John 13–16) contains Christ’s introduction to Church Age truth that He expands upon in the Epistles. It makes sense that the new revelation about the rapture was introduced to His disciples shortly before His death and resurrection (John 14:1–3).⁶

6. *Piper notes the New Testament teaches saints will be protected by God during the tribulation by the seal of God (Rev. 9:4).* How is this an argument against pretribulationism since all holding to a pre-trib position believe that there will be saints who will be protected during the tribulation? Those saints in the tribulation are never called the church, instead they are the hundreds of millions who will be saved after the rapture of the church during the tribulation (Rev. 7:9–17). Many will be martyred (Rev. 6:9–11) and many will make it through the perils of that time and will enter into the millennial kingdom in their mortal bodies. So it means all will not be protected during the tribulation as Piper intimates. Revelation 9:4 speaks specifically of the five month torture of the demonic locusts (Rev. 9:1–11).

7. *Next, he speaks of the command to “watch” as admonished by our Lord in Matthew 25:1–13 when speaking of the parable of the ten virgins.* Matthew 25 is a parable to Israel about watching for the second coming, not the rapture. The rapture is never found in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25). Instead, the church, in relation to the rapture is “waiting” for His Son from heaven . . . Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10). Since the rapture is signless, unlike the second coming, there are no signs to watch for, thus, the church is charged with *waiting* for her Bridegroom (1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:13; Jude 21).

8. *Piper cites Revelation 3:10 and pronounces it as the strongest passage for pre-trib, then says it means to be preserved through the tribulation.* Piper cites Galatians 1:4 and John 17:15 in an attempt to support his misguided notion that “kept from the hour” in Revelation 3:10 really means preservation instead of its normal meaning of kept from the time and place of the tribulation.⁷ First, Galatians 1:4 does not employ the Greek phrase “*tereo ek*” used in Revelation 3:10, therefore, the Galatians passage is not a factor to help one understand the meaning of 3:10. Next, the only other time *tereo ek* is used in the Greek New Testament is John 17:15 where it speaks of God the Father keeping believers from the evil one. I am sure Piper would agree Christ’s prayer has been answered since all genuine believers are protected from Satan. In the same way, all church age believers will be kept out of the time of the tribulation via the rapture before that seven-year event.

9. His final reason is “New Testament moral incentive is . . . that we should love the appearing of the Lord so that we want to be pure as the Lord is pure.”⁸ This is hardly an argument against pretribulationism since we believe most mentions of the rapture in New Testament Epistles are accompanied with a moral imperative applied to the present. Piper cites 1 John 3:1–3 as an example. Pretribulationists believe this passage is an example of multiple references to moral purity in the present in light of a future event. This verse and many others refer to the rapture and admonishes believers to “purify oneself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:3).

CONCLUSION

Evangelical leaders like John Piper appear to be on a crusade against the New Testament teaching of the pre-trib rapture doctrine as introduced by Jesus Himself in the Upper Room Discourse and expounded upon and applied in the Epistles by the Apostles, especially in Paul’s letters. In fact, Paul calls the rapture a believer’s “Blessed Hope” (Titus 2:13). Since the early 1970s in North America, God has used the teaching of pretribulationism as a key factor in seeing millions of people come to faith in Christ. Opposition to pretribulationism in the 70s came from liberals and unbelievers. Now, in 2014 many Evangelical leaders lead the way warning of the supposed dangers of preaching such a message. As a new movie is about to be released featuring the pre-trib rapture, believers should be praying that God will use it as a catalyst to proclaim the gospel to an unbelieving world so our Lord will use it to see an influx of unbelievers getting saved, similar to the early 70s. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Morgan Lee, “No, Christians Should Not Believe in ‘Left Behind’s’ Rapture Theology, Says Prominent Christian Philosopher,” *The Christian Post*, July 30, 2014; www.christianpost.com.

² Lauren Leigh Noske, “Nine Reasons Why John Piper Disagrees with Nicolas Cage’s ‘Left Behind’ Movie’s View of Rapture,” *The Gospel Herald*, August 6, 2014; www.gospelherald.com.

³ I am also drawing from Piper’s “Definitions and Observations Concerning the Second Coming of Christ,” *Desiring God Ministry*, August 30, 1987; www.desiringgod.org.

⁴ See the following: Kevin Zuber, “1 Thessalonians 4:17 and the meaning of ‘to meet’”, <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/1-thessalonians-417-and-meaning-of-to-meet-meeting-dignitary-or-retrieving-bride>. Thomas Ice, “The Meeting in the Sky,” <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-TheMeetingintheSky.pdf>. Michael R. Crosby, “Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul’s use of APANTSIS in 1 Thessalonians 4:17,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* Vol. 4, 1994, pp. 15-34.

⁵ See Thomas Ice, “Is the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?” <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-TheRapturein2Thessal.pdf>. Thomas Ice, “The ‘Departure’ in 2 Thessalonians 2:3” <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-TheDeparturein2Thess.pdf>.

⁶ See Thomas Ice, “The Rapture and John 14” <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-TheRaptureandJohn14.pdf>.

⁷ See Thomas Ice, “Kept from the Hour” <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-KeptFromTheHour.pdf>.

⁸ Piper, “Definitions and Observations.”