

A Scriptural Primer: THE RAPTURE

The Rapture has been a much-debated concept throughout Church history. What is it exactly? When does it happen? Who does it happen to? Why does it happen? There are also many who dismiss the teaching because the word “rapture” does not appear in Scripture; however, it is a Latin translation of the phrase, “caught away,” which Paul uses to describe our meeting Christ in the air in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18. Thus the phrase that the word “rapture” refers to is in the Scriptures.

Those Believers who agree that there is a Rapture event are often divided into three main camps: pre-Tribulation, mid-Tribulation, and post-Tribulation, depending on whether they believe the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation, sometime during the Tribulation, or at the end of the Tribulation.

Let’s look at the Scriptural evidence for the Rapture in its context and also see why there is a great deal of evidence to support the pre-Tribulation view.

AT LEAST TWO BELIEVERS HAVE BEEN RAPTURED BEFORE

We know from the Scriptures that at least two people have been “caught up” bodily to be with the Lord. The first was Enoch: *“When Enoch had lived 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. **Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him**”* (Ge-nesis 5:21-24 ESV).

*“**By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him**”* (Hebrews 11:5-6). Enoch’s body could not be found and he was removed from this life in such a way that people understood he didn’t simply die unfound in the wilderness. He was likely “raptured” in the presence of witnesses.

The second person to be “caught up” was Elijah: *“**Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal...Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.’ And Elisha said, ‘Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.’ And he said, ‘You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.’ And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, ‘My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’ And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. And **he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him** and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan”*** (2 Kings 2:1; 9-13). We cannot tell for sure if what Elisha saw would have been visible to other people or if he was seeing things spiritually, since Elijah told him he might not see his “rapture.”

Also, Elijah's cloak falling from him as he went up is perhaps where some people get the idea that Believers will leave their garments behind when the Church is raptured. Furthermore, Elijah's "whirlwind" and "chariot" suggests a rapid and dramatic ascent to the Lord.

These "raptures" give us a picture of what *the* Rapture of the Church may be like. Whether or not unbelievers see the Church being raptured is up for debate, but their mysterious and unexplained absence will surely be witnessed as it was with Enoch and Elijah.

THE JEWISH VIEW OF *ONE* RESURRECTION

For all intents and purposes, the Jewish people only looked for one resurrection and did not seem to know about the Rapture: "*Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead*" (Isaiah 26:19). "*At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt*" (Daniel 12:1-2). Speaking to Jesus of her dead brother Lazarus, "*Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in **the resurrection on the last day** "*" (John 11:24).

We can see here that just as the prophecies concerning the Messiah were "compressed" and the Jews overlooked His suffering and did not see the Church Age, so their knowledge of the Resurrections and the Rapture seems to have been compressed into one Resurrection "on the last day" with the great Judgment. Jesus sometimes referred to this compressed view: "*Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment*" (John 5:28-29). But we know from His additional revelation to His apostles that there is substantial evidence for at least three different "resurrections."

THE PRE-TRIBULATION RESURRECTION AND RAPTURE

There is a strong testimony of Scriptural passages supporting the idea that the Church is "taken out" of the world in the first resurrection before God's wrath is revealed in judgment upon the earth.

"So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him" (Hebrews 9:28). In this way, Jesus comforted His disciples as He was leaving them: "*In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also*" (John 14:3). Jesus ascended into Heaven from the Mount of Olives after His resurrection. He has gone to prepare a place for His Bride, the Church in His Father's House. We know that the Day of the Lord (or