

PRETRIBULATIONISM

PART I

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Pretribulationism is the belief that the rapture of the church occurs before the commencement of the seven-year tribulation. The rapture will result in church saints receiving glorified bodies—the living through translation and the deceased through resurrection—and forever being with the Lord Jesus Christ. Since amillennialists and postmillennialists regard the coming of Christ as a single event that will culminate in a general resurrection and judgment, the issue of the timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation is a premillennial concern.

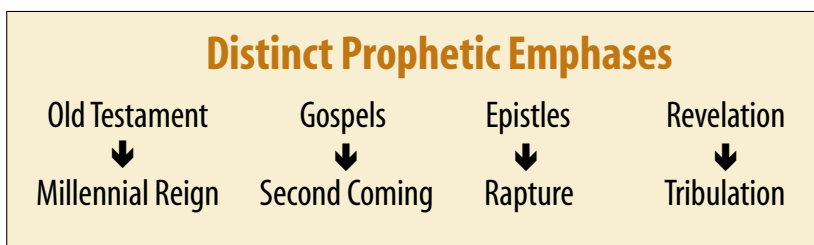
A mystery is a truth that had not been previously revealed by God. It is not something that God intended to withhold as a secret; rather, in due course of time God revealed something previously unknown (e.g. the rapture).



Within the Gospels, the only mention of the rapture is John 14:1-3. By contrast, there are several references to the second coming in the Gospels.¹ The rapture is a prophesied event for the church only. Logically, then, the Old Testament does not reveal the rapture, because this is an event for the church. Christ first gave the promise of the rapture in the New Testament. However, the Old Testament promised the coming of Messiah to earth as the sovereign King. The epistles primarily emphasize the rapture. The Gospels emphasize the second coming. Christ's disciples expected fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of Messiah, who will reign on David's throne in Jerusalem. The Gospels would logically and contextually emphasize Christ's coming to national Israel to fulfill the covenantal promises and establish His earthly kingdom. The church was a mystery "hidden from the past ages and generations" (Col 1:26), and therefore, the rapture of the church was also a mystery (1 Cor 15:51-54).

The mystery concerning the resurrection of church saints is that some would not die (1 Cor 15:51). All church saints will receive glorified bodies either by translation of the living or resurrection of the deceased at the coming of Christ. A mystery is a truth that had not been previously revealed by God. It is not something that God intended to withhold as a secret; rather, in due course of time God

revealed something previously unknown (e.g. the rapture). There are various "mysteries" revealed in Scripture, so the idea itself is frequent. Scripture refers to the mystery of the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God (Matt 13). Paul used the Greek word *mustērion* ("mystery") twenty times. According to 1 Corinthians 15:51, there is a mystery regarding the resurrection and translation of church saints (cf. 1 Thess 4:14-17). The church as being composed of both Jew and Gentile in equality was a mystery (Eph 3:1-11). The incarnation was a mystery (1 Cor 2:7; Col 2:2, 9). Second Thessalonians 2:7 refers to the mystery of lawlessness. Israel's pre-



sent blindness is a mystery (Rom 11:25). The Book of Revelation refers to the mystery of the seven stars (1:20) and of the harlot (17:5, 7). Scripture even refers to the mystery of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). Regarding the use of *mustērion* in 1 Corinthians 15, amillennial commentator Albert Barnes noted:

The word here does not mean anything which was in its nature unintelligible, but that which to them had been hitherto unknown. This commences the third sub-

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ject of inquiry in this chapter—the question, what will become of those who are alive when the Lord Jesus shall return to raise the dead? This was an obvious inquiry, and the answer was, perhaps, supposed to be difficult, and says that they will undergo an instantaneous change, which will make them like the dead that shall be raised.²

The mystery that Paul communicated in 1 Corinthians 15 is “we will not all sleep” (i.e. die). The Greek there is the future passive indicative, *koimēthēsometha*, which means that believers “will not all sleep” in the future. In other words, some believers shall not die physically before the eschatological resurrection of the saints.

When Paul wrote, “we will not all sleep,” he was certainly referring to physical death.³ The *mustērion* is that when the resurrection occurs, there will be believers who are still living. The use of the first person plural for “sleep” would mean that Paul included himself with those facing the possibility of being translated while living.⁴ The Apostle anticipated this resurrection as an imminent event that could occur in his own lifetime.⁵

Paul certainly expected that the conclusion of his ministry would not be by death but by “the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming” (1 Thess 2:19). It is the fact that there were no events preceding this coming that Paul included himself as one who may experience the blessed event (cf. Tit 2:13). Radmacher commented, “There may be delay, but there would be no necessary prophesied event before the coming of Christ for His church.”⁶ Morris would reply that this is an illegitimate conclusion: “The plain fact is that Paul did not know when these events would take place, and nowhere does he claim to know. When he says *we* he means ‘we believers,’ ‘Christians alive at that day.’”⁷ In response, if the



passage could mean “Christians alive at that day,” then this would include the Apostle Paul, which is the point. Without a doubt, Paul regarded the imminent translation of living church saints as an incentive for holy living (1 Cor 15:51; Phil 3:20; 1 Thess 4:17; Tit 2:13) and something that could occur in his lifetime.

