

Episode 255

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Kevin, the managing editor of GotQuestions.org, and Jeff, the managing editor of BibleRef.com are joining me for episode two in our series about the end times. We're going to be covering different end times events, try to essentially go in sequential order. But as you see, some of the stuff we talk about today will connect to some of the stuff we talk about next week and some of the stuff we talk about later. But today we're going to be covering the rapture. What is the rapture? When is it going to happen? Is it a separate event from the second coming and so forth?

Shea Houdmann

Let me just say at the outset that the timing of the rapture is a very controversial issue in the study of eschatology, and there's some entire fields of theology and eschatology that don't even really believe that there is a rapture, that this is just the second coming. So we recognize it's controversial, recognize that there's a lot of disagreement, but we think the Bible is very clear in several aspects of the rapture, and that's what we're going to try to focus on today. The timing, we have a hope, I think it's part of the blessed hope, in addition to the second coming, that the rapture will occur before the end times tribulation, which we'll go into before, and that's our default position.

Shea Houdmann

But this is a position we hold with grace, recognizing the timing of the rapture is not an essential of the faith, and it's not even to be in the same field of eschatology, the same doctrinal stance. You can have different views on the timing of the rapture and still basically have the same views of the end times. So I hope you hear that spirit.

Shea Houdmann

But let me start just by reading what I think is the main passage that talks about the rapture. And that's in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, and I'll read verses 13 to 18. Again, that's 1 Thessalonians 4:13 to 18. But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with the cry

of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Shea Houdmann

So what this passage is describing, there is a return of Jesus, there is a call of the archangel, possibly a trumpet sound where all the dead in Christ, all believers in Christ who have died over the centuries, are raised and meet Christ in the air, and then all believers who are still alive, along with the dead in Christ, also meet Christ in the air. And this is the event that is known as the rapture. There are some who take an extreme view, say the Bible doesn't teach the rapture at all. Clearly this passage does teach an end times event that involves people being resurrected and meeting Christ in the air. Now the big question of course, is this a separate event from the second coming? So Kevin, why don't you dive in a little deeper, what are some other key passages on the rapture, and why is the rapture an important doctrine for us to understand and to study?

Kevin Stone

Yes, I love talking about this topic. I love the thought of the rapture and that time when Jesus is going to come for His own. He's going to receive us unto Himself, and He's going to take us to the Father's house. And it's just going to be a wonderful time when we get to see Jesus face to face. And it's an important doctrine because it gives us so much hope. As we live in this world that's darkened with sin, it's a fallen world, and we are busy about the Lord's work, and we're toiling, and we're sometimes getting discouraged, but we always have this hope in front of us that Jesus is coming again to receive us unto Himself.

Kevin Stone

Some of the other passages, two other main passages that the Bible deals with the rapture, I can share with you here. The passage you just read, Shea, 1 Thessalonians 4, gives us the sequence of events regarding the living and the dead at the rapture, be that resurrection of the dead and then the translation of the living as we are changed and taken up into the air to meet with the Lord. But the other two passages would be from John 14 and 1 Corinthians 15.

Kevin Stone

So in John 14, this is Jesus speaking to His disciples, and it's on the night of His arrest. So He's basically doing His farewell address to His disciples, teaching them some things that He really wants to leave with them. And in this

passage, He gives us the destination of the believers at the rapture. He says this to His disciples, do not let your heart be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in Me. My Father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you I'm going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me, that you also may be where I am. So what a wonderful promise to His disciples that He will come again. He's going to take them so that they will be with Him, and then they will be where He is, that is, heaven. We are going to be taken by the Lord to His Father's house. And this is Jesus teaching on the rapture.

Kevin Stone

1 Corinthians 15 then gives us the duration of the event, happens very quickly, and then the purpose of the rapture of the church, as Paul reveals this mystery, he calls it. A mystery is something that had at one time been hidden from our knowledge, but now God is revealing it to us. And in verse 50 and following, we read this, 1 Corinthians 15. I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. So there's a purpose for the rapture right there. We cannot, in our physical human bodies, be in heaven. So God's got to change us. This is how that happens. Paul continues here in verse 50. Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery. We shall 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 incorruptible, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, 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.

