

UNDERSTANDING THE RAPTURE

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Until the 1800s, Christians have always believed two things about the Rapture. First, it meant the general resurrection of Christians, when Christ will give Christians their new glorified bodies. Second, this would occur at Christ's second coming.
2. In the early 1800s, John Darby invented a new theology called Pretribulational Rapturism. He taught there was going to be a secret Rapture in which Christ takes all Christians out of the earth. Only unbelievers will be left behind. No one will notice this event until after it occurs. But this Rapture is not Christ's second coming. Immediately after the Rapture there will be a seven-year Great Tribulation. The anti-Christ will make a covenant of peace with Israel. The temple will be rebuilt. After three and a half years, he will break the covenant and begin to annihilate the Jews, killing two-thirds of those who live in Israel, as well as millions of people around the world. Then, at the end of the seven years, Christ will come back and reign on earth for 1,000 literal years. So, Darby believed that the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ were two distinct events separated by seven years of tribulation.
3. Pretribulational Rapturism was popularized by the notes in the Scofield Reference Bible (1909). It is now the most popular view of the Rapture and end-times prophecy.
4. In 1989 Larry Norman came out with the song about the Rapture called, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." Then in 1995 Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins published a best-selling series of fictional novels based on the Rapture called Left Behind. This was then made into a movie, starring Kirk Cameron.
5. Here's a passage from the book Left Behind, by Tim LaHaye: "Local television stations from around the world reported bizarre occurrences... CNN showed via satellite the video of a groom disappearing while slipping the ring onto his bride's finger. A funeral home in Australia reported that nearly every mourner disappeared from one memorial service, including the corpse."
6. So, when the most popular study Bible, and many of the most popular television preachers, and then a highly popular novel and movie all teach a certain doctrine, many Christians buy into it.
7. But even as a young Christian I had a problem with Pretribulational Rapturism. As I studied my Bible, I didn't see it. Nowhere in Scripture did I see a secret Rapture of Christians, followed by seven years of Tribulation, following by the Second Coming of Christ. I didn't see that series of events in my Bible. And there's a reason for that. It's not in the Bible.

8. **Tim LaHaye** “One objection to the pre-Tribulation Rapture is that not one passage of Scripture teaches the two aspects of His Second Coming separated by the Tribulation. This is true.”
9. **Gary DeMar** asks, “How is it possible that so many well-meaning Christians believe in a pretrib Rapture when even pretrib advocates tell us that no one passage of Scripture teaches the two aspects of Jesus’ second coming separated by the Tribulation?”
10. So, what does the Bible teach about the Rapture? The word “rapture” is not found in any English version of the Bible. But the doctrine of the Rapture is found in 1 Thessalonians 4. There we find very clear teaching about the Rapture, and it is nothing like the Left Behind novels.

II. TEXT

1. **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** “13 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord’s coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are still 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. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

III. EIGHT SECRETS ABOUT THE RAPTURE

1. It will occur at Christ’s second coming.

- a. The Rapture will not be a taking up of the Christians to be with Christ in heaven. It is a part of the second coming of Christ.
- b. **1 Thessalonians 4:15** “For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord’s coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.”
 - i. Notice the phrase “at the Lord’s coming.”
- c. **1 Thessalonians 4:16** “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout...”
 - i. Notice the word “descend.”

2. Christ will bring with him those Christians who have already died.

- a. **1 Thessalonians 4:14** “14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.
- b. Archeologists have found an ancient inscription in Thessalonica that reveals that common belief of the day: “After death no reviving, after the grave no meeting again.”
- c. There is something we already know about death that helps us understand this passage: When Christians die, their souls immediately go to heaven to be with

Christ. There is no such thing as “soul sleep.” “Asleep” in the Bible often refers to death.

- d. Verse 14 explained: When Jesus comes back, He will bring with Him all those Christians who have already died and who were in heaven with Him.
- e. **1 Thessalonians 3:13** “May he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen.”
- f. This is another reason why we know that the Rapture is not an event in which all the Christians are going to be taken away to heaven. No. Christ will not be taking anyone to heaven at that time; He will be bringing all the dead saints with Him to earth from heaven.

3. It will not be secret event.

- a. It will be a bodily coming.
 - i. **1 Thessalonians 4:16** “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven”
- b. It will be obvious.
 - i. **1 Thessalonians 4:16** “with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God”
- c. **Kim Riddlebarger** “The threefold annunciation of the coming of the Lord by the loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God gives the readers who take Paul literally the sense that this event is anything but secret.”
- d. **Leon Morris** “I do not doubt that, if he so chose, God could make the voice of the archangel, the shout, and the trumpet audible only to believers. But I doubt very greatly whether that is what Paul is saying.”
- e. This is contrary to the view that the Rapture will be a secret event.

4. Christ will give Christians their resurrected bodies.

- a. **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17** “16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are still 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.”
- b. “the dead in Christ”
 - i. The dead in Christ are those believers who have already died when Christ comes back, whom Christ is bringing to earth with Him at His return.
- c. “rise”
 - i. What does the term “rise” mean?
 - ii. There are two things we already know from other parts of Scripture that help us with this word “rise.”
 - 1. First, as we already established, when a Christian dies, immediately their spirit leaves their body and goes to heaven to be with Jesus. There is no such thing as “soul sleep.” So, the word “rise” does not mean that when Jesus comes back all the dead Christians are going to wake up from their sleep and come out of their graves.

