

The Rapture Question

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

The concept of the rapture refers to the eschatological event of both dead and living believers being caught up together in a moment in the twinkling of an eye to meet Jesus in the air.

SUMMARY

The belief in the rapture is widely held among most evangelicals. The basis for the rapture primarily [1 Thessalonians 4:17](#) and [1 Corinthians 15:52](#) regarding the hope for believers of a future resurrection of their bodies. This resurrection will occur in the last days at or near the time when Jesus returns to earth. The question is whether or not the rapture is a separate and distinct event from the second coming of Christ or if it occurs simultaneously when Christ returns to earth at the end of the tribulation. Those who affirm a pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, and pre-wrath view of the rapture see it as a separate or secret return of Christ for the church occurring well before he actually returns to the earth publicly. Those who affirm a post-tribulation view see the rapture as occurring simultaneous to the return of Christ at the end of the Tribulation. This article will examine some of the arguments for the rapture as a separate event and as a simultaneous event with the Second Coming of Jesus.

Introduction

The concept of a “rapture” refers to the eschatological event of both dead and living believers being “caught up” ([1Thes. 4:17](#)) together in a moment “in the twinkling of an eye” ([1Cor. 15:52](#)) to meet Jesus in the air. The term “rapture” comes from the Latin Vulgate’s use of the word *rapiō* meaning “to seize, snatch away,” which is equivalent to the meaning of the Greek word *harpazō* in [1 Thessalonians 4:17](#) (“caught up”). The rapture, then, relates to the hope of the resurrection of all believers who have died and the simultaneous transformation into a glorified body for believers who are still alive at the return of Jesus. While the resurrection of believers is a long-established doctrine in the Christian faith and is firmly rooted in scripture, the specific terminology of a rapture came into popular parlance in the nineteenth century with the rise of Premillennialism and Dispensational theology.

The most common issue centered around the Rapture has to do with the timing of it. There are four main views:

1. Pre-Tribulation Rapture: This view maintains the rapture occurs when Jesus comes secretly to gather the church prior a seven-year Great Tribulation that precedes the return of Christ to earth.
2. Mid-Tribulation Rapture: This is similar to the pre-tribulation view except that it locates the rapture after the first three-and-half years at the point when the Anti-Christ assumes power.
3. Pre-Wrath Rapture: This position argues that the rapture will occur toward the end of the tribulation before the outpouring of God's wrath with the bowl judgments (Rev. 16) prior to the return of Christ.
4. Post-Tribulation: This view sees the rapture as occurring simultaneous to the return of Christ at the end of the Tribulation.

Although there are serious differences between the first three views of the rapture they all share the same perspective that the rapture is a separate event from the second coming of Christ. As such, this article will primarily address the question of whether or not the rapture is a separate and distinct event from the second coming of Christ or if it occurs simultaneously when Christ returns to earth at the end of the tribulation.

View 1: The Rapture and the Return of Christ are Separate and Distinct Eschatological Events

Premillennial eschatology is distinguished by an emphasis on a literal reading of biblical prophecy, as well as a belief in a future for national Israel, a future period of tribulation before the return of Christ to earth to establish his millennial kingdom, and a subsequent final judgment. Premillennial eschatology seeks to integrate and harmonize all biblical prophecy into one comprehensive scheme, which is primarily based on Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. Premillennialism also gave birth to the concepts of the rapture, a two-stage return of Christ, and a strict separation between Israel and the church. These views are all integral to a theological school of thought called dispensationalism, which grew out of the Brethren movement and the writings of John Nelson Darby that were popularized in America by C. Larkin, D.L. Moody, C.I. Scofield, and L.S. Chafer. Although not all who affirm a premillennial eschatology are dispensationalists, all dispensationalists are premillennial. They argue the church is a parenthesis inserted between God's dealings with Israel, and thus the tribulation and millennium focus on the future of ethnic and national Israel. In the book of Revelation, the term "church" (*ekklēsia*) does not occur after Revelation 4:1 until 22:15, so classic dispensationalists conclude that the reason is because God raptures the church at the beginning of the tribulation so that he may return to dealing with Israel. This particular understanding of the rapture is at the core of the pre-tribulation rapture view.

The dispensational teaching of the pre-tribulation rapture fits within an end times series of events in which Christ will return for his church in two distinct stages. First, Christ will return in the clouds to rapture all true believers. It is commonly understood as Christ's secret return for the church and will happen imminently like a thief in the night so that believers will suddenly vanish without any warning and those left behind will not know what happened to them. The rapture will mark the beginning of a seven-year Great Tribulation centered around the nation of Israel and will feature a number of devastating judgments. After the Tribulation, Christ will return visibly to earth to establish his millennial kingdom. This second stage of Christ's return is the "second coming," although he already returned once for his saints. Both stages of Christ return are often grouped together under the heading of the "second coming."

