

10. THE RAPTURE OF THE LIVING SAINTS

What is the Rapture?

When God's people die, they go to be home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). It doesn't say they go to heaven, and that is not the best way to look at it. Heaven is not Japan or the moon or a place in our physical universe, it is a realm, the heavenly realm, where time and space are different. At death, the body remains on Earth while the spirit transits into this heavenly or spiritual realm. Christians will find themselves in the heavenly Jerusalem while non-Christians are excluded from God's presence and will find themselves in Hades (Greek) or Sheol (Hebrew), the underworld, where they await judgment at the end of the world.

But none of that has to do with the Rapture. The Rapture does not involve Christians who have died, but those who are alive at the second coming of Jesus Christ. It will happen at the same time as the resurrection of the dead. When the dead rise from their graves in new supernatural bodies to meet the Lord in the *air*, the bodies of the living saints will be instantly transformed into supernatural bodies, and they will also rise to meet the Lord in the Earth's atmosphere. It happens in an instant, as resurrection bodies are not restricted by time and space. Our existence in the heavenly realm will be under different laws of physics just as subatomic particles are.

The Timing of the Rapture

It is difficult to change your thinking if you have followed the pre-tribulation rapture teaching for some time, but we must always give precedence to the Bible over what is currently popular. Nowhere does the Bible teach or even suggest that Jesus is coming back twice, firstly, in a secret manner to take Christians out of the world to heaven, and secondly, to bring them back again to Earth seven years later. That doesn't make sense. It is also instructive to know that the Church did not embrace the secret rapture idea until John Nelson Darby and others

proposed it around 1830. The chiliasts (premillennialists) of the early centuries of the Church believed in a post-tribulation rapture.

Proponents of the secret rapture correctly argue that God will keep Christians from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the Earth (Rev 3:10), but then they err in claiming that he will remove them from the world before the Great Tribulation begins. No Scripture teaches that! Daniel and Revelation emphasize that there will be many martyrs during the reign of Antichrist. Both declare that the Antichrist will wage war on the saints and defeat them (Dan 7:21, Rev 13:7). Why would God take the Church out of the world before the end of the Church age when Jesus returns to Earth? Why would believers be rescued seven years before the Church age ends leaving new converts to be martyred during the following years? With the Church raptured, from where will new converts come? Why would the Antichrist be so concerned about making war on the saints, if they were all removed from the world by the rapture before his reign began? A great multitude of martyrs from every nation, tribe, people, and language will die in the Great Tribulation (Rev 7:9, 14). This makes it clear that Christians are still there. These tribulation martyrs washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and were beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus (Rev 20:4). They refused to worship the Beast or his image and did not receive its mark on their foreheads or their hands. Pretribulation rapture proponents, is it fair for new Christians to be left in the world to be slaughtered by the Antichrist, while you enjoy yourselves in heaven at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb? Impossible!

Christians are pervasive throughout the Great Tribulation period, being referred to in Revelation twenty times as ‘the servants of God,’ ‘the saints,’ and ‘those who hold to the testimony of Jesus.’ Jews are not in focus, except in Revelation 11 where two Jewish Christians preach in Jerusalem for three and a half years, and Revelation 12, where Israel is referred to as the ‘woman who gave birth to Jesus’ and who is pursued by the dragon (Satan). All Israel will be saved, but not until after Jesus returns: The Deliverer will come from Zion and turn godlessness away from Jacob (Rom 11:26). The 144,000 who are sealed (Rev 7:4) are Christians. They are called “servants of our God,” and the seal on their foreheads is the name of the Lamb and the Father

to whom they belong (Rev 14:1). They follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev 14:4).

We need to understand that it has been normal in history for Christians to be persecuted and martyred. God calls upon us not only to believe in Jesus but also to suffer for his sake. There are currently an estimated 90,000 Christian martyrs every year. Jesus said: A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master ... Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but can't kill the soul ... Whoever doesn't take up their cross and follow me with it is not worthy to be my disciple (Mt 10:24, 28, 38).

