

Caught Up In The Rapture

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What would you think if I said that the Rapture **IS** a biblical teaching? In the church of God, we do not like to use this term because of its evangelical overtones and its reputation as a doctrine of wild-eyed, Bible-thumping fanatics. The essence of the idea, though, comes straight from Holy Writ!

Proponents of the Rapture cite I Thessalonians 4:16-17 as their chief source of information:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 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.

So far, so good. But how did this teaching of the apostle Paul ever come to be called the Rapture? The answer lies in the word translated "shall be caught up" (Greek *harpagésómetha*). In Latin, this word is *rapere*, from which "rapture" is derived. Free of any arcane or mysterious interpretation, it simply means "to be caught up," "snatched" or "seized."

The trouble begins when people confuse this meaning with another definition of *rapture* that has nothing to do with the biblical concept: "a state or experience of being carried away by overwhelming emotion; a mystical experience in which the spirit is exalted to a knowledge of divine things." When people blur these meanings, a picture develops of a strange, otherworldly experience preached by fire-breathing preachers to compel sinners to repent before God's wrath burns them to cinders.

To avoid this connotation, the church has in the recent past used other words to describe this future event: "Christ's second coming," "when we are changed," and most often, "the first resurrection." These euphemisms serve a good purpose in distancing the church from groups that hold unscriptural beliefs on this topic.

The Common Belief

Those who teach the Rapture frequently begin with I Thessalonians 4:16-17, but soon afterward they move into areas unsupported in the Bible. They make assumptions that are suspect. Worst, they fail to consider the clear order of events presented in Revelation, pinpointing when this astounding miracle will occur.

What do they believe? They believe that at some point in the near future, Jesus Christ will return and "snatch away" all Christians on the earth. Those who believe in Jesus will rise to meet Him in the air, and He will whisk them off to heaven for a 3½-to-seven-year Marriage Supper. In the meantime here on earth, untold destruction occurs when professing "born-again Christians" suddenly vanish while at the controls of cars, trucks, trains, airplanes, heavy equipment and the like. "Unsaved" relatives and friends will frantically and unsuccessfully search for their raptured loved ones. The media will

provide 24-hour coverage of the mysterious disappearance of millions of people, speculating wildly on its cause—everything from a mass alien abduction to shifting dimensions and levels of consciousness.

Does this sound like something our God would do?

On the other hand, the church's understanding of the first resurrection is more straightforward. On the day Christ returns to earth to establish His Kingdom, the dead in Christ will rise first, and those who are alive and converted will follow. They will meet Him in the air and immediately return to earth as a vast army of spirit beings to defeat the Beast and False Prophet in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (Revelation 19:14; Joel 3:1-2; Zechariah 14:1-5).

Notice two vast differences in these scenarios:

» The Protestant Rapture takes place either 3½ or seven years *before* Christ's return, while the church believes it will occur *at* His second coming. For this reason, the Protestant concept is often called the "Pre-tribulation Rapture" and our view, the "Post-tribulation Rapture."

» When believers are "caught up" in the air, Protestants believe, they will go immediately *to heaven* for a long, spectacular feast. We believe, though, that the saints will return *to earth* to fight in Christ's heavenly army and to help establish God's Kingdom.

Succinctly, then, the two differences are in *timing* and *destination* .

A Question of When

When this event occurs is the key to understanding the Rapture. If the timing is off, the sequence of events will not make sense, and this is what happens with a Pre-tribulation Rapture. To make the Rapture fit, other events must be juggled to new positions, and verifying scriptures must be wrenched out of context to substantiate it.

The most abused verse on the subject of the end times is Daniel 9:27, and it is a linchpin in the Pre-tribulation Rapture theory: "Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering." Unlike the Protestants, we believe that "he" in this verse refers to Messiah, not Antichrist, for the main subject of this section is Messiah. (Request our December 1994 article, "Seventy Weeks Are Determined . . .," for further information.)

Protestants, referring to Isaiah 28:15 and "a covenant with death," say that the Antichrist makes a peace treaty for one week—seven years—with the Jews. But this makes no sense! Why would the Beast "destroy the city [Jerusalem] and the sanctuary" (Daniel 9:26), and "then . . . confirm a covenant . . . for one week" (verse 27) with the vanquished Jews? The timing is wrong! Verses 26-27a speak of events that occurred in the first century.

It makes more sense to attribute this covenant to our Savior. He was "cut off, but not for Himself" (verse 26a) by His redemptive death in AD 31. He had spent 3½ years "confirm[ing] a covenant [the New Covenant] with many," and "in the middle of the week He [brought] an end to sacrifice and offering" (verse 27a) by the sacrifice of His perfect life. This simply restates what is said in verse 26a.

If this is the case, the whole idea of seven years of tribulation vanishes. Many Pre-tribulationists have begun to realize this, now claiming that the Rapture will occur 3½ years before Christ's return. How can we show that this is not when it will happen?

The Last Trumpet

We find the answer right in the context of I Thessalonians 4; in fact, Paul mentions the exact timing twice! In verse 15 Paul says that this occurs at "the coming of the Lord," and in verse 16 Christ "descend[s] from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God." To combat these clear time markers, Protestants have to say that Christ returns twice and that there are two different blowings of the trumpet!

