

Given our understanding that Paul has a "proprietary program," it is worth taking into account the possibility that his eschatology - his doctrine of last things - could be markedly different from the "prophetic program" outlined in the rest of Scripture.

### CONSIDERING THE PROPHETIC PROGRAM

Paul's writings, while discussing "last things" like the second coming and the Day of the Lord, do not add to the prophetic program, but echo existing eschatological themes. These themes, found in prophetic literature, typically consolidate into:

1. An impending seven-year tribulation period, split into two halves, during which Israel will be targeted but divinely protected.
2. A resurrection to judgment leading the faithful to the kingdom and the unfaithful to eternal punishment.
3. A peaceful, prosperous kingdom on earth under the Messiah's reign, marked by perfect harmony.

Here's a brief chart showcasing these three areas, complete with scripture references. It highlights the harmony of teachings across the scriptures on these topics.

Prophetic Event	Old Testament Prophetic Passages	Prophetic Words of Jesus	Book of Revelation
Forthcoming Period of Tribulation (7 years)	Daniel 9:24-27; Jeremiah 30:7; Ezekiel 20:34-38	Matthew 24:21-22; Mark 13:19-20	Revelation 11:2-3; Revelation 12:6, 14
Resurrection to Judgment (Faithful to Kingdom, Unfaithful to Punishment)	Daniel 12:2; Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 37:12-14	John 5:28-29; Matthew 25:31-46	Revelation 20:4-6, 11-15
Kingdom on Earth (Messianic Reign, Peace, Prosperity, and Health)	Isaiah 2:2-4; Isaiah 11:1-10; Micah 4:1-3	Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:28-30	Revelation 20:1-6; Revelation 21:1-4

While Paul affirms these three areas of eschatological doctrine - the forthcoming period of tribulation, the resurrection to judgment, and the kingdom on earth - his teachings do not introduce new concepts or diverge from the established prophetic program.

### SO WHY THE CONFUSION?

Despite Scripture's consistent eschatological teachings, Christian doctrines widely diverge, largely due to Paul's influence. One key debate is the timing of Christ's millennial reign, with positions on its occurrence being pre-, post-, or a-millennialism causing divisions within Christianity. Further division exists within the premillennial camp between pre- and post-tribulation beliefs, regarding the timing of the Rapture relative to the Tribulation.

### HOW DOES PAUL INTRODUCE THIS CONFUSION?

Paul's teachings on the Rapture, a concept exclusive to Pauline literature, adds complexity to Christian eschatology. This idea of believers being taken to heaven isn't found elsewhere in the Scripture, leading to diverse interpretations and debates. The Rapture has divided Christian understanding on end times.

In contrast, Jewish eschatology lacks such divisions, as there are no debates over the Messiah's arrival. This difference is unique to Christian discourse. Jews do not have a Rapture doctrine based on Hebrew Scriptures, making their eschatology less complex.

Paul's introduction of the Rapture doctrine added a new aspect to Christian eschatology, leading to various interpretations and distinct millennial positions.

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## PRE-MILLENNIALISM:

1. **Belief:** Christ will return before a literal thousand-year reign on earth.
2. **Relation to Rapture:** Divisions based on the timing of the Rapture relative to the Tribulation:
  - **Pre-Tribulation Rapture:** Before the Tribulation.
  - **Mid-Tribulation Rapture:** Midway through the Tribulation.
  - **Post-Tribulation Rapture:** At the end of the Tribulation.
3. **Impact:** The Rapture's introduction led to different positions based on its occurrence timing.

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## POST-MILLENNIALISM:

1. **Rapture's Relation to Second Coming:**
  - The Second Coming happens after a golden age of Christian influence.
2. **Rapture as a Singular Event:**
  - Many believe the Rapture and the Second Coming are the same, occurring at the millennial age end.
3. **Impact on Eschatology:**
  - This interpretation emphasizes a future Christian dominance period and society's gradual transformation, culminating in the Second Coming, which includes the Rapture.

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## A-MILLENNIALISM:

1. **Approach to Return Passages:**
  - A-millennialists often equate the Rapture with the Second Coming, favoring a more allegorical interpretation.
2. **Impact of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:**
  - A-millennialists interpret the millennium symbolically, viewing the current church age as Christ's reign.
3. **Development of A-Millennialism:**
  - The Rapture doctrine's introduction likely prompted a more symbolic understanding of eschatological events.

Paul's introduction of the Rapture doctrine influenced believers' theological stances and the development of post-millennialism and a-millennialism. Post-millennialists saw the Rapture as a future Christian dominance period, while a-millennialists viewed the Rapture and the Second Coming as one event and interpreted the millennium symbolically.