Kevin Stone

So the rapture is all about victory. Victory over death, victory over the grave, as the dead in Christ are raised, and then immediately following that, living believers will be translated. They'll be changed. Their physical bodies will be changed into a glorified body, a resurrection body that is fit for eternity. And that's what begins our eternal state, really. Our eternal home with Jesus will be beginning at that time. And that is what the rapture is all about.

Jeff Laird

Well, I have to say that I find discussions of the rapture interesting because there are different opinions. There's different ideas about when it's going to happen and when it's not. We're making a point in this series to bring up the idea that, as Shea said, not only are some of these beliefs secondary in the sense that you don't have to have a specific view on these in order to be saved or even to be an orthodox true believer, but also that there's a relatively

low impact of some of these on your day-to-day life. They're good to know and they're important to know, especially when it comes to things like hope. But I tell people that I am well, well on the side of wanting the rapture to happen when things get difficult or things get tough. I tell people I'm holding out hope for the rapture. I will certainly take that if I get to vote on an option, and I don't. But if I got to vote on one, I would definitely vote on that being the way.

Jeff Laird

Rapture is also interesting for me because I've been through it before. I have experienced it. I know what it's like. Before people think I'm being weird, when I was a kid, I was, I don't know, maybe seven, eight years old. I did something and I don't remember exactly what I did. I was going to be in massive trouble. This is one of those ones where your legs are shaking and you're running around the backyard going, what am I going to do? What am I going to do when mom and dad find out about it? And in my backyard, I remember praying, Lord, if you're going to come back, it would be great if you just come back right now, because that's the only way I'm going to avoid getting in trouble. And I heard this loud trumpet blast right at that moment when I was in my backyard. Now, as it turns out, it was just some random person in our neighborhood who decided to step outside and play for whatever reason. But I mean, yeah, I did all the things, you know, whatever you want to think of when a person freaks out. I had that. So I jokingly say that I understand what the surprise rapture is going to be like.

Jeff Laird

But I think some of the things that we talk about in this, though, are important because they do fit into what we talk about in the purpose of the church and the purpose of what we're going to call the tribulation, which is this seven year period at some point during the end times where there's going to be tons of terrible things happening around the world politically and environmentally and just going to be awful, awful. So these descriptions that we have to talk about God rescuing the church from that or that the church is not appointed to wrath is important because that's part of how the theology for this develops. And I'm sure we'll get into those bits and pieces later.

Jeff Laird

I do want to address one thing people sometimes bring up about the rapture, which is the idea that it's a new or a recent development in theology. And that's true, depending on how you define it. The really, really well-defined version of the rapture that we talk about now is really from the mid 1800s. It wasn't until about then that some of the real language and ideas that we talk about now really got solidified. But when you look back through early church fathers and historical documents, you do see references from Christian

leaders who talk about things that are very similar to the way we describe the rapture now. One reason possibly that some of those were not as popular is that did not match Catholic teaching. And the Catholic church was the dominant force in Christianity for a long time.

Jeff Laird

But you see people in the second century and the 1300s, 1400s, medieval times, who will say things like, God is going to come and get his church because he doesn't want them to be in the tribulation. So you have that pre-millennial idea of God taking the church out even earlier. It was not until much later that we really, really solidified and congealed all of these ideas. But it's worth mentioning that, yes, it is relatively new. And that's a very good reason for us to recognize that it is not a crucial doctrine for our salvation. If this was something that we absolutely had to know, God would have made sure that we knew about it. But just because it's new does not necessarily mean that it is incorrect. We can learn and develop as we go.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent point, Jeff. And I'm glad you brought that up. The newness of doctrine. I mean, there's a saying in theology that if you think of something that no one has ever thought of before in 2000 years of church history, that gives you good reason to pause and question whether this doctrine is actually biblical. But something like the Shepherd of Hermas, a very early Christian document, could easily be read to be talking about a rapture that occurs before the time of wrath. And there are some of the other early church fathers, as you said, definitely seem to have some sort of belief of God delivering the church before the time of devastation. So we have basically 1,500 years of Catholic ideas becoming dominant, and amillennialism, where there is no literal thing. The only end times event that's coming is the second coming, and then new heavens and new earth. That was the dominant viewpoint for so long that no one was even really thinking or studying eschatology much. So there's a good reason why it took time to develop.

