

## THE RAPTURE IN HISTORY AND PROPHECY

by Thomas Ice

A number of years ago I had a meal with one of the most well known Reformed theologians in America. The purpose of our get-together was to discuss the issue of Bible prophecy. A number of times throughout our conversation he would stop in mid-sentence and make a comment about how absurd the whole concept of the rapture was. He was not questioning the timing of the rapture at this point, but the very idea and concept of a rapture. Of course, my response was that even though he thought it ridiculous, the Bible teaches this strange event. In fact, the rapture of the church will not be the first rapture in history. When one examines the panorama of biblical history it is amazing to find a number of raptures throughout history and prophecy.

This month Harvest House Publishers is releasing the chart book that Tim LaHaye and I have been working on for the last couple of years. It is entitled *Charting the End Times*. We are both very pleased with this full-color prophecy chart book that not only has a fold-out master chart at the front of the book, but around 55 other prophecy charts that depict the entire spectrum of our prophetic future. Included in *Charting the End Times* is a chapter called "Various Raptures in History and Prophecy."<sup>1</sup> This chapter demonstrates that while the rapture of the church is the first time that God will take a large group of people from earth to heaven without experiencing death, it will not have been the first time that God takes individuals to heaven in this way. Look at the following inventory of rapture events throughout biblical history as noted in the following list.

- ENOCH—Genesis 5
- ELIJAH—2 Kings 6
- ISAIAH—Isaiah 6
- PHILIP—Acts 8
- PAUL—2 Corinthians 12
- TWO WITNESSES—Revelation 11
- MALE CHILD (Jesus)—Revelation 12

### ENOCH

As far as the biblical account records, Enoch became the first individual to be raptured and taken to be with the Lord. Genesis 5:24 records the remarkable event of Enoch's translation to heaven. "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). What does it mean that Enoch "was not, for God took Him?" It means that Enoch was translated, without dying, and went directly to be with the Lord. Enoch was raptured, to use the language of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 or he was "taken," to use the language of John 14:3. That Enoch was raptured or translated to heaven is clear when compared with the dismal refrain "and he died" that accompanies the legacy of the other patriarchs mentioned in Genesis 5.

Enoch's rapture is confirmed by the divinely inspired New Testament commentary found in Hebrews 11:5 which says, "By faith Enoch was *taken up* so that he should not

see death; and he was not found because God *took him up*; for he obtained the witness that before his *being taken up* he was pleasing to God.” The New Testament word “taken up” in Hebrews is the same one selected by those who translated the Old Testament into Greek. This word conveys the idea of being removed from one place to another. Thus, it is clear that both the Genesis passage and the thrice-repeated reference to Enoch in Hebrews teaches the idea of translation to heaven.

### ELIJAH

Elijah is often seen as the first and thus representative of Israel’s post-law prophets. He will make some kind of visitation during the tribulation (Malachi 4:5) and was joined with Moses as the two from the past who appeared at Christ’s transfiguration (Matthew 17:3). Like Enoch, Elijah was translated to heaven without dying. 2 Kings 2 records this interesting event with an emphasis upon the mode of Elijah’s transportation to heaven. 2 Kings 2:1 says he was taken “by a whirlwind to heaven.” In 2:11 the whirlwind is further described as “a chariot of fire and horses of fire.” No doubt this was an appearance of the Shechinah glory of God since Hebrews 1:7 says, “and of the angels He says, ‘Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.’” God objectively marked Elijah as a genuine prophet by identifying him with the glory of God and his rapture to heaven.

We can see a pattern developing. Enoch was raptured before judgment while Noah remained and was preserved through the judgment. Elijah was raptured while Elisha remained behind. How does this relate to the rapture of the church?

### ISAIAH

Isaiah was called into the throne room of God (Isaiah 6). Since this was a physical transportation of Isaiah from earth to heaven and back to earth again, it most likely took place via a rapture. Why do I think so?

Old Testament prophets had a varied job description. One of their primary responsibilities was to expound upon and interpret how the nation was doing in reference to the Mosaic Covenant. Israel’s prophets were not social reformers, as some liberals have suggested. Instead, they provided a Divine viewpoint of Israel’s history from the reference point of the sanctions provided in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. If the nation kept covenant and obeyed the Lord, then the kinds of blessings promised in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 would “shall come upon you and overtake you” (Deuteronomy 28:2). When Israel’s disobedience would mount, God would call and commission a prophet to remind and warn the nation of their responsibility to obey the terms of their covenant. God, through the prophets, would warn them that if they persisted in rebellion then He would execute the harshest curse provided for in the sanctions—expulsion from the land of Israel (Leviticus 26:27–39; Deuteronomy 28:49–68). When the nation began to reach the point of continued disobedience, God’s prophet would bring a lawsuit against the nation for violation of their contract with God.

