

The Interpretation of Matthew 24:39, 40, and 41 with regard to the Rapture

The three passages from Matthew's Gospel are the following:

- 1) "...and they knew nothing of what would happen until the flood came and **took** them away." (Matthew 24:39)
- 2) "...two men will be in the field one will be **taken** and the other left." (Matthew 24:40)
- 3) "...two women will be grinding with a handmill; one will be **taken** and the other left." (Matthew 40:41)

The phrase about people being taken away in these three passages from Matthew's Gospel has been used to refute the idea of there being a Rapture of Christians.

Are those taken away in these passages unbelievers or believers?

Let's have a closer look at the passage about Noah and the Flood. The question to ask is why some people are in the Ark and many are outside. The answer given by the Bible is that those outside the Ark are those who refuse to accept the salvation offered by God to enter the Ark. They will perish, swept or taken away. It is not who is taken and who not but why. It has always been a matter of human choice, then and now.

So this piece of reasoning cannot be used as proof that there is no Rapture of believers. The reasoning, which is false, being that those 'taken away' are unbelievers, under judgment. Those who remain are the Christians. Whereas the Rapture is about Christians being 'caught up' (raptured), taken to be with the Lord when He returns for them before a time on Earth called the Great Tribulation. Those left behind are the unbelievers. It is not where one is, it is who one is.

As for the other two passages in Matthew, the word 'take' in Greek or English means what it says. It does not carry any good or bad overtones. Therefore it is not possible to assume that those taken are either Christians or unbelievers. Strong in his Concordance in commenting on the word 'taken' in the Matthew passage says that it means "the removal from the earth in judgment", that is to say, those removed are unbelievers, not Christians. It is obvious that here he is no longer only giving a definition of the Greek words for 'take'. He is interpreting Matthew 24:40, 41, by saying what he thinks the passage also means.

This same Greek word for 'take' is used in a neutral sense in the following passage, also in Matthew.

"After six days Jesus **took** with him Peter, James, and brother of James and led them up a high mountain by themselves."
(Matthew 17:1)

In the parable of the ten virgins our Lord said that the bridegroom when he arrived unannounced took only five of the ten virgins who were ready for him, and "the door was shut" (Matthew 25 : 10). From this parable it is clear as to who was left and who taken.

Discussion

The definitions of the word 'take' in its various grammatical forms is no guide as to whether there is a Rapture or no Rapture. The belief in a coming Rapture rests on the whole tenor of New Testament teaching. The problem with accepting the teaching of the Rapture comes down to this. When Christians say that the Lord will deliver them from the coming Tribulation by His taking them up to be with Him the question is: "why this special treatment?" Does not the Lord say that in the world you will have tribulation?

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace.

In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Herein lies the key to the misunderstanding of the Biblical teaching of the Lord coming for His saints. Tribulation has been with the Church from the very beginning, merely from the fact that she is in the world which does not accept her as it did not accept her Lord. That was what the Lord meant to comfort all His followers. Today the Church finds itself subjected to sporadic persecution or wholesale slaughter in certain countries. This is well documented in missionary newsletters. Since persecution has been an accepted part of our faith, why need there be a special evacuation of Christians from the world, it is asked.

The basis of the belief in the Rapture is based on what the Lord Himself said. Important to note is His emphasis of what happens at the end of this age. The Lord teaches in Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13 that there will be unmistakable signs on earth and in the heavens as this age draws to a close. The book of Daniel, and the New Testament speak of a period of horrendous natural disasters, political and civil unrest of increasing tempo and disruption. Accompanying these will see religious turmoil marked by severe persecution of Christians and loss of their faith by many. This is what is known as the Tribulation of the endtimes.

Not only in the Gospels does the Lord speak of this time of worldwide distress. To the church of Philadelphia was promised deliverance by Jesus Himself from what He called: “the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole earth, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” (Revelation 3:10) What is the Lord referring to which He called the ‘hour of trial’? The chapters which follow the letters to the seven churches, namely Revelation chapters 6 – 19, are there for all to read and try to understand. These chapters concern

judgments from God at the end of the age. That is the purpose for the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls – they are God’s judgments on the world and on the prince of this world, Satan, and his minions. Now, the seals, trumpets and bowls take time to work themselves out. They follow each other in succession. The fact that there is a time sequence of these events is confirmed by Revelation 15:1:

“And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous sign, seven angels who had seven plagues (bowls) **which are the last**, because in them the wrath of God is finished.”

In other words, the bowl judgments which follow the trumpet judgments are the final events marking the end of the sequence – hence the ‘hour of trial’.

PURPOSE OF THE “HOUR OF TRIAL” OR TRIBULATION OF THE ENDTIMES

The ‘hour of trial’ is a period of time. It is not the event of Judgment Day depicted in Revelation 20:11 – 15.