Shea Houdmann

But ultimately, though, the rapture is a biblical doctrine. The key question with the rapture, I guess, questions, one, is it the same event as the second coming, or is it a separate event? And then related to the end times tribulation, the next episode in this series will be specifically on the tribulation. Does the rapture happen before the tribulation, in the middle of the tribulation, sometime towards the end of the tribulation, or actually at the end of the tribulation, which would be the view that it's the same event as the second coming? So Kevin, I know you've done some study on what do you

see are the key differences between the rapture and second coming? Why should we view these as two separate end times events?

Kevin Stone

Yes, we see the second coming of Christ basically happening in two phases. And the rapture is the first of those two phases where Jesus comes and receives us, and then he comes again to establish his kingdom. We believe, our position is that these two events, the two phases of the second coming are separated by at least seven years where the tribulation falls. And both of you guys have kind of alluded to this verse, which is 1 Thessalonians 1 and verse 10, which calls us to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. And so we believe that the deliverance from the coming wrath is actually a reference to the rapture of the church. We believe that the rapture and the second coming are different phases of Jesus' return to this earth. And for the sake of my presentation here, I'll just say rapture versus second coming, realizing that they're related and that they're just phases of the same event.

Kevin Stone

But the rapture and the second coming, we believe, are different events separated by some time for at least these reasons. In the rapture, Jesus comes for his saints. In the second coming, Jesus comes with his saints from heaven. So there's a difference there. In the rapture, Jesus comes in the clouds to meet us in the air, 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 17. And in the second coming, Jesus descends all the way to the earth. His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, Zechariah 14, verses 3 and 4. So there's a coming partway to earth, meets us in the air. And then there's a coming all the way to the earth. And we see that as a difference.

Kevin Stone

In the rapture, there's a resurrection of non-living saints, those who are sleeping in Jesus, as the passage says. And there's a resurrection there. In the second coming, there is no mention of a resurrection of believers at all attached to that. In the rapture, Jesus comes from heaven and he returns to heaven. We will go be where he is. But in the second coming, Jesus comes from heaven and he sets up his kingdom on earth. He comes all the way to the earth and he stays, deals with wickedness, and he sets up his wonderful kingdom.

Kevin Stone

In the rapture, he delivers saints from the wrath to come. The second coming, though, is the culmination of the wrath to come. And it's a time of the end of that wrath as the kingdom, the peaceable kingdom of God is set up.

Kevin Stone

In the rapture, it could happen at any time. We say that it is imminent. There is nothing else prophetically that has to happen before Jesus returns to receive us unto himself. The rapture could happen at any time. But the second coming is preceded by some specific identifiable signs that Jesus goes through, like in Matthew 24, the signs that are leading up to his appearing for all the world to see.

Kevin Stone

And then finally, the rapture involves only the saved. We will see him. But then the second coming, everyone will see him. Every eye will behold him. So the second coming involves a whole world. The rapture only involves the church. We see these things as differences that are big enough for us to separate the two. The phase one is the rapture and the phase two is his second coming all the way to the earth.

Jeff Laird

Like the distinctions that you have in there. Another one that's been interesting to me is the idea that in the book of Revelation, there's this very large stretch where the word church just does not appear. Now, that does not mean that there aren't going to be any believers during this phase after the rapture. And that I suppose could maybe be an entire other episode. But from what we see in the Bible, we have no reason to think that people cannot be saved and come to a saving relationship with Christ after the rapture. But it's interesting because then that discussion becomes, is that considered then part of the church? Is it a terminology thing? But it's interesting one way or another that in Revelation, during all of these terrible things that are happening, you don't hear any reference to the church, but you do hear references to saints. So to me, that's always been one of the interesting mentions to that.

Jeff Laird

And it's also good to notice that pretty much all of the discussion about the timing of the rapture has to do with the relationship between the church and the wrath that's happening. To what extent is God going to spare the existing church from what's going to happen in the tribulation? So pre-tribulationism would say he's going to spare the church from all of it. Mid-tribulation is the idea that he's going to come at that halfway point between what we sometimes call the tribulation and the great tribulation. There's pre-wrath, which is the idea that he's going to come sometime after the middle, but before the really bad stuff, whatever that means, considering how awful most of what's in Revelation is. Then there's the post, which says that he's going to show up basically at the same time as the second coming.