It appears in the Old Testament Prophets that God is following the pattern of a certain protocol common in the Ancient World in His dealings with Israel. Understanding this background provides a framework for seeing tremendous

significance in events like Isaiah's call into the throne room of God (Isaiah 6) and Elijah's "rapture" to heaven via the fiery chariot (2 Kings 2). This supports the notion that Isaiah was raptured to heaven as part of his throne room experience.<sup>2</sup>

### **JESUS CHRIST**

Revelation 12:5 speaks in the form of a symbol that represents important aspects of the career of Christ. Within this picture, Christ is called the "male child" who it is said "was caught up to God and to His throne (Rev. 12:5). This picture looks back to the ascension of Christ that is described in Acts 1:8-11, where Christ ascends to heaven in a cloud. Thus, because Revelation 12:5 uses the word for rapture, this means that Christ's Acts 1:11 ascension is view as a rapture, a trip from planet earth to heaven.

### **PHILIP**

Philip, who was "snatched away" by the Spirit of the Lord after evangelizing the Ethiopian eunuch and "found himself at Azotus" (Acts 8:39–40), which is located in what we call today the Gaza Strip. Philip was not taken to heaven, but was physically transported from the Judean wilderness to the modern-day Gaza Strip area. This is the only example of a rapture in the Bible where the subject is not transported to heaven. Here he is taken from point A to point B upon earth.

### **PAUL**

Twice Paul mentions that he was "caught up [raptured] to the third heaven" and received "visions and revelations of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 12:1–4). Paul's heavenly trip reminds us of Isaiah's throne room commission (Isaiah 6:1–13). Perhaps a rapture was involved in this incident. Paul, via rapture, received a commission, message, and revelation that became the foundation for the unique purpose for the church during this age, "which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Ephesians 3:5). Apparently, Paul's heavenly visit was such a heady experience, the Lord gave him "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! (2 Corinthians 12:7).

### **RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH**

This is the most well known rapture in the Bible to the average Christian. 1 Thessalonians 4:17 says, "we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Of all the raptures in the Bible, this is the first time that our Lord will take a large group to heaven in a single instance, without first facing death. This is such a clear teaching in the Bible that even those Christians who do not emphasize the rapture as a distinct event, merge it into to the second coming in some way. Yet, this is the event that will take place before the seven-year tribulation.

### **TWO WITNESSES**

Reminiscent of Elijah, the two witnesses during the tribulation are summoned "into

heaven in the cloud” (Revelation 11:12). Certainly these special Divinely commissioned and protected messengers fulfill the role as ambassadors for our Lord to the Jewish nation during the tribulation. Along the same line, the “male child” is said to be “caught up [raptured] to God and His throne” in Revelation 12:5.

The Bible provides us with seven citations of the rapture of individuals throughout history. This provides a strong support that a group—the church—will be raptured in the future as 1 Thessalonians 4 teaches. Some opponents of the rapture seek to suggest that the worldwide disappearance of millions would be too odd to consider as a realistic possibility. Such is not the case if the Bible is the criterion for establishing possibilities. In fact, the Bible reveals a significant number of raptures or trips directly to heaven that provides assurance that God can and will take millions at one moment in time. Are you ready for the rapture?

### **TYPES**

1 Corinthians 10:11, speaking of some Old Testament events says, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, . . .” The word “example” is from the Greek word *typos*, which means “form, figure, or pattern.” The English word “type” is developed from the Greek word and provides the basis for why Bible students coined the term “typology.” Typology refers to Old Testament patterns that illustrate doctrine—usually New Testament doctrine. It is wrong to teach a doctrine from a type. Types serve only to illustrate a doctrine that is taught clearly, or directly from the biblical text.

Old Testament raptures, while not teaching the New Testament truth of the rapture of the church, do provide us with Old Testament types, patterns, or illustrations of the rapture. Thus, Enoch and Elijah stand as types of the rapture of the church. I believe that the purpose for both Old Testament and New Testament raptures come into clearer focus when seen within the framework of the covenantal protocol of recalling one’s ambassador from a distant land.

### **AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST**

Paul describes New Testament believers as “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20). As I have noted earlier, an ambassador is one who represents a dignitary, often in a foreign land. Corresponding with Isaiah’s commission in the Old Testament, the church has been given its Great Commission through Christ’s apostles (Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:6–10). This commission includes the command to preach the gospel throughout the world until the end of the current age. Instead of just a local responsibility, as with Israel in the Old Testament, the New Testament church has a global responsibility as Christ’s ambassadors to entreat and beg humanity to “be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Paul ask the Ephesians church to pray for him “that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19–20). The primary issue during the current church age between God and all mankind is the issue of belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. When, in God’s estimation,

the world reaches the point of global rejection of Christ, then, as with Israel before her global deportation, God will recall His ambassador—the church—before the judgment of the tribulation. Since the church is described as heavenly citizens (Philippians 3:20), it makes sense that she is raptured before God’s war commences against “those who dwell upon the earth” (Revelation 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 14; 14:6). This is one of many purposes for the New Testament doctrine of the pretribulational rapture of the church.

### **CONCLUSION**

Even though my Reformed friend thought the concept of a rapture was odd. I don’t think that the concept of a rapture is such a strange event for those who have an understanding of biblical events. Regardless of what others may think, I am going to let the Bible inform me of what is possible and what the future holds. That’s why I am constantly looking for our Lord’s any-moment return. Maranatha!

### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting The End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), pp. 109-11.

<sup>2</sup> For more support for this view see LaHaye and Ice, *Charting The End Times*, pp. 109-10.