Jesus said he would keep us from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the 'inhabitants of the Earth,' a common phrase in Revelation that consistently refers to unbelievers (Rev 3:10). Paul said: Jesus will come from heaven to rescue us from the coming wrath (1 Thess 1:10). He also said that God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 5:9).

In Revelation, there are three tribulation cycles: the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of wrath. The presentation is very symbolic and a lot of parallelism exists between them. They describe the tribulation that occurs during the last seven years of this age before Jesus returns. Most of the distress of this period (Rev 6 – 18) is caused by the Antichrist and his armies, nuclear war and its after-effects, famine, pollution, and plague. The church is still in the world, and the Antichrist wages war on the saints during the final 42 months. Half the world's population dies during this time; not due to the wrath of God but to the foolishness of man.

Then, suddenly, the Messiah arrives, and the first thing he does is to send out his angels to resurrect the dead and gather the living saints. They meet him in the air and a return to heaven is never mentioned. He has rescued his people from the wrath to come. The moment when the Lord plants his feet on the Mount of Olives, God's wrath is poured out. It is then that the worldwide earthquakes occur, the cities of the world collapse, mountains and islands disappear, and the wicked try and hide from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of God's wrath has come.

The time of great distress is over for the Church. After believers have received their resurrection bodies and been transferred to the heavenly realm in the sky, the angels pour their bowls of wrath on the world. Although the angels are numbered one to seven, ‘then’ never occurs to give their actions a consecutive meaning. It is more likely that their actions are simultaneous: Antichrist’s followers are struck with sores and burnt by the sun, his kingdom collapses, oceans and rivers are ruined, armies from the East converge on Israel, worldwide earthquakes occur causing mountains and islands to disappear, and showers of asteroids fall on people.

Revelation 17-18 describes the fall of Babylon, followed by rejoicing in heaven with loud hallelujahs. The Messiah has finally begun his reign (aorist) and it is time for the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-7).

Jesus’ Teaching on the Rapture

When you see the Abomination that causes Desolation in the holy place that the prophet Daniel spoke about - let the reader understand - then let those who are in Judea at that time flee to the mountains (Mt 24:15-16).

This event occurs in the middle of the Great Tribulation, and Jesus’ words, relevant for his followers, shows that his followers will be in the world during the distress. Christians at that time should expect to see the Antichrist taking his seat in the temple at Jerusalem.

For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now - and never to be equaled again. If God hadn’t reduced those days, no one would survive, but he reduced them *for the sake of the elect*. At that time if anyone should say to you: Look, the Messiah is here or over there, don’t believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will come and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that is possible. Listen! I have warned you (Mt 24:21-25).

Jesus was warning his followers (Christians) about the horrors of a time of great distress, the Great Tribulation, and tells them what to do when that time comes. If those days were not reduced, no human being would be saved, but for the sake of the elect (Christians), those days will be

reduced. Christians are still there on Earth, and they are in danger of being deceived by false prophets. Jesus has warned us!

Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will darken, the moon won't give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be dislodged. Then the Son of Man's sign will appear in the sky. All the tribes of Israel will mourn as they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and great glory. He'll send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and *they'll gather his elect* (Christians not Jews) from all directions, from one end of the heavens to the other (Mt 24:29-31).

Jesus states very clearly that he, the Son of Man, will come with his angels to gather his elect, *immediately after* the distress of those days, not before it. The elect are Christians, whether dead or alive. He'll come with a great public and noisy display, with power and glory, and with a loud trumpet call. It'll be no secret event! The Bible does not teach a secret rapture. The elect here are not Jews. The Jews are not raptured by angels, they are gathered from all the nations and brought to Israel as God has been doing during the past hundred years. The only elect Jews in the NT are Christian Jews.

I tell you, that night two people will be in one bed, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be at the farm, one will be taken and the other left (Lk 17:34-36).

Jesus is talking about the very day when the Son of Man will be revealed, a day of which no one knows the hour, but the closer it gets, the surer we'll be that it'll be soon. It'll be a day of judgment and separation of the 'sheep' from the 'goats.' It'll be daytime in some parts of the world and nighttime in others. The righteous will not be left behind, they will be taken by resurrection and rapture.