2. Second, we also know that when Jesus comes back, He is going to give all believers their new resurrected bodies. Theologians refer to this event as glorification, or the general resurrection.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 15:23** “But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; afterward, at his coming, those who belong to Christ.”
 - iii. Thus, we can conclude that the word “rise” in this context refers to the general resurrection. As Christ returns, He will bring the dead in Christ with Him, and He will give them their new, resurrected bodies.
- d. “17 Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...”
 - i. The Bible does not say there will be two resurrections of Christians. So, when it says that the dead in Christ will rise first (v. 16), and “then we who are still alive, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (v. 17),” we can safely conclude that all Christians will be resurrected at this time. The dead in Christ who are coming with Jesus on His way down, and those who are still alive at Christ’s coming as well.
- e. So, we see here that the Rapture and general resurrection of the saints will occur together.

5. Christians on earth will rise to meet Christ in the air as He makes His descent.

- a. **1 Thessalonians 4:17** “Then we who are still 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.”
- b. The Greek word for “caught up” means to be seized by an irresistible force.
- c. We have already established an important truth from the text. The Rapture will occur at Christ’s second coming. When Christians are caught up in the air, Christ is on the way down.
 - i. **1 Thessalonians 4:15** “For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord’s coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.”
 1. Notice the phrase “at the Lord’s coming.”
 - ii. **1 Thessalonians 4:16** “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout...”
 1. Notice the word “descend.”
 - iii. We also know that this is Christ’s second coming because this passage is about the general resurrection, and the general resurrection will occur when Christ comes back.
- d. If Christ simply wanted to take Christians out of the world and bring them to heaven...
 - i. It wouldn’t say “at the Lord’s coming.”
 - ii. There would be no reason for Him to “descend.”
- e. As well, the text does not say that Christ then takes all the Christians back to heaven.

- f. That raises the question, If Christ is not taking Christians to heaven, then why do they rise to meet Him in the clouds?
 - i. First, I we could counter that question with a question of our own. If this passage is merely about Christ taking Christians up to heaven, then why did He need to bring all the dead saints with Him? Why not just leave them in heaven?
 - ii. Second, we don't know why because the text doesn't tell us.
 - iii. Third, the language of the passage reflects a well-known tradition of that day. When a king would visit a city, as he got near, the people of the city would not stay in the city and wait for him. They would leave the city to meet him on his way, and then escort him into the city. That may be what is happening here. As Christ the King is making His descent to earth, His people don't just sit around waiting for Him. He has us rise up in the clouds and escort Him back to earth as the conquering hero.
 - 1. **Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*** "Nowhere does the text say that when Christ comes down from heaven 'with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God' (1 Thess 4:16) that Christ will hover with us in midair, suddenly change directions, and escort us to mansions in heaven while all hell breaks out on earth. Nor would the Thessalonians have understood Paul in this way."
 - 2. **Dr. N. T. Wright** "Paul conjures up images of an emperor visiting a colony or province. The citizens go out to meet him in open country and then escort him into the city. Paul's image of the people 'meeting the Lord in the air' should be read with the assumption that the people will immediately turn around and lead the Lord back to the newly remade world."
 - iv. There's another possible explanation for why Christians will rise to meet him in the air, only to turn around. The Bible says that when Christ comes back He will destroy the antichrist (2 Thess 2:8), a man who has deceived the masses and is likely waging war on Christians. It's possible that as Christ is returning, He bring catastrophic destruction on all of His enemies on the earth. And to protect His people from that destruction, He lifts them up off of the earth. See also 2 Thess 1:6-10.
 - v. As well, the Bible teaches that when Christ comes back, He will destroy the earth and create a new heavens and earth where we will live with Him forever. It's possible that Christ will destroy and recreate the heavens and earth as He descends, and so He lifts up all the believers to protect them from the destruction.
 - g. Either way, the Biblical picture of the Rapture is not of Christ taking the Christians away to heaven, but of Christ lifting the Christians up off the earth and giving them their new resurrected bodies as He is making His return.
- 6. **Christians will live in the presence of Jesus Christ forever.**
 - a. **1 Thessalonians 4:17** "and so we will always be with the Lord."

- b. Regardless of your view of the Rapture, this is something we can all agree on. When the Rapture occurs, all Christians will be with the Lord for the rest of eternity.
- c. What does the bible say about God's presence? In His presence is fullness of joy!

7. The timing of the Rapture is unknown.

- a. **1 Thessalonians 5:1-3** "About the times and the seasons: Brothers and sisters, you do not need anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "Peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."
- b. Christians do not know when, but they know it will occur. Therefore we will not be surprised.
 - i. **1 Thessalonians 5:5** "For you are all children of light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or the darkness."

8. Christians must live godly lives until He comes.

- a. **1 Thessalonians 5:6-11** "6 So then, let us not sleep, like the rest, but let us stay awake and be self-controlled. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation. 9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing."
- b. What do we do while we wait for Christ to return? We don't quit our jobs and sit around staring at the sky? We continue to live fruitful, productive Christian lives.
- c. Specifically, we must put on the armor of faith, love, and hope.
- d. **1 Thessalonians 1:3** "We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."
 - i. Faith: Confidence in God, that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do.
 - 1. Faith is the source of our work – obedience to Christ.
 - ii. Love: Affection for God.
 - 1. Love is the source of our labor – service for Christ.
 - iii. Hope: The confident expectation of heaven.
 - 1. Hope is the source of our endurance – standing firm in Christ during hard times.

IV. CONCLUSION

- 1. So, what can we conclude about the Rapture?
 - i. The Rapture and the Second Coming will occur simultaneously.
 - ii. The Rapture will result in Christians getting their resurrected bodies.
 - iii. The Rapture involves coming to earth with His people, not taking His people back to heaven.
- 2. So, are you ready?