

THE RESURRECTION: SINGLE OR MULTIPLE?

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

I recently received the following question: "I believe in a pre-tribulation rapture of the church but the only post-trib argument, that almost every post-trib believer uses, that has stumped me deals with scriptures where Jesus Himself refers to raising up His followers on the last day (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54 and Mark 8:38). These verses coupled with (John 11:24) make a very strong case for a post-tribulation catching away (rapture) of the saints. . . . My study resources are limited and thought that maybe you could settle this argument." Even though I have never heard anyone use this argument, I hope to be able to answer this question as we look at what the Bible says about this issue.

RESURRECTION & RAPTURE

First, the resurrection and the rapture are not the same event, which is an errant assumption presupposed in the question. Resurrection is for the dead while the rapture will be for the living ("we who are alive and remain" 1 Thess. 4:17). It is a common ploy by non-pretribulationists to just assume that resurrection and rapture are the same, since that is what they believe. Then they want to conclude, as the questioner noted, that there must be a single resurrection event, which, if true, would militate against pretribulationism.

Second, it is true that a resurrection takes place in conjunction with the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4. However, Paul treats them as separate phases of the overall event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Verse 14 speaks of the resurrection of deceased church age believers, followed by verses 15–17 that describe the rapture of living church age believers. Paul says, "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (verse 17). Thus, it is clear that the resurrection and "the catching up" (i.e., rapture) are not the same exact event, even though they occur in close sequence with one another.

THE JOHN PASSAGES

Verses in John 6 are cited about raising believers up in the last day, as if this somehow refutes the not yet revealed pre-trib rapture. The main point being made by our Lord in the context of this discourse (John 6:22–40) supports the sub-point of verse 37. "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." Those given to the Son (Jesus) by the Father are the elect and Jesus, who is One with the Father (6:36), will certainly not cast out those chosen by the Father. In other words, the elect of the Father are secure with the Son.

The next verse says: "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day" (6:40). The statement "I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day," speaks of the fact that all of the elect given Christ by the Father will make to their destined goal, which is the resurrection. In context, the statement about being raised up on the last day refers solely to the resurrection of believers. Certainty of a believer's resurrection is reinforced by verse 41 which says, whoever "believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." Likewise, the other two references (6:44, 54) are also statements assuring believers that they will all attain to their destiny of the resurrection in the last day. John Walvoord has noted:

The broad prophecies which here are being revealed by the Saviour predict, first of all, the salvation of individuals who hear the facts about Christ and as a result of believing will live eternally. Just as Jesus has life in Himself from the Father, so He has authority to judge as the Son of man (v. 26). For further confirmation of Christ's ability, Jesus called attention to the fact that those in the grave, referring to those who have *died* physically, will someday hear His voice and come out of the grave with the result that they will be judged concerning their life on earth, whether good or bad (vv. 28-29). In asserting this fact of judgment, Christ Jesus is not teaching that all the resurrections will occur at the same time as other Scriptures make clear that there will be a series of resurrections, and the wicked will not be judged until all the righteous will be raised.ⁱ

These passages do not deal with the timing of the resurrection in the last day, instead they provide certainty or assurance that all believers will experience a future time of resurrection. Since Jesus had not yet revealed that there would even be a future assembly that would be known as the church, He would clearly not have yet revealed the event that would bring that church age to a close, the rapture. Therefore, it follows that Jesus made a general statement about the resurrection in these passages about the certainty of a future resurrection for believers, not intending to convey a nuance of the timing in relation to when this event would fit into end-time prophetic events.

MARK 8:38

“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). This passage is merely a summary statement of a dialogue that began in verse 34 where Jesus said the following: “And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” The phrase “when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels,” clearly speaks of the second coming, since it refers to His return to planet earth in glory. This event is clearly described in Mark 13:24–27 (compare Matt. 24:27–31) as Christ “coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). How does this in any way deny pretribulationism?

Once again, contrary to some non-pretribulationists, we do not see Mark 8:38 as a reference to the rapture, nor do we even see the rapture mentioned in either Matthew or Mark at all. For this passage to be properly used against pretribulationism, it would have to be shown to be a rapture passage that pre-tribblers use in that way.ⁱⁱ Such is not the case! Christ returning in glory is clearly related to the second coming to the earth (for example Matt. 25:31; Rev. 19:11–18). The presumed compulsion by a posttribulationist that Mark 8:38 refers to the rapture has no traction with pretribulationists since it has not been proven that such a passage relates to the rapture.

JOHN 11:24

“Martha said to Him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day’” (John 11:24). Once again, I am at a loss to find anything that somehow remotely supports a posttribulationist argument versus a pretribulationist one. Once again, this is a reference to a believer being resurrected and it also refers to a general statement about

the certainty of an end-time resurrection. One must assume that the rapture and the resurrection are a single event, which I demonstrated above that they are not from the clear rapture passage (1 Thess. 4:13–18). As in the other passages, one is baffled how this passage could be seen as a reference to the rapture when Christ has not yet unveiled revelation concerning the rapture.

MULTIPLE RESURRECTIONS

The New Testament teaches multiple resurrections, not just a single event at the end of time. There are multiple resurrections of believers that do not occur at the same time but are sequential as follows:

- 1) The resurrection of Jesus Christ as the first fruit of many to be raised (Rom. 6:9; 1 Cor. 15:23; Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:18).
- 2) The resurrection of the redeemed at Christ's coming (Dan. 12:2; Luke 14:14; John 5:29; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 20:4, 6)
 - a) Resurrection of the church at the rapture.
 - b) Resurrection of Old Testament believers at the second coming (Jews and Gentiles), at least seven years after the resurrection at the rapture.
 - c) Resurrection of all martyred tribulation saints at the second coming (Jews and Gentiles).
 - d) Resurrection of all millennial believers after the millennium (implied).
- 3) The resurrection of the unredeemed from throughout history (Rev. 20:11-14).

CONCLUSION

Since the Bible teaches multiple resurrections, depending on which saved body it relates to, it does not mean that there is only a single or mass resurrection at which time every believer from Adam on down is raised up. Statements that simply mention a time of future resurrection should not be taken as an exhaustive statement concerning this issue. Instead, later statements that speak specifically about a time when a resurrection will occur should be taken as the ones that provide a chronology of these events. One should never use one statement in Scripture to argue against the clear meaning of another passage, as if they are pitted against one another. However, since there are no contradictions in the Bible, all passages should be interpreted in their contexts in such a way that Scripture is harmonized with itself. This is the approach that should be taken in dealing with these passages in relation to pretribulationism. When this approach is followed, it does not result in an anti-pretrib polemic. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook: All the prophecies of Scripture explained in on volume* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), p. 408.

ⁱⁱ The following are most of the rapture passages that pretribulationist either directly refer to the rapture or presume the rapture: John 14:1–3; Rom. 5:9; 8:19; 1 Cor. 1:7–8; 15:51–53; 16:22; Phil. 3:20–21; 4:5; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 4:13–18; 5:9, 23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 3 (?); 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28; James 5:7–9; 1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 5:4; 1 John 2:28–3:2; Jude 21; Rev. 2:25; 3:10; 4:1.