There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. Nations on Earth will be perplexed and terrified at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Apprehensive of what is coming on the world, people will pass out in fear for the heavenly bodies will be shaken, and at that time, they'll see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin, *stand up and*

raise your heads because your deliverance is close by (Lk 21:25-28).

Jesus is telling his disciples about his second coming, the day of the Lord, when the sun, moon, and stars are darkened, and the nations are in a state of distress and terror. At that time they'll see Jesus return with power and great glory. Jesus tells his disciples that when these things *begin* to happen, before the wrath of God is poured out, they should stand up and raise their heads because their deliverance is about to occur, their deliverance from the Antichrist and more specifically the transformation of their bodies (Rom 8:23), their adoption to sonship, their glorification. Jesus is talking to his followers as Christians, not Jews (Luke 21:12-19), Christians who will be alive at the time of his return. This is sure evidence of a post-tribulation rapture, because when Jesus said, "when these things begin to happen," he is talking about signs that precede the Day of the Lord. He said: When you see these things happening, you'll know that the kingdom of God is near (Lk 21:31). You'll know that he is near, right at the door (Mt 24:33). Both passages mean that the Messiah will soon appear to establish his reign on Earth. The kingdom of God has not yet begun, the evidence for that is all around us. It will begin when he returns to Earth, the territory over which he will rule (Rev 11:15-18).

Paul's Teaching on the Rapture

As all who are related to Adam die, so all who are in Christ will be given life. Each one in his order: Christ was first, then later, when he comes, those who belong to him (1 Cor 15:22-23).

Christ was the first to be resurrected. At his coming, the dead in Christ will be resurrected first, then immediately afterwards, those who remain alive at that time will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. There is no mention of some being resurrected before and others after the tribulation.

The concept of the rapture is best described by Paul, as he explains to the Thessalonian church what happens to Christians who are alive on the day when Jesus returns to Earth and resurrects the Christians who have died. See 1 Thessalonian 4:13-17.

They shouldn't grieve for their number who die, as if they had no hope. When Jesus returns from heaven, he will bring the spirits of the righteous dead *with him* to be reunited with their bodies. He will return in great glory with a cry of command and the trumpet call of God, and the righteous dead will be resurrected first. Only then will the living Christians be raptured (caught up) to meet the Lord in the air. Those who are raptured are immediately transformed, receiving immortal bodies as the righteous dead have done. From that time on they are forever with the Lord.

In summary, Jesus will descend from heaven, dead saints will be resurrected, then living saints will be raptured, then they will meet the Lord in the clouds, in the air, in the sky. There is no mention of returning to heaven. From the moment the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, no one else can enter (Mt 25:10-12, Lk 13:25). The Church is complete and God will once again resume his plan for his chosen nation Israel, Jesus has returned to Earth as Messiah to be their king.

This passage gives the destination of the resurrected and raptured people as "in the air." Jesus is returning to Earth to reign, and he brings the righteous dead with him from heaven because they'll rule the Earth with him. He is not taking them back to heaven. Where will they all live? They may number a billion people. The answer is, in New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God simultaneously. They can't live on Earth and be mixed up with unredeemed people. Immediately after Babylon falls, a great multitude proclaims that the Lord Almighty has begun to reign (aorist tense) and the wedding of the Lamb has come. Yes, the Wedding Supper of the Lamb is after Babylon's fall, not during the Great Tribulation.

The Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly like a thief in the night, but Christians are not in darkness that this day should surprise them. When unbelievers say, "Peace and security," sudden destruction will come upon them and they will not escape. Christians are children of the light and children of the day, they will know the signs of the times and are not in darkness. No, Jesus' return is not imminent (1 Thess 5:1-4). There will be judgment at Christ's coming. Blazing fire is symbolic of judgment and the powerful angels will be with him to execute judgment as the anti-Christian and anti-Jewish forces

are destroyed. Jesus will take vengeance on them when he comes, and at the same time, he will grant salvation and give relief to his people.