Paul himself quashes this argument in I Corinthians 15:50-52:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit *the kingdom of God*; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at *the last trumpet*. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

I Corinthians 15:50-52 is parallel to I Thessalonians 4:15-17. The phrase "the kingdom of God" in I Corinthians parallels "the coming of the Lord" in I Thessalonians. Likewise, "the last trumpet" parallels "the trumpet of God." The last trumpet announces *both* the resurrection of the saints and Christ's triumphant return to earth to set up His Kingdom!

We must go to Revelation 11:15-18 to confirm when the last trumpet sounds:

Then the seventh angel sounded [his trumpet]: And there were loud voices [shouts? of archangels?] 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!" And the twenty-four elders . . . worshiped God, saying: "We give you thanks, O Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth."

This prophecy adds even more to the mix. This last—seventh—trumpet announces the coming of Christ, the establishment of God's Kingdom, the judgment upon the nations, and the rewarding of the saints. They occur simultaneously!

The last trumpet sounds when Christ returns, not 3½ years before! If we compare verses 11-13 (the resurrection of the Two Witnesses) with verse 19, the "great earthquake" ties the resurrection of the

saints with the beginning of the Kingdom (see also Revelation 16:18). In addition, an angel tells John in Revelation 10:7 that when "the seventh angel . . . is about to sound, the mystery of God would be finished." There will be no more mystery about man becoming God when the saints are resurrected or changed to eternal spirit beings!

Matthew 24:30-31 also verifies this scenario, showing that the trumpet sounds to send the angels to gather the elect from all over the earth to meet Him upon His return. To clinch the argument, verse 29 very plainly says, "Immediately *after* the tribulation of those days. . .!" Isaiah 27:12-13, Joel 2:1-11 and Zechariah 14:3-5, 9 also confirm these events.

Destination: Earth!

The second difference between the teaching of the church and the Protestants' view is the matter of the eventual destination of those who rise to meet Christ in the air. Is it up to heaven or back to earth?

Much of the Protestant view is based on an assumption. Because Paul writes, "And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (I Thessalonians 4:17), they assume that since Christ lives in heaven, the changed saints will too. But is this assumption valid?

We have shown elsewhere that the reward of the saved is eternal life as kings and priests ruling and teaching here on earth (Revelation 5:10). But where will the saints go at the moment of Christ's return? The clearest verses that show Christians immediately returning with our King to the earth are Zechariah 14:3-5, 9:

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, which faces Jerusalem on the east. . . . Thus the Lord my God will come, **and all the saints with You** [*Him*, margin]. . . . And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. (See I Thessalonians 3:13.)

If our Savior is going to rule "over all the earth," the saints will have to settle for earth too!

Protestants also use John 14:2-3 to "prove" that the saints go to heaven:

In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

Here, too, they make assumptions, such as understanding "house" only as a dwelling, rather than as a family or dynasty. Thus, they narrowly define *place* as "an ornate abode, a mansion or palace" instead of a "position," "office," "role" or "spot." If this is the case, it is a good thing that Jesus was a carpenter while He lived on earth! He must be doing a lot of work preparing all those mansions!

Seriously, however, they gloss over the fact that Jesus says directly in this context that He would "come again." Where? To earth! He then says He will receive the saints to Himself. If He remains on earth to rule the nations, then the saints will rule with Him on the earth! Many scriptures show very plainly that God's Kingdom will be on the earth (Psalm 2:6-8; Jeremiah 23:5; Daniel 2:35, 44-45; 7:27; Zechariah 9:9-10; Revelation 11:15).

After the saints are resurrected, full-fledged members of the God Family, they may be able to go from earth to God's throne in the third heaven. They will live and work, though, on the earth. After the Millennium has passed and the White Throne Judgment is complete, the Father Himself will descend from heaven to make the new earth His dwelling place (Revelation 21:3, 22; 22:1-5)!

Earth is where the action is!

Not Appointed to Wrath

Pre-tribulationists also point to I Thessalonians 5:9 to show that Christians will not be on earth but in heaven when the Great Tribulation occurs: "For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice, however, that they have read into it something it does not say. It mentions neither heaven nor earth, and thus it has no bearing on the physical whereabouts of the saints when Christ returns.

This scripture does, though, make a good point about God's plans for us! He does not intend for us to feel His wrath in the Day of the Lord (verse 2). With His calling, His Word and His Spirit, we should be soberly watching world events, keeping tabs on the approaching crisis at the close of this age (verses 4-6). More than that, we should be applying the armor of God daily, preparing for our roles in the coming Kingdom of God (verse 8; Ephesians 6:10-18).

Indeed, the faithful have ***not*** been appointed to wrath! As Paul says encouragingly in Philippians 1:6: "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." God is molding us in His Son's image (II Corinthians 4:18; Romans 12:2; I John 3:2), and Paul shows us what we should be doing as He works in us:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)

If we are busy following these instructions, with God working in us "both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13), we do not need to fear God's wrath! Our Savior promises, "Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth" (Revelation 3:10).

Jesus says, "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36). If we endure to the end and remain faithful servants of God, we ***will*** be among those who "shall be caught up together . . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air"!

As Paul says, we can take great comfort in these words (I Thessalonians 4:18)!