

Understanding the First Resurrection and the Catching Up: A Biblical Perspective

The concept of the "rapture" often captures the imagination of Christians, frequently depicted in popular culture as a secret event where believers vanish before a period of tribulation. However, a careful examination of Scripture reveals a different narrative, one that ties the catching up of believers to the first resurrection and places both at the return of Christ after the tribulation. This article explores the biblical teaching on the timing of the first resurrection and the catching up, drawing from key passages, including a reference from Peter affirming Paul's teachings, to present a unified understanding grounded in God's Word.

The Foundation: Paul's Teaching in 1 Thessalonians

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, the Apostle Paul outlines a clear sequence of events surrounding Christ's return. He writes that the Lord will descend from heaven with a cry of command, the voice of an archangel, and the sound of God's trumpet. At that moment, the dead in Christ will rise first, followed by those who are alive, who will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. The term "caught up," derived from the Greek word *harpazō*, is the basis for the term "rapture." Paul emphasizes that the resurrection of the dead in Christ precedes the transformation of the living, all occurring at Christ's coming.

The imagery of a trumpet, an archangel, and the Lord's descent points to a public, climactic event, not a secret one. Paul's purpose is to comfort believers, assuring them that both the dead and the living will be united with Christ at His return. This passage lays the groundwork for understanding the timing of these events, but it must be harmonized with other Scriptures for clarity.

The Last Trumpet: 1 Corinthians 15

Paul provides further insight in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, where he reveals a mystery: not all believers will die, but all will be changed in a moment, at the last trumpet. When the trumpet sounds, the dead will be raised imperishable, and the living will be transformed. The phrase "last trumpet" suggests a culminating event, echoing the trumpet in 1 Thessalonians 4. This transformation equips believers with glorified bodies for eternal life with Christ.

The "last trumpet" aligns with the eschatological trumpets in Scripture, signaling significant divine acts. While some connect it to the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15, which announces God's kingdom, the primary connection here is to the resurrection and catching up at Christ's return. Paul's teaching reinforces the

sequence and unity of these events.

Peter's Affirmation of Paul's Teaching

In 2 Peter 3:15–16, the Apostle Peter acknowledges Paul's writings on eschatological matters, stating, "And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures." Peter's context is the day of the Lord (2 Peter 3:10–14), a sudden, transformative event tied to Christ's return. His reference to Paul's letters likely includes teachings like those in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, which address the resurrection and catching up.

Peter notes that Paul's writings can be difficult to understand, leading some to misinterpret them. This warning is relevant to discussions of the rapture, where Paul's teachings have been used to support a pre-tribulation event not explicitly found in Scripture. Peter's affirmation underscores the authority of Paul's letters and the need to interpret them carefully within the broader biblical context, aligning them with the post-tribulation framework we find elsewhere.

The First Resurrection: Revelation 20

The Book of Revelation provides a definitive anchor for the timing of the resurrection in Revelation 20:4–6. John describes thrones and the souls of those beheaded for their testimony of Jesus and the Word of God, who refused to worship the beast. These individuals come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. John calls this the first resurrection, distinguishing it from the resurrection of the rest of the dead, which occurs after the millennium.

This passage places the first resurrection at the start of Christ's thousand-year reign, following the defeat of the beast and false prophet in Revelation 19. The context of Revelation 13–19 depicts a period of intense persecution, often understood as the tribulation. Thus, the first resurrection occurs after the tribulation, involving believers, particularly martyrs, who are raised to reign with Christ. The promise that those in the first resurrection are blessed and immune to the second death highlights its significance as the resurrection of the righteous.

Jesus' Teaching: Matthew 24

Jesus' words in Matthew 24:29–31 further clarify the timing. He declares that immediately after the tribulation, the Son of Man will appear in the sky, coming on the clouds with power and great glory. Angels will gather His elect from all corners

of the earth with a loud trumpet call. This gathering of the elect parallels the catching up in 1 Thessalonians 4, and the trumpet call aligns with both 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians. Jesus explicitly places this event after the tribulation, describing a visible, glorious return, not a secret departure.

Assembling the Biblical Puzzle

When these passages are woven together, a consistent timeline emerges. The first resurrection, as defined in Revelation 20, occurs at Christ's return after the tribulation, marking the beginning of His millennial reign. This resurrection includes the dead in Christ, as Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4, where they rise first. Immediately following, living believers are caught up to meet the Lord in the air, transformed in a moment at the last trumpet, as detailed in 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24 confirms this post-tribulation timing, describing the gathering of the elect at His visible return. Peter's affirmation in 2 Peter 3:15–16 supports Paul's teachings as authoritative, urging careful interpretation to avoid distortion.