The Rapture won't Precede the Man of Lawlessness

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brethren, not to become easily disturbed. Don't get confused by teaching coming allegedly from us, whether prophecy or preaching or a letter, saying that the Day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in this way, for *that day will not come unless the rebellion against God comes first and the Lawless One is revealed*, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and exalt himself above everything that is called God or is worshiped. He will even take his seat in God's temple and proclaim himself to be God (2 Thess 2:1-4).

These verses are decisive, they specify clearly the timing of the rapture. Paul is teaching eschatology, the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, all one event, consisting of the second coming, the resurrection, and the rapture. He says that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first, and the Antichrist is revealed.

The Lord will not come today, this week, or even this month, because the rebellion has not happened yet. There is a lot of anti-Christian sentiment in our world, but the rebellion will be a widespread and violent defiance of the authority of God, none other than a gigantic end-of-age conflict between good and evil. That fits with the meaning of 'Antichrist,' and 'man of lawlessness,' and what we know about this dictator's character. He will oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god and religion and dare to set himself up in God's temple in Jerusalem, proclaiming himself to be God. Paul says that Jesus will not return until after these events occur.

The rapture won't happen until the Lawless is revealed and he won't be revealed until that which restrains is taken out of the way. Many have tried to solve the mystery of the restrainer, but I believe the text itself solves it for us. The whole paragraph is about lawlessness and the

Lawless One. The restrainer is the law itself or the person who makes and upholds the law. In exalting himself above everything that is called God or is worshiped, he is abolishing all the commandments and morality that religion brings. He'll enforce a truly secular society where religions and religious doctrines have no place or say in education, civil affairs, and national policy. Yes, the mystery of lawlessness is already at work and we find it hard to understand. "Just do it" is the catchcry. Even teenagers are now committing horrendous crimes and not being punished for it.

The Rebellion and the Restrainer

Jesus won't return until 'the rebellion' occurs. It's a specific rebellion, because the prophets predicted it. Psalm 2 is all about a rebellion against God and his Messiah in the last days when the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain against the Lord and his anointed. Daniel has a vision about a lawless one (Antiochus Epiphanes, Dan 8:9-13) who takes away the daily sacrifice, instigates a rebellion that causes desolation, and tramples the saints underfoot. This vision develops into activities of the Lawless One in the distant future (8:23-26). No wonder Jesus warned us, saying: When you see standing in the Holy Place the abomination that causes desolation spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand (what is happening) (Matt 24:15).

And no wonder John also warns us about this dictator whom he calls the beast:

The beast was given a mouth to speak arrogant and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. He began blaspheming God, his name, his dwelling, and those who dwell in heaven. He was allowed to wage war on the saints and to conquer them. He was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation, and all the inhabitants of the Earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the Book of Life of the Lamb who was slaughtered (Rev 13:5-8).

The Rapture in Revelation

Since you have kept my command to endure, I will keep you from the time of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the Earth (Rev 3:10).

The final years of this age will be times of great distress, initially because of the rise of a world dictator and the wars that he fights, and secondly because of his anti-God policies as the Antichrist, resulting in universal persecution of Christians and Jews and millions of martyrdoms. The whole period (Rev 6 – 18) is a time of tribulation and distress. However, the 3 ½ year rule by Antichrist will be a polarising time separating the sheep from the goats. Everyone will be tested to see whether they choose Christ or Antichrist. Those who worship him and take his mark on their bodies fail the test and end up in hell. Those who refuse to follow Antichrist are the overcomers, even though they become martyrs. This time does not include the pouring out of the wrath of God on the Earth as this follows Jesus' return and the resurrection.

Jesus said, that just as they have *kept* his command to endure, he will *keep* them from the coming trial. Remember Jesus' previous words: I'm not praying that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one (Jn 17:15), and: Everyone will hate you because of me but not even a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance, you will save your souls (Lk 21:17-19). Jesus does not promise to spare believers from suffering and martyrdom but to shield them from his wrath and to transform martyrdom into triumph (ESV commentary).