Jeff Laird

But pretty much all of those are defined and discussed on the question of how is God going to have the church interact with this judgment that's happening on the world? And there's reasonable arguments to be made that God does not always spare the church from terrible things. Individual Christians and groups of Christians have undergone awful, awful things. So in and of itself, the argument that God would not want us to go through that doesn't really work. I mean, he very well could. It's more a question of when scripture talks about being spared from the wrath to come and meeting us in the air and these other things, what does that mean?

Jeff Laird

So as we've said before, I hold kind of a tentative sense of a lot of stuff in eschatology, but I would think that the pre-tribulational rapture idea does seem to make the most sense. It's what I would hold out hope for, but I would consider myself prepared either way. I'm not finding myself in a position where I have to know whether it's pre, post, mid, or whatever. I'm ready as I can be now, and that's what I want other people to be also.

Kevin Stone

Another thing that pre-trib people like me point to is when God's judgment day fell upon Sodom and Gomorrah, God pulled his people out first. He came personally and pulled out Lot and his family. He was not going to judge the wicked alongside the righteous. He delivered the righteous from that wrath before he meted out that judgment. And an illustration, I think, of God's heart and the way that he'll be treating the church at the time of the rapture.

Shea Houdmann

The way I hear a lot of end-times teachers break this down is similar to what you were saying, Jeff. There's wrath that is taking place. God has not always protected the church, Christians, followers of Christ, from the wrath of men, from persecution, those sorts of things. But God does not pour out his wrath on believers. There's a verse similar to what Kevin read earlier, 1

Thessalonians 5:9, for God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. So if the tribulation, Revelation 6-19, are God pouring out his wrath on the world, on wickedness, on evil, well, then the church being there would involve—I mean, if you read Revelation, obviously God can do anything. He could protect believers from his wrath, even in the midst of the terrible suffering we see in there, but it seems pretty narrowing on impossible for no Christian to be impacted by God pouring out his wrath on the entire world, based on what we see in Revelation 6-18.

Shea Houdmann

So the pre-trib view is that God is going to preserve or remove Christians from the entire time period of the wrath. And some see in Revelation 3:10, in

reference to one of the seven churches, I will keep you from the hour of trial that's coming on the whole world, and see this is sort of a promise that it's not just, he's just going to protect us from the wrath that's coming, he's actually going to remove us from the time period of the trial, which would be a reference to the tribulation.

Shea Houdmann

So again, all three of us strongly hope that the rapture will occur before the tribulation. If you read Revelation 6-19, I don't want any part of any of that. I don't want to witness it. I don't want to, and even like the wrath of man, the wrath of the antichrist, the wrath of evil, Babylon, and all the evil things that happen, I want nothing to do with that. But at the same time, recognizing that God has allowed Christians to go through terrible suffering, I do not view myself as exempt from that. So were it to be a mid-trib, pre-wrath, or post-trib view, that's not going to shake my faith in God. It's not going to cause me to question God's goodness. It's just, I hope the pre-trib view is correct. I think there's good biblical evidence to believe pre-tribulation rapture, but in terms of different end times events, I think I said in the first episode, I'm more strongly a pre-millennialist than I am a pre-tribulationist. So that's kind of where I'm at. I hope the pre-trib view is correct. I strongly lean that direction, but this is not a hill I guess I'm willing to die on.

Kevin Stone

Yeah, and I appreciate that perspective as well. Whatever happens, whatever God's timing is for the end times, however that ends up to be, our eternal destiny is secure. We are secure in Christ. Now, we believe in the rapture. We believe that it is going to be happening. I think I'll also throw this in here, that we believe that when the rapture happens, that all of the church is going to be taken to be with Christ. The Bible doesn't really give any kind of clue that this is going to be a partial rapture. I think one of the big things that leads us to believe it's going to be a full rapture of all of the church with no believers left behind is some of the symbolism that God uses to identify the church, calls us a body. God's not going to leave part of his body behind. He's not going to chop himself up and leave part of himself here. We're also called the bride of Christ. God's not going to take part of the bride and leave part of the bride here. Also, we are the temple of God. We're all living stones that have been compacted together and joined and fitted just where God wants us. We're going to be taken as a unit. He's not going to leave part of the building here in ruins. He's going to be taking all believers, everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, will be taken at the rapture. Ready or not, here he comes. And we want to be ready. We want to be serving him, occupying until he comes.