This understanding contrasts with the popular pre-tribulation rapture view, which envisions a secret removal of believers before the tribulation. Scripture does not describe a pre-tribulation resurrection or catching up. The trumpets, the public nature of Christ's return, and the sequence in Revelation all point to a single, climactic event at the end of the tribulation. The first resurrection and the catching up are inseparable, occurring together at Christ's second coming.

Addressing Common Misconceptions

The pre-tribulation rapture, popularized in media, often stems from dispensationalist interpretations that separate the rapture from Christ's second coming. Proponents may cite 1 Thessalonians 4 in isolation, but when read with Revelation 20, Matthew 24, and Peter's caution in 2 Peter 3, the post-tribulation timing becomes evident. The "last trumpet" in 1 Corinthians 15 would be an unusual term for an event years before the tribulation's end, and Revelation's first resurrection explicitly follows the beast's defeat. No passage describes a secret rapture; instead, Christ's return is consistently portrayed as visible and glorious.

Some propose a phased first resurrection, including Christ's resurrection or a pre-tribulation rapture, but Revelation 20 presents it as a singular event for believers at the millennium's start. Jesus' resurrection, while foundational as the "first fruits" (1 Corinthians 15:20), is not called the first resurrection in Scripture; it paves the way for believers' resurrection.

Implications for Believers

The biblical teaching that the first resurrection and the catching up occur at Christ's return, after the tribulation, carries profound implications for how Christians live and prepare for the future. This understanding, rooted in Scripture, calls believers to a posture of endurance, discernment, and unwavering faith. It challenges the pre-tribulation rapture view, which can leave Christians unprepared for end-times trials like the mark of the beast, persecution, and deception, potentially leading to confusion or a crisis of faith.

Endurance Through Tribulation: Scripture urges believers to endure hardship, particularly in the end times. Jesus warns in Matthew 24:9–13 that during the tribulation, His followers will face hatred, betrayal, and false prophets, yet "the one who endures to the end will be saved." Revelation 13:10 calls for "the endurance and faith of the saints" amid the beast's persecution. The first resurrection in Revelation 20:4–6 honors those who resisted the beast's mark, even to death. These passages suggest believers may face trials before Christ's return, contrary to the pre-tribulation view. If believers expect to be raptured beforehand, encountering events like the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:16–17) could lead to shock or doubt, with some questioning, "This can't be it because I'm still here." This misalignment could weaken their faith, making them vulnerable to compromise. A post-tribulation perspective prepares believers to endure, trusting God's grace to sustain them (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Discernment Against Deception: The tribulation will bring intense deception, with false christs and prophets performing signs to mislead even the elect (Matthew 24:24). The mark of the beast, a system controlling economic participation, requires discernment to resist (Revelation 14:9–11). Pre-tribulation believers may overlook such signs, assuming they cannot face them, potentially leading to unintentional compromise or a faith crisis when reality contradicts their expectations. A post-tribulation understanding fosters vigilance, encouraging believers to study Scripture, pray for wisdom (James 1:5), and recognize deceptive systems, ensuring they remain faithful to Christ.

Building a Resilient Faith: The pre-tribulation view can promote passivity, expecting an escape rather than perseverance. If tribulation arrives, believers may feel abandoned, risking apostasy (2 Thessalonians 2:3). A post-tribulation perspective encourages proactive faith through scriptural study, community support (Hebrews 10:24–25), and practicing faithfulness now. Believers can prepare for the mark by cultivating spiritual discipline, economic independence, and mental resolve to reject compromise, drawing on examples like Daniel's faithfulness (Daniel 6).

Hope in Christ's Return: Despite trials, the promise of the first resurrection and catching up offers hope. Believers who endure will reign with Christ (Revelation

20:4–6) and be forever with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17–18). This hope transforms challenges into opportunities for witness, preventing faith crises by aligning expectations with Scripture.

Conclusion

The first resurrection and the catching up of believers occur at Christ's return, after the tribulation, as He establishes His millennial reign. Revelation 20 defines the first resurrection, 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 describe the sequence, Matthew 24 confirms the post-tribulation timing, and 2 Peter 3:15–16 affirms Paul's teachings. This understanding equips believers to endure trials, discern deception, and maintain hope, avoiding the vulnerabilities of the pre-tribulation view. By preparing for tribulation, Christians can stand firm, confident in God's promises, until they meet their Lord in the air and reign with Him forever.

Note: All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

**In His Grace,
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