### THAT UNIQUE RAPTURE

The Rapture, as outlined in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, is the moment when all true believers in Christ are transformed and caught up to meet the Lord in the air. This sudden event includes a miraculous transformation of the believers' bodies and an instantaneous transportation.

Pre-millennialists see the Rapture and the Second Coming as distinct due to their unique characteristics and purposes. The Rapture occurs suddenly and is marked by joy as believers meet Christ in the air and are taken to heaven.

On the other hand, the Second Coming is Jesus' visible return to Earth after the Tribulation, witnessed by all and associated with judgment and the establishment of Christ's kingdom. The differences in location, visibility, timing, and atmosphere lead pre-millennialists to view the Rapture and the Second Coming as separate eschatological events.

The Old Testament doesn't specifically mention believers being "caught up" to meet the Lord. It depicts God's protection and deliverance, with individual events like Enoch's and Elijah's ascensions, but no mass event for all believers.

Old Testament end times prophecies, like the Day of the Lord in Joel 2:1-2 and Isaiah 13:9-11, focus on visible, stark events, not the clandestine Rapture described by Paul.

The Old Testament references resurrection (Daniel 12:2) and renewal (Ezekiel 37:12-14), but not an event where living believers are instantly glorified and taken to heaven. Its eschatology centers on the Messiah's coming, God's earthly kingdom establishment, and Israel's restoration, not a pre-tribulation removal of believers. The Rapture concept is absent in the Old Testament.

Just as the Hebrew Scriptures, non-Pauline New Testament texts omit a Rapture event also. Matthew 24:30-31 describes a visible, post-Tribulation Second Coming, with no mention of believers ascending. John 14:1-3's promise of Jesus preparing a place aligns more with the temple reference. Acts 1:9-11's description of a visible return matches Old Testament prophecies. Peter's letters mention Jesus' revelation, judgment, and a new world, but not a Rapture event. These texts emphasize judgment, Christ's visible return, and God's kingdom establishment, aligning with Old Testament prophecies.

The specific idea of a sudden, secret Rapture as described by Paul is not found in non-Pauline texts. Instead, these texts emphasize the visible, public nature of Christ's return and the final judgment.

In short, the rapture is purely Pauline.

### WHY A PAULINE ESCHATOLOGY?

Logically, a Pauline eschatology is a vital necessity for there to be any harmony in Scripture. Paul presents an exclusive and proprietary program. This is considered a "new man" that came from Jews and Gentiles but is neither Jew nor Gentile.

Could this new man (the body of Christ) in any way fulfill the Israel-centric prophecies of the non-Pauline scriptures? Such would seem impossible. Thus, a new eschatology is required for the new man.

That eschatology is that someday, without a sign and without warning, God is going to rapture the church (i.e., the body of Christ), and take them to Himself to be with the Lord. After that time, God has many promises of the prophets yet to fulfill, and eschatology as taught in the "prophetic program" will resume.

Many Christians oppose the doctrine of the Rapture, viewing it as a form of "pie in the sky" escapism, a convenient way to avoid the tribulation. However, this perspective misses the point of the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine. Those believers who subscribe to the idea of a Rapture as outlined in this chapter, do anticipate significant suffering for the body of Christ, much like what Paul himself experienced, sometimes even on a daily basis, without a means of escape.

However, they also understand that the coming tribulation, referred to in the Bible as "the day of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7), is expressly about Israel and not the body of Christ. Similarly, they believe that the glorious millennium that follows the tribulation is also intended for Israel.

So, the Rapture is not so much an escapist idea as it is a logical one. It provides a way for God to fulfill His promises to both the body of Christ and to Israel without conflating the two. The body of Christ is caught up in the Rapture, allowing for the tribulation and subsequent millennial reign to focus on Israel.

This doctrine doesn't originate from human reasoning alone but is a revelation given to Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The Scripture reveals it, and logic affirms it.

### SIGNS OF THE RAPTURE

I am different from many pre-tribulation adherents in that I do not believe there will be a single sign given from God before the Rapture. The Rapture is imminent in the sense that there is absolutely nothing preventing it from happening at any given moment. I do not look to current news headlines to try to discern if the Rapture is near or far. In fact, I believe that all the biblical signs of the end times are actually signs of the prophetic program, not the proprietary program that Paul describes.

Rather than anticipating and searching for signs of the Rapture, I advocate for a life lived in expectation. We should pray for the Rapture, yes, but also prepare to live full, fruitful lives, even to a ripe old age if the Lord tarries. The emphasis of our faith should not be on predicting the time of the Rapture, but on living a life dedicated to God, being ready to be "snatched up" at any time, while continuing to serve Him faithfully here and now.