The other truth that Paul was communicating to the Corinthians is “we will all be changed.” Either a believer’s body will be dead or living at the time of the resurrection (1 Thess 4:13-18), but irrespective of the present state, all will be translated (changed).⁸ The translation of church saints at the rapture answers Paul’s preceding statement in verse 50: What will happen to believers who do not die prior to the resurrection? How shall they take part in the resurrection of the body? “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” so there must be a transformation (1 Cor 15:50; Phil 3:21). The transformation for some will be while they are still living. It must be stated that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is not a mystery, since it was taught in the Old Testament (Job 14:14). The mystery truth is that not all church saints will experience physi-

cal death. The resurrection *and* translation occurring for some still living is a mystery previously unknown. There will be a group of believers that will not experience the intermediate state, which follows physical death and precedes the resurrection of the body (2 Cor 5:10).

The Christian has a great hope in Jesus Christ. All of humanity is condemned before God as sinners, but victory over the wages of sin is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone as one's Savior. Christ alone can provide the victory through either resurrection or translation. The rapture of the church is to have a purifying effect on the body of Christ, since at any moment the church saints could be in His presence. The rapture of the church should also cause Christians to be active in obeying all the Lord's commands and responsible with the privileges of the Gospel, since Christ could come at any moment. Certainly, the church should be active in the work of the Lord and Savior so that when He returns to gather His church, there will not be shame, but rather confidence in His coming, because one has lived a life of obedience in service of Jesus Christ.

* Following this brief introduction to pretribulationism, subsequent articles will follow to provide biblical defense of rapture passages in John 14:1-3; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15:23-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11; and, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 (and an extended exegesis of the Olivet Discourse and Revelation 3:10). (MC)

ENDNOTES

- 1 The author presented a paper entitled "Consistent Pretribulationism and Jewish Questions of the End" at the annual meeting of the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, Texas, 11 December 2002, which argued that the rapture of the church is not within the context of the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24—25 // Mark 13 // Luke 21). A rough draft of the paper is available at <http://www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=121>. The final draft of the paper was published as "The Olivet Discourse: A Resolution of Time," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 9 (Spring 2003): 106-40.
- 2 Albert Barnes, *Notes on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Gall & Inglis, 1847), 383.
- 3 William F. Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 437.
- 4 For some who disagree regarding the possibility that Paul included himself as being alive at the resurrection, see Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 354-55; and, A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 4:198.
- 5 How did Paul's expectation of the rapture as imminent affect the statement that Peter would "grow old" (John 21:18) and that Paul "must witness at Rome" (Acts 23:11)? God's promise to Peter may be regarded as a general description of his future (i.e. Peter could have died some time following the Lord's ascension and could be regarded as one grown old). Given the date for the composition of the Gospel of John (AD 85-95), the prophecy would not have been circulated largely among the early church to dissuade belief in the imminency of the rapture. Secondly, by the time of the composition of the Book of James, which may have been the first writing of the New Testament (it is possible that the Gospel was written as early as AD 45, and therefore, the Book of James was either the first or second book in the New Testament canon, since the Gospel of Matthew was written approximately AD 45-55), Peter would have grown old in age and his death could be regarded as imminent. Moreover, understanding the progress of revelation, the doctrine of imminency was not revealed completely until the writing of the Pauline epistles (AD 48-64). The fulfillment of the prophecy concerning Paul's witness in Rome should be understood as probable if the Lord Jesus did not return sooner, as Christians today often say for something to be accomplished "if the Lord wills." However, even if the prophecy is regarded as necessary (which the Greek particle would indicate), the essential requirement for the rapture of the church to be pretribulationist is that it simply precede the seven-year tribulation. If there was a genuine delay in the Lord's coming for His church, as in the prophecies to Peter and Paul, this would not argue against pretribulationism, since mere objections to imminence are not sufficient to deny the biblical doctrine.
- 6 Earl Radmacher, "The Imminent Return of the Lord," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, gen. ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 258.
- 7 Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 227.
- 8 Since Paul stated, "we will all be changed" (1 Cor 15:51) and "God will bring with Him, those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (1 Thess 4:14), such statements would negate partial rapturism (the belief that only "spiritual" Christians who are watching for the rapture will experience the event). Moreover, 1 Thessalonians 5:10 teaches that whether watching ("awake") or not watching ("asleep"), the rapture will be experienced by all church saints. (The Greek word translated "asleep" in 1 Thess 5:6, 10 is different than the word for "asleep" in 1 Thess 4:13-15. The former context is that of watchfulness, whereas the latter context is physical death.)