

## **Tough Topics: What Does the Bible Say About the Rapture (and Other Questions About the End Times)?**

**I. What is the Rapture?** Commonly understood, *the rapture is the secret (first) coming of Christ where the people in the Church are taken away (raptured) before a seven-year tribulation.*

This “teaching” is not ancient. It is not rooted in Scripture but drawn from a misinterpretation of it. The Rapture was first popularized by a priest named John Nelson Darby (of the Plymouth Brethren) in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The full heading for the teaching is **dispensational pretribulational rapture theory**.

### **II. What Is the Textual Basis for This Teaching?**

*1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4:13-18 (ESV)*

*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 a 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.*

The word “rapture” (4:17) comes from Latin by way of the Greek. The Greek term in verse 17 *harpadzo* is translated by the Latin Vulgate using the verb *rapio*. Both mean to be carried away or snatched away (think of a *raptor* carrying off a mouse!). The first person future passive indicative plural is then translated “we will be caught up”.

### **III. The Analysis of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

As always, **context matters**. Paul’s initial concern is to correct the uninformed concerning those “who are asleep”. This is a common NT way of talking of *those who are dead in Christ*. These saints are now in the presence of the Lord (we might say “heaven”). God in Jesus will “bring with him” the ones who have “fallen asleep”. Paul clearly says that the dead in Christ will rise first, and then those who have been “left behind” will be caught up together with them in the clouds.

However, the picture is not a secreting away (rapture), **but of the full resurrection of the dead together with Christ uniting with all the saints on earth**. In this is the consummation of the end of the age. Also, note the direction of the returning Christ—He is going DOWN. The trajectory is down, not up, up and away! The final comforting word Paul gives the Thessalonians is that *we will always be with the Lord*.

Again, **context matters**. Continuing on in the letter is 5:1-11 (ESV):

*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord **will come like a thief in the night**. While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then **sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come***

*upon a pregnant woman, and **they will not escape**. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. **For you are all children of light, children of the day**. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, **but let us keep awake and be sober**. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

Now we have another part of Paul's picture. The "end" will come suddenly and without any warning. There is no sense here of an intermediate period of tribulation. The apostate will receive "sudden destruction". But those in Christ are not to fear because we are "children of the day". While some of this may support a "rapture", remember—Christ will come with a cry of command, with a voice of an archangel, with the sound of "the trumpet of God". So, **there is nothing here that warrants a "secret" coming or a snatching away**. Christ will come publicly, visibly, and every eye will see and ear will hear Him in His return.

But what about those who are not in Christ, but are "in darkness"?

#### **IV. Other Scriptures to Consider in the "Rapture" Teaching**

First to consider is St. Paul's writing to the same group of Christians around the same time, *2 Thessalonians 2* (ESV):

*Now concerning **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him**, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, **to the effect that the day of the Lord has come**. Let no one deceive you in any way. **For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction**, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. **Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.***

So, while the end will be sudden, it will be public, there will also be signs and wonders that will take place. There will be a "son of destruction" who will do "false signs and wonders" in order to deceive those who are perishing. Note the concern here: *some fear that the day of the Lord has already happened*. Putting both of these pictures together, we

can absolutely rule out any type of preliminary secret coming of Jesus and a rapturing of the saints. Instead, the end will happen all at once, and it will happen in the open.

A few other Scriptures to consider. *Matthew 24:40-41 (ESV):*

*Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.*

Wait! That sure seems like there is some kind of rapture! One is “taken and the other left”! You’ve been had, you Lutheran heretic!

Not so fast. Again, **context matters**...as in the nearer, fuller context. 24:34ff (ESV):

***“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”***

Using the flood as example, the one who is “raptured” is the one swept away in judgment! The one “left behind” is like that of Noah and his family, preserved in the ark, saved from destruction. As also St. Paul admonishes, Jesus says to stay awake. Be sober and watchful. Not to detect the timing **but to be ready for the sudden and public coming of the Lord.**

## **V. What Does the Bible Clearly Teach Concerning the Return of Jesus?**

So, the Day of the Lord will take place at ONE TIME. One of the hallmarks of the Rapture is that there is a first **secret** second coming and then a final **public** second coming. AND IN BETWEEN THE APOSTATE HAVE A SECOND CHANCE FOR SALVATION. But there is nothing in Scripture that speaks of a “second chance” for salvation after Jesus returns/reappears.

Consider the words of Jesus. *Matthew 25:31-46 (ESV):*

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”*

*“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

While one may try to argue that these verses are that second public Second Coming (which happens after the Rapture and before the seven year tribulation), if Scripture interprets Scripture, **there is no clear Scriptural basis for a secret first coming**. There is no indication in what Jesus says (above) that this is anything other than **the final day of judgment**. Therefore, the teaching of the Rapture must be dismissed on the basis of Scripture out of hand.

## **VI. Further Considerations on Reading The Apocalypse of St. John or Revelation**

You may have noticed that my arguments do not rest on *Revelation*. This was by design. We want to interpret *Revelation in light of the clear teaching of the Gospels and Paul* (and not the other way around). This approach leads to a correct reading of *Revelation*. The teachings of not just the Rapture, but **dispensational premillennialism** are largely drawn from a gross overreading and literal (mis)interpretation of major sections of the OT Prophets and *Revelation*. And this is dangerous. For instance, the seven-year tribulation comes from a misreading of Daniel 9, then applied to *Revelation*. That is beyond our scope this morning. But it does raise questions about how to read the book of *Revelation*. I leave you with some final thoughts.

The book of *Revelation* is not a code to be cracked. It was written to be *revelatory*. While written in a kind of “secret language” that only the initiated can read, there are ways or **doors** into the book.

- **Door One**—the Christ Event (Christ Crucified, Christ Risen, Christ Ascended, Christ Returns)—any interpretation that sidelines Christ and His work is to be avoided. This is the framework the entire book fits into.
- **Door Two**—The Old Testament—278 verses of Revelation’s 404 are direct OT references or citations. Books like Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and others are key to unlocking the book.
- **Door Three**—The geopolitical context of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century—the persecuted Christian Church was living during a Caesar cult. One must know some of the things happening *in that context* to make sense of *Revelation*.
- **Door Four**—The apocalyptic genre (Rules, Style, Grammar)—numbers, symbolism, and figurative language are all part of this style of writing. Reading this genre *literally* will lead one down the wrong paths.