No one reading the details of these judgments can deny that these are meant to inflict supernatural punishment worldwide. Yes – there will be a marked rise in persecution and of the number of those who choose to seal their testimony with their blood. The Lord expects His people to face suffering and persecution for His name’s sake. But the persecution takes place within the period of the judgments from on high against the evil forces gathered in battle against the Lamb of God. These evil forces are clearly exposed for who they are - Satan, the arch enemy of God and deceiver of men and angels, with his army. The Enemy will try to eliminate all believers. Hence the intense persecution.

These disasters are also a final call for repentance. There will be people who turn to the Lord but generally there is widespread rejection as the following verses make clear. Look at the results of the fourth and fifth bowl judgments:

“And men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues; and they did not repent so as to give Him glory”
(Revelation 16:9)

“...and they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.”
(Revelation 16:11)

This is such a terrible time of upheaval, suffering and martyrdom that the Lord in His mercy does not want His people to be present. It is a time of judgment for an unrepentant, Christ-rejecting world hardened by sin and gross immoral pleasures. It is in the understanding of the horrendous nature of these dire times of Tribulation, unequalled in world history, that the Rapture makes Biblical sense. Our Lord spares His people and takes the Church, His precious Bride, as her Bridegroom, to be with Him, before the Tribulation.

There are those who have become Christians during this time of Tribulation because they understand the meaning of the judgments and turn to Him in repentance. The Lord knows and He speaks of them and offers comfort and relief to those who come to Him during the Tribulation. Jesus made it clear what He would do.

“...for then there will be a great tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall be. And unless those days had been cut short no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short.” (Matthew 24:21, 22)

THE MERCIFUL NATURE OF GOD

It is characteristic of God to deliver believers before a divine judgment is inflicted as illustrated in the deliverance of Israel.

Taken from Egypt, Israel crossed safely through the Red Sea before the returning wall of water destroyed their enemy. (Exodus 14:22, 30) For Noah, his safety and that of his family was assured by being in the Ark before God sent the mighty waters of the Flood upon the world. (Genesis 7:1) It is seen again in the case of righteous Lot who was warned to depart from Sodom and Gomorrah before the fire and brimstone rained down on those wicked cities. It is interesting what the angel said to Lot when he hesitated about where he wanted to flee to. The angel revealed to Lot: "Hurry, escape there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there (Zoar)." The fiery downpour was held back so that Lot and his family would leave before the judgment fell. (Genesis 19:22)

Remember Enoch of Genesis 5:24 whose walk with God so pleased Him that God 'took' him from the unspeakably wicked world of Noah's time. And remember Elijah who was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire, delivered from all his fears, after a lifetime of courageous service as a prophet of Israel. (2 Kings 2:11) Was it not with Rahab also as recorded in Joshua 6:17, 25? She was kept safe in her home by a prior arrangement with the spies while Jericho fell around her to the attacking Israeli forces.

What is the message? In the endtimes God the Judge will finally and decisively deal with the world for its stubborn wickedness. It will be evident to all that there is a God of justice as well as a God of love. We will all experience the fulfillment of our hope and the justice for which we have hungered.

Listen to the plaintive cry of the martyrs from under the altar when the fifth seal was opened

“And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” (Revelation 6:10)

The latter chapters of the book of Revelation, specifically chapters 6 to 19, ring out with ‘Hallelujahs’ and ‘Amen’. These are the same chapters where the judgments of the seals, trumpets and bowls are poured out on a defiant world. Yes – a world that shakes its fist in God’s face knowing full well that the Divine hand is responsible for this last of the last opportunity to repent. Here in the endtimes is the culmination of the raging Babylonian spirit against all that is true and good of all the ages. The people of God will have been removed, taken to heaven, by the Rapture to be with the Lord whom they loved and lived and died for. They will not be part of this hour of the unparalleled distress due to the outpouring of God’s wrath. Paul writes that we are to:

“...wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.” (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

It matters not whether we interpret the “wrath to come” in the verse above as referring to the Great Tribulation or the Judgment Day. In both cases the wrath is from a longsuffering righteous God on ages long human wickedness, rebellion, spurning of His offer of forgiveness through the Cross and, not least, the persecution and killing of His people. Importantly, He will send Satan to where he belongs in the fires of hell together with those who willingly allow themselves to be used as his tools of deception and violence.

The predictions by some preachers and teachers on the exact date of when the Rapture should occur and later proven wrong do not

detract from the reality of the event. Anymore than the presence of Christian cults detract from the genuineness of the Christian faith. The Rapture is a coming future event. It will be an event visible to all. The increasingly ominous signs of disorder in nature and in human society tie in with what the Lord proclaimed to us in Matthew 24, Luke 21 and Mark 13. It is the blessed hope of all believers. It cannot be far off.

Hallelujah and Amen!

“For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together for Him. Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you are doing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:9 – 11)

Swee Eng
11 May 2020