When he removed the fifth seal, I saw the souls of those who had been slain because of God's word and their testimony about Jesus. They cried out aloud, saying: Lord, holy and true, how long until you judge the inhabitants of the Earth and avenge our murders? Then each of them was given a white robe and told to be patient a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants were killed just as they had been (Rev 6:9-10).

The martyrs are told to wait until the full number of martyrs are killed. The Antichrist's persecution lasts for 3 1/2 years. They weren't given physical protection from the persecution but they had the promise of resurrection.

Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against her other children, those who keep God's commands and maintain their Christian testimony (Rev 12:17).

There will be millions of martyrs under the reign of the Antichrist. God will give his people strength and they'll be resurrected within a very short time. The joy of the Lord will be their strength. The Church is still on Earth during the tribulation.

Our brethren triumphed over Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by their Christian testimony. They didn't love their lives even when it meant dying (Rev 12:11).

God has given you the opportunity to suffer for Christ, not only to believe in him (Php 1:29).

Martyrdom is regarded as a victory over Satan and that should be our attitude if we are called upon to endure it. Many have even looked forward to it as a way of showing their faith in the strength of the Lord. Jesus said: When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on Earth? (Lk 18:8). He is suggesting that when he returns, there may not be many Christians left alive. However, the fact that there is a rapture means that a considerable number will survive.

The beast was allowed to wage war against the saints and *to conquer them*. ... Whoever has ears, let him hear this. If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they'll go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they'll be killed. *This calls for the saints to endure and be faithful* (Rev 13:7, 10).

Christians from every tribe, people, language, and nation will be present during the reign of the Antichrist and God will allow him to wage war against his people. God will strengthen them, and they'll be victorious in the face of martyrdom. Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever lets go of their life will preserve it (Lk 17:33). The saints are called upon to endure and be faithful.

Those who worship the beast and his image and receive the mark of his name will have no rest day or night. This calls for the saints who keep God's commands to be patient and remain faithful to Jesus (Rev 14:11-12).

Comments like this are a warning for Christians to be ready for a hard time during the Great Tribulation. The persecution and martyrdom come from the Antichrist, it's not from God's wrath, and those who are counseled to remain faithful to Jesus are Christians, not Israel.

I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their Christian testimony and because of God's word. *They did not worship the beast or his image and did not receive his mark on their foreheads or hands.* They came to life and reigned with the Messiah a thousand years (Rev 20:4).

Revelation 20 is about the millennium. A thousand years is mentioned six times for emphasis. Don't try and change it, we don't know whether we should add or subtract from it. Those who reign with Christ are those who were beheaded for their Christian testimony, and no doubt many others whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. All for whom Jesus died are made to be a kingdom of priests, and they will reign over the Earth (Rev 5:9-10). In his vision, John saw them come to life at the first resurrection to reign with Christ. They will be so overjoyed that they had the opportunity to prove their faith and love for Christ and to share in his sufferings.

The end times will be difficult. The apostle John said he is our brother and companion in this suffering and kingdom and endurance that are ours in Jesus (Rev 1:9). Despite the difficulties, it is a time to welcome, because Jesus' return is imminent and the saints will be conquerors, overcomers who will be resurrected and live in paradise in New Jerusalem.

At the resurrection and rapture, the saints meet the Lord in the air where New Jerusalem becomes their new home. John saw the Holy City coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev 21:2). The saints are the bride, the resurrected inhabitants of the city. Revelation does not teach that the resurrected righteous live in heaven or on Earth, but in New Jerusalem, a heavenly city that exists in the heavenly realm but also overlaps with earthly Jerusalem in the physical realm. The glory of New Jerusalem will be seen in the sky above. Earthly Jerusalem is told to shine because her light has come (Isa 60:1-2). During the millennium, the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the Earth will bring their glory to it

(Isa 60:3, Rev 21:24). Because New Jerusalem exists in a different realm, its description in Revelation is symbolic. The gold, pearls, and precious stones symbolize the glory of the heavenly city. The throne of God and Jesus are in the city, and the redeemed serve him and reign over the Earth from there. This is our destiny, it is for this that we will be raptured or resurrected.