Dispensationalists typically interpret 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (along with 1Cor. 15: 51–52) to support their belief in a pre-tribulation rapture. They argue the rapture is the resurrection of all true Christians from the time of Pentecost till the time of the rapture. This resurrection differs and is unique from the resurrection described in the Old Testament, as well as the one described at the end of Revelation.¹ In addition, meeting Christ in the clouds means that the rapture differs from Christ's visible return to earth. Dispensationalists correlate this to John 14:1–3 to argue that if the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation then Jesus' disciples return to the earth instead of his father's house as he promised.² Once in heaven, the church is presented to the Father, faces the bema seat judgment (2Cor. 5:10), and will be married to the bridegroom Christ.³ The rapture must occur prior to the tribulation to allow enough time for these events.

Dispensationalists argue that the rapture and return of Christ are separate events because they focus on the dissimilarities between so-called rapture passages and return passages. By contrasting the passages that describe the return of Christ for his church and the return of Christ to earth in judgment they attempt to support the idea of two distinct phases of Christ's second coming. As such dispensationalists have succeeded in contributing a fair amount of research to distinguish at least twenty-two references to rapture passages and at least twenty second coming passages. The reason why the return of Christ is divided into two phases or stages is because many of the references to the return of Christ are positive and hopeful for the believers, but many references are negative and wrathful for the unbelievers. Revelation 6:16 depicts the cataclysmic judgments of the end times as the wrath of Christ. Whereas, Revelation 19:7- 9 depicts the Church as the bride of the Lamb so it will not be subject to his wrath to be poured out on an unbelieving world.

They contend to spare the Church from divine wrath the Church will be delivered from the tribulation by the rapture. The concept of the pretribulation rapture (as well as the mid-tribulation and pre-wrath views) implies that the Christian church will be physically removed from the earth prior to any of the troubles associated with the Great Tribulation. They also maintain that the Great Tribulation pertains to God's return to dealing with Israel as his chosen people so that the church must be removed first. They would argue that the great tribulation is the wrath of the lamb (Rev. 6:17-17; 11:18; 14:10; 15:1, 7; 16:1; 19:15). Because the tribulation is equated with God's wrath, it is very different from any tribulation the church may have experienced during the "church age." However, the pretribulation rapture is not necessary for the Church to be spared from the wrath of God. To be sure, those in Christ need never fear the wrath of God (1Thes. 1:10). Christians will never receive the wrath of God because Christ has borne the wrath of God in their place. Without a doubt, believers are spared the wrath of God, but this does not require their removal from the earth during the time of the Tribulation in order to protect them from God's judgments (2Pet. 2:5-9). God is perfectly capable to shield/seal (Rev. 7) his people from his wrath (e.g., Egyptian plagues and Goshen; Exod. 8:22; 9:26).

View 2: The Rapture and Return of Christ Occur Simultaneously at the End of the Tribulation

Another view maintains that there is only one return of Christ and at his return believers, both those who have already died and those that are still alive, will rise to meet him in the air as he descends. It is called the post-tribulation view because it locates the rapture at end of the tribulation. Those who affirm this view reject the notion of a two-stage return or a separate secret return of Christ for his church prior to the tribulation. Instead it maintains that Christ only returns once and prefer to identify the rapture, as the resurrection of the saints, as a public event. Until the rise of premillennial dispensationalism, this has been the traditional understanding of the church and some form of it is typically affirmed in amillennial, post-millennial, and historical premillennial eschatological readings of Scripture.

While the term rapture derives from a reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, what is often called the rapture is actually a reference to the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the saints. The focus on the term rapture has potentially displaced and confused the meaning of the bodily resurrection of believers by introducing another eschatological category of a two-stage or secret return of Christ that is not explicitly taught in the New Testament. As such, there are several reasons to reject any notion of a two stage return of Christ and to affirm that what is called the rapture occurs simultaneously with the one return of Christ at the end of the age.

While the catching up of believers to meet the Lord in the air in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 may suggest a rapture of sorts, it is important to remember that, in the context, Paul is addressing the topic of the resurrection of the believers who have died before Christ's return and has nothing to say about removal of the church prior to or during the tribulation. Paul explains that believers who have died will be resurrected at the return of Christ and those who are alive at that time will receive their glorified bodies automatically when Jesus comes down from heaven (1Thes. 4:16). Paul likely refers to the same event in 1Cor. 15:51–52, when he says “We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (NIV). Once again, it comes in the context of Paul's most comprehensive teaching about the bodily resurrection of the dead.

The timing of the resurrection of the saints or rapture is best understood as occurring at the visible second coming of Christ instead of at a secret return some years prior is because Paul indicates it as such in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. The Greek word *parousia*, meaning “presence,” “arrival,” or “coming,” is used to refer to the second coming of Christ throughout the New Testament (Matt. 24:27; 1Cor. 15:23; Jas. 5:8; 1Jn. 2:28). In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, the rapture passage, Paul states that those who are left alive “until the coming of the Lord” will be caught up together with those who have been raised from the dead to meet the Lord in the air. The specific term he uses in verse 15 is *parousia*. Those who affirm a two-stage secret return of Christ to rapture the church prior to or during the tribulation see this *parousia* as a distinct first stage of his second return. The problem with this interpretation is that everywhere else *parousia* occurs in the Thessalonian correspondence it unambiguously refers to the visible return of Christ to the earth (1Thes. 2:19; 3:13; 5:23; 2Thes. 2:1, 8). In 1 Thessalonians 3:13, refers to “coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints,” which clearly indicates the second coming. In addition, *parousia* is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, when Paul declares that the Lord Jesus will defeat of the man of lawlessness by “the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.” If both of these examples refer to his actual second coming to earth, there is absolutely nothing in the context to suggest that 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 should be taken any differently as all the other instances of *parousia* in Thessalonians. As such, Paul clearly seems to conceive of the resurrection of the saints and the catching up of the believers to meet the Lord in the air occurring at the same time Christ is visibly coming back to the earth and not a secretive stealing away of the church several years before he actually returns at the end of the age.