Jeff Laird

And that readiness really is that relationship that we have with Christ. So one of the things that gives people fear of the rapture is this idea of, I'm going to be left behind. And the point that you were making, Kevin, right there is important, is that in order to not be left behind, one has to have a saving relationship with Christ. And that's it. So this is not where, you know, Lord is going to punish us by saying, well, you were a believer, but you weren't a great believer. So you're going to stick around for all this terrible stuff. So, you know, the sense of being concerned, worried, fearful about the rapture, if you're securing your salvation in Christ, you're ready. If you're not, that's the way to be prepared for the rapture. So all the scary things that we see and all the things that we're worried about, we don't really need to worry about them.

Jeff Laird

Sometimes people also are concerned about young children, babies, and so on and so forth. A lot of ministries, including ours, take the position that that would fall under the same umbrella as what we call the age of accountability, which is the idea that if that child or that infant was to die in a state where they couldn't possibly comprehend the gospel in the first place, we believe that Christ's grace is going to extend to them. We can't absolutely chisel that in stone, but we have very good reasons to think that that's the case. So we have good reasons to think that that would apply to the rapture as well.

Jeff Laird

It's also good for people to remember that just because some person makes an interesting visual case for something does not necessarily mean it's true. With all due respect to Nicolas Cage, the movie adaptations that have involved the rapture are usually are usually awful. And again, no offense to Krik Cameron or whoever else, but it's a difficult kind of a subject to put on film. It's even a difficult subject to put in books. Around the turn of the century, there was a whole series of books that was this fictionalized account of the end times. And believe it or not, just like we see with movies, like the Ten Commandments and Prince of Egypt, that's where people sort of get their sense of Moses and the Exodus. Those books and movies sometimes become the way people sort of interpret what they see in the end time. And that's not all terribly bad, because there's things that we can pull from that. We just have to remember that those are not actual scripture. That's not actually what the Bible says. And what the Bible says, it might be a little bit more vague or it might actually be more specific than what we see in those. So as far as being ready for the rapture, it's not about saying I need to do something extra and special and different. You be ready. You have that right relationship with Christ.

Jeff Laird

And then as Shay was saying, that also gives you the opportunity to say, that way I know that even if my sense of what's going to happen, the rapture was wrong, then that's the only thing that's at stake is okay. Then I guess it's going to be another three and a half or seven or five or whatever years of really hard stuff. If I survive it and 50,000 years into eternity, I'm probably not even going to remember it. So we don't need to fear the rapture. We just need to be ready by doing what God has asked us to do right now.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah. Well said, Jeff. I'm sure you two guys have seen questions about the rapture from people who don't believe in the rapture, you say, well, all these Christians who are deceived into believing in the rapture, they're going to lose their faith if the rapture doesn't happen. And you're basing this on what? Will some Christians be surprised if there is no rapture before the tribulation? Of course. I honestly would be very surprised if the tribulation were to start. I'm still here. But I think it would take me a good five seconds to then readjust. Okay. Well, the Bible still tells me what's going to happen. How can I be ready? What does God want me to do in the midst of the tribulation rather than me being in heaven with the Lord where I would much prefer to be?

Jeff Laird

So you are going to have to take back that car loan.

Shea Houdmann

Exactly. This doctrine of the rapture, just be clear on what we can be clear on. The Bible teaches the rapture in a passage like 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15, John 14. The event that's known as the rapture, even though the word rapture may not be in this passage, the doctrine is biblical. What's debatable is that a separate event from the second coming, as Kevin went through, that there's good biblical reason to view it as a separate event. And then the question is, how separate? Separate by seven years? Separate by more? Separate by three and a half? Separate by a few months? Who knows? All those things we can debate. You can have discussions. We can hope. But to say the doctrine of the rapture is unbiblical is absurd because there are multiple passages that clearly teach the doctrine.

Shea Houdmann

So we're going to focus on that Christ is coming back for his church, his bride, and he will take us to heaven. We will receive glorified bodies. All those who have died in Christ will be resurrected and be given glorified bodies, and we will be forever with the Lord. And that's the hope that the rapture gives us. Fun to debate. Fun to discuss. Fascinating to read an End Times fiction series and kind of imagine what it might be like. But ultimately, what the Bible says,

Jesus is coming back for his people. And that's a doctrine we cannot and should not deny. So I hope our conversation today has been encouraging to you. I hope you have a better understanding of what the Bible teaches about the rapture. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.