

The Rapture—A Popular but False Doctrine!

The rapture, often called “the blessed hope,” is sadly more hoax than hope, even though the man who started it had no intention of deceiving anyone. You need to know what the Bible actually says!

The rapture is widely taught and believed in Christianity today. Popular books and movies spin themes around this doctrine that essentially teaches Christ will come back twice, first coming only into the atmosphere to snatch believers away to heaven for several years; then actually returning to set foot on the earth.

We live in a time when most are content to get their knowledge of religion secondhand, preferably through dramatic presentations, including stage, screen and novels.

But you cannot afford to neglect your personal responsibility to prove the truth!

Those willing to take a careful look at the Bible will see that the rapture theory doesn't stand up to the scrutiny of God's Word.

The rapture was popularized in the 1970s by Hal Lindsey's writings (*The Late Great Planet Earth*, etc.) and more recently by Jim Jenkins and Tim LaHaye in their *Left Behind* fictional books and films. But where did the idea of the rapture originate?

The origin of the rapture theory

Credit for its origin generally goes to John Nelson Darby, a 19th-century theologian.

Let's define some common terms to help one navigate the technicalities, for in reading about the rapture, you will often encounter the words *postmillennialism*, *amillennialism* and *premillennialism*. First, the root word, *Millennium*, comes from the Latin for 1,000 years. Religiously, it refers to the first 1,000 years of Christ's reign over the Kingdom of God on earth (Revelation 20:4).

A postmillennialist believes that Christ returns to establish the Kingdom on earth after the 1,000 years; an amillennialist doesn't believe that the Kingdom is coming at all; a premillennialist believes that Christ returns before the Millennium to set up His Kingdom as described in Revelation 20:4.

In the century before Darby, Daniel Whitby pushed the philosophy of postmillennialism in England. “This interpretation maintains that present gospel agencies will root out evils until Christ will have a spiritual reign over the earth, which will continue for 1,000 years. Then the second advent of Christ will initiate judgment and bring to an end the present order” (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1988, “Millennium”).

Postmillennialism gives life to the idea of “the social gospel” and the belief that the Church can actually bring about the Kingdom by its actions. It has led to many Christian churches involving themselves in politics on the premise that they are virtually obligated to lobby governments in the direction of godliness.

There were also amillennialists in Darby’s day. He labored to correct both false teachings. Darby believed, rightly, that Jesus Christ would return to earth to establish and rule over the Kingdom of God. Darby was a premillennialist.

But in his zeal for countering error, he added another—the rapture theory. He believed he understood a new truth, an idea that had not been taught in the history of Christendom. While he was most likely sincere, sincerity alone does not make one right.

“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20, New International Version).

How do we know whether God inspired John Darby with new understanding? It actually would not be difficult to verify. Jesus said, “...the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35), meaning Scripture agrees within itself.

If the rapture were truly a biblical doctrine, it would mesh with all other scriptural references to Christ’s coming. But it does not stand up to that test, as we will see.

Scofield picks it up

“Darby’s pre-tribulational view of the rapture was then picked up by a man named C.I. Scofield, who taught the view in the footnotes of his Scofield Reference Bible, which was widely distributed in England and America. Many Protestants who read the Scofield Reference Bible uncritically accepted what its footnotes said and adopted the [rapture doctrine], even though no Christian had heard of it in the previous 1800 years of Church history” (“Catholic Answers,” <http://www.catholic.com/library/Rapture.asp>).

Both Darby and Scofield claimed that the “day of Christ” refers to the rapture and that “the day of the Lord” refers to the actual second coming several years after the rapture.

In fact, “the day of the Lord” and “the day of Christ” both refer to Christ’s return to the earth throughout the Bible—that is, to the time when He will step foot on earth. So also do the phrases, “the day of the Lord Jesus Christ” and “the Lord’s Day.” They all speak of His actual descent and setting His feet on this earth (Zechariah 14:1-4). This fact further discredits this principal premise of Darby and Scofield. (See our booklet *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* for further information about this subject.)

The heart of the case offered by Darby, Scofield and their modern counterparts is based upon the English words “caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

Thin proof

For such a seemingly major doctrine, one might expect a weighty argument, but this is what is offered in The Scofield Bible’s Reference Notes (1917 Edition): “...’caught up’—Not

church saints only, but all bodies of the saved [that is, not only the living, but also the dead], of whatever dispensation, are included in the first resurrection... [It] is peculiarly the ‘blessed hope’ of the Church (cf) Matthew 24:42; 25:13; Luke 12:36-48; Acts 1:11; Philippians 3:20, 21; Titus 2:11-13.”

This offers surprisingly little information, considering how many accept the rapture doctrine based upon these notes. Additionally, all of the references he cited are about Christ’s return and the believer’s need to be ready for that event. None of them speak of a “near return” by Christ to snatch away believers.

Some rapturists today cite Acts 8:39, saying it uses the same Greek word that is translated “caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. They say that the fact the Spirit of God “caught [Philip] away” shows that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 means that the saints are caught away to heaven. Yet the Spirit did not transport Philip to heaven, but rather from one place on the earth to another.

The saints of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, on the other hand, rise to meet the Lord in the air.

The words “blessed hope” also often appear in rapture literature. In fact, “The Blessed Hope” is the name by which some denominations refer to the rapture doctrine. They take “blessed hope” from Titus 2:13, where Paul writes, “looking for the blessed hope, and the appearance of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

The implication is that the word “appearance” conveys something secretive and sudden; that is, the rapture. Therefore, “blessed hope” becomes a sort of shorthand for the rapture in literature and films on the doctrine. A few other New Testament references that mention “the appearing of Christ” are also often cited, as if these scriptures strengthen their case.

But all of these are simply referring to Christ’s coming, either the first time as a perfect sacrifice for sin, or the second time, as an invincible King.

Flawed foundation

The word *rapture* comes from the Latin *rapere*, meaning, “to seize” or “to abduct.” It is translated from the Greek word that is rendered “caught up” in English Bibles today.

All advocates of the rapture agree that the main argument is based on 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Here the argument stands or falls.

First, look at verse 17 in the New King James Version: “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

The Greek verb for “caught up” is *harpagesometha*. Does it convey the sense of an abduction here? No, “[it] combines the ideas of force and suddenness seen in the irresistible power of God” (Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Revised Edition, 1984, p. 94).

Why would Paul use such a strong word? Let's allow the Bible to speak for itself. The context of the subject begins in verse 13 and concludes in verse 11 of the next chapter. Paul wrote this section of the letter in answer to concerns of the local Christians.

As you read verse 13, you discover that Christians in Thessalonica were grieving over the unexpected deaths of members of their congregation.

Albert Barnes comments: "There seems some reason to suppose...that some of them believed that, though those who were dead would indeed rise again, yet it would be long after those who were living when the Lord Jesus would return had been taken to glory, and would always be in a condition inferior to them" (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, notes on 1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Paul wrote that they should not grieve over this: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus [believers who had died]" (verse 14).

Was he responding to a worry about whether Christ would rescue believers from the Great Tribulation? No, nothing is said of this.

Nor is there anything in these verses that intimates Christ making a swooping pass by the earth to snatch off a few people to take them to heaven. These verses refer only to the doctrine of the second coming, at which time Jesus sets foot on the earth.

A reunion with friends who died

There is more to Paul's encouragement. Dr. Morris observes, "There will be a reunion with Christ, but there will also be a reunion with the friends who have gone before" (Tyndale).

The Commentary on the Whole Bible by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown observes something further. "The leading topic of Paul's preaching at Thessalonica having been the coming kingdom (Ac 17:7), some perverted it into a cause for fear in respect to friends lately deceased, as if these would be excluded from the glory which those found alive alone should share. This error Paul here corrects."

Verse 15 amplifies the point: "We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep."

Verse 18 reiterates this main point: "Therefore comfort one another with these words." Paul sums it up in verses 10-11 of chapter 5 (there is no chapter break in the original text): "...that whether we wake or sleep [remain alive or die], we should live together with Him. Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing."

Any claim that "the comfort" of these verses was about being snatched away to heaven takes incredible license with the Bible.

Paul's reason for using such a strong word as *harpagesometha* was to reassure people that, at Christ's return, God would reunite believers who remain alive with believers who had died. The dead won't be behind in any way!

The Rapture Is Wrong: The Saints Don't Rise to Run Away

The Bible says the saints rise to meet Christ at His return. But they aren't snatched away to heaven. They rise in the air to perform a fitting salute to the King of Kings and then join Him, not in heaven, but on the earth. If this is different from what you have heard or

Today's teachers of the rapture weave numerous biblical references into their narratives, but John Darby and other early rapture advocates based their belief on two verses: 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

In particular, they believed the words "shall be caught up" in verse 16 conveyed the idea that Christ would snatch the saints away. Combining this with the biblical teaching that God would protect His people in the end-time Tribulation, they projected that Christ would take the saints to heaven during that period.

Doctrine must come from the Word of God, not the word of man. What does God's Word say? The Greek for this phrase conveys a sense of force and suddenness, but it doesn't suggest abduction or snatching away.

Paul was comforting members of the Church of God in Thessalonica who were grieving over believers who had died. The survivors feared that their loved ones would lose out on participating in God's glorious Kingdom. Christ inspired Paul to put in plain words the truth of the matter. Those who died didn't go to heaven. They were in their graves. But that didn't mean they would lose out on the marvelous Kingdom of God or that the believers still living would have any advantage.

"We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep [dead]" (1 Thessalonians 4:15). Paul's message was that the dead would rise. The biblical term for rising from the dead is *resurrection*. A parallel reference is 1 Corinthians 15:51-53, which plainly tells us that God resurrects deceased believers to spirit at "the last trumpet," the same "trumpet of God" mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

Verse 51 of 1 Corinthians 15 also reveals that God will also change to spirit those believers still living at Christ's return.

That change is what enables the saints to rise in the air to meet Christ. Human beings can't just go up in the air! But spirit beings can! In the first resurrection, God changes mortal saints into immortals (1 Corinthians 15:53).

The rapture theory says Christ takes the saints to heaven to spare them from the Great Tribulation. But spirit beings don't need to be rescued from anything that the physical realm

might inflict. They can't be hurt by physical events. It therefore makes no sense to think that Christ must take them to heaven to protect them from the evils on earth.

The trumpet tells us the timing

What is the significance of the trumpet of which Paul wrote? The book of Revelation tells of seven trumpets sounded by seven angelic beings at the end of the age. The drama builds through each event announced by a trumpet blast until the seventh and final angel sounds. His announcement is the finale, the last and greatest event: The return of Jesus Christ to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth.

“Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!’” (Revelation 11:15).

Scripture doesn't allow for a rapture of the saints to heaven for an interim of several years! To the contrary, “the last trumpet” announces Christ's return to rule over the earth. Reading the full message of Revelation along with Matthew 24 shows that the timing is critical; that human governments are in the process of destroying the earth. Jesus comes not only for spiritual salvation, but also to save humankind from destroying itself. It is an emergency demanding immediate intervention.

You can read about this in our booklets *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* and *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*. All of our literature is available at www.wnponline.org/litreq.

Allowing the Bible to interpret itself, it is unmistakably clear that Christ comes to the earth at the time described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 to fulfill the countless prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, the King of Kings, to save the world. Considering all this, it is unreasonable to say that He comes briefly only to leave, not to return for years!

The ancient prophecy of Zechariah confirms the immediacy of Christ's intervention on the heels of history's greatest crisis.

“Behold, the day of the LORD is coming... For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, the houses rifled, and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity, but the remnant of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives” (Zechariah 14:1-4).

Throughout the Bible, “the day of the LORD” refers to the time of God's intervention in human affairs. It does not come subtly, stretched out over years, but rather with suddenness and with force—the precise sense of the Greek word translated “shall be caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

Protection for the saints

Therefore, believers aren't taken off the earth during the Great Tribulation. But God *will* protect believers during this time of stress. The most specific reference to the protection that God promises for His people at the end of the age is in Revelation 12.

Revelation 12:14 says, “But the woman [symbolic of the Church of God] was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness *to her place*, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.”

There is more to the story. The context tells us that at least part of God’s Church will suffer persecution while God protects the rest of the Church. “And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (verse 17). Most likely, the result of this persecution will be martyrdom.

The Bible records many ways by which God protected His people in the past, but does not reveal specifically how, where, when—or even all of the “who” that He will protect in the end. However, we can have confidence that He will reveal what we need to know at the essential time. In the meantime, our focus must be on the spiritual preparation for Christ’s return and the establishment of our Father’s Kingdom (Matthew 24:38-51).

Why the saints rise to meet Him

There is one question yet to answer: Why would the saints rise to meet Christ in the air, when He is on His way to the earth to defeat evil and to establish the Kingdom of God here? Why not simply wait for Him to arrive?

Those who teach the rapture make much of this issue, claiming that it buttresses their theory. In fact, the truth of the matter actually further discredits their erroneous teaching.

We need to look at the meaning of the Greek term translated “to meet” that Christ inspired Paul to use in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Dr. Leon Morris writes in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*: “The expression translated *to meet* is kind of a technical term ‘for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary’...and is very suitable in this context.”

Notice that it pertains to a newly *arrived* dignitary, not to one who is merely passing through. In no way does it convey that Christ only enters the atmosphere and then reverses course, as He snatches believers away to heaven.

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words adds that the Greek word “is used in the papyri of a newly arriving magistrate. ‘It seems that the special idea of the word was the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary’” (1985, “Meet”).

The resurrected saints rise in a respectful gesture to welcome the arriving dignitary, “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:16). The *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary* notes that “when a king enters his city the loyal go forth to meet him.”

As well, the word tells us where the saints go after rising to meet the returning Christ. F.F. Bruce’s *International Bible Commentary* explains: “*To meet* is used in the papyri of the official reception given to a visiting governor, whom his citizens escort into the city from which they have come to meet him” (1986, notes on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Jesus’ loyal subjects, the resurrected saints rise from the earth to meet Him as He comes to govern the world, and they escort Him back to the earth—at that time, not years later.

The same reference we cited above from Zechariah confirms this: “And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley; half of the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south... Thus the LORD my God will come, *and all the saints with You*” (Zechariah 14:4-5, emphasis added).

The truth of 1 Thessalonians 4

In conclusion, let's summarize what 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 actually says.

- Christ's return is proclaimed by an angel's trumpet blast; it is clearly not a secret matter.
- The fact that some believers had died doesn't mean they would be left out; they will be resurrected to join Christ as He returns to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.
- Living believers will also be changed to spirit to join those resurrected from the dead.
- All the saints will form a welcoming party that rises to meet Christ and escort Him back to earth; absolutely nothing is said or implied about going to heaven.

In related scriptures, we have seen that Christ indeed continues through the air to the earth after the saints meet Him. His return is the prophesied second coming, not a clandestine snatch and grab of the saints.

We have also seen that the resurrected saints who meet Christ will immediately begin to serve with Him in the Kingdom of God on the earth (Revelation 20:6).

There is no rapture. There *is* a resurrection at the second coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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