A third reason to view the rapture as simultaneous with the return of Christ to the earth is because in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24) Jesus indicates that the believers will go through the period known as the great tribulation and will be gathered to meet him when he returns. In Matthew 24:21–22, Jesus states that there will be a “great tribulation” and the fact that believers will be on earth during this time is evident when he says those days will be cut short “for the sake of the elect” (Matt. 21:22). There is no mention of anything remotely similar to the rapture until Jesus says, “And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (24:31 NIV), just after the sign of the Son of Man appears in the sky and he comes in the “clouds” (24:30). This gathering of the elect occurs at the visible return of Christ in Matthew 24:30. Jesus clearly says that his *parousia* will occur after the great tribulation in verse 29 (“immediately after the tribulation of those days”). The visible nature of this return is emphasized when he says it will be as lightning is visible in both in the east and west (24:27), and he will come with great power in the “clouds” (24:30). Interestingly, Jesus describes his return and the gathering of the elect using terms remarkable similar to in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 in that both texts make a reference to a “trumpet” blast and Jesus coming in the “clouds” (1Cor. 15:52 also mentions a “trumpet”). It seems most likely, then, that Paul based his eschatological teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 on an awareness of Jesus’s own teaching in the Olivet Discourse. Some argue the language of those taken and left behind found in Matthew 24:40–41 gives evidence of the rapture: “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.” However, the imagery of being “taken” is typically not used to refer to salvation, but taken in judgment and being “left” refers to those spared destruction (Isa. 3:1–3; 4:2–4; Zeph. 3:11–12; Matt. 13:41–43; 24:38–39).⁴ The teachings in the Olivet Discourse as a whole do not support the notion of a secret return of Christ to rapture the church prior to or during the Tribulation.

Lastly, it is often assumed that those saints who were either alive or resurrected will return to heaven with Jesus. Yet, the view that the saints return with Jesus to earth garners more support from the New Testament evidence. 1 Thessalonians 4:17 says that believers will “meet” (*apantēsis*) the Lord in the air. Greek word *apantēsis*, in the ancient world, was used when dignitary paid an official visit (*parousia*) to a city and the citizens of that city would go out to “meet” him escort him into the city in a procession. Perhaps this concept relates to Matthew 25:6 where the bridal party is summoned to “come out to meet” (*apantēsis*) the bridegroom so with their lamps they might escort him to the banquet hall. Or, in Acts 28:15 when the Christians from Rome “came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet (*apantēsis*)” Paul and his companions to escort them on their journey to Rome. Thus, instead of a secret rapture to heaven, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 suggests a visible return of the Son of Man to earth with great fanfare and glory. The church will suffer through the persecution (as it has done all throughout history) but God’s elect will remain faithful and will meet the Lord in the air in order to usher Him back to earth as the great King.

Conclusion

Does the Bible clearly teach the concept of a pre-tribulation rapture or a two-stage return of Christ? Probably the best answer to these questions is “not really.” Nevertheless, many faithful Bible-believing Christians hold to the view the church will be removed prior to or during the tribulation to spare them from the wrath of God. Their view is supported by a number of biblical and theological arguments that do have merit. However, if the two-stage return of Christ and rapture can only be substantiated by the theological system and hermeneutical practice of traditional dispensationalism, then there is a case for reasonable doubt. On the other hand, there are ample historical, theological, and biblical reasons to view the second coming of Christ as a singular event instead of divided into two-stages. The notion of a two-stage return is not explicitly taught in scripture and is a relatively new doctrine in Christian theology. What is more, the doctrine of the resurrection of believers and the transformation to a glorified body is well established in Christian theology, but has often been replaced with a rapture theology that may minimize the great hope of a future bodily resurrection. Regardless of what one believes about the rapture or its timing, it is not a matter of orthodoxy and heresy if believers disagree. A person’s fidelity to Christ and theological orthodoxy does not depend on belief in a two-stage return of Christ or a singular return. When Christ returns and the church is with him in glory, nobody will be disappointed or argue about how or when it all occurred.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Walvoord, John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton: Victor, 1990), 481–84.

² *Ibid.*, 421.

³ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 219–228.

⁴ Benjamin L. Merkle, “Who Will Be Left Behind? Rethinking the Meaning of Matthew 24:40–41 and Luke 17:34–35,” *WTJ* 72, no. 1 (2010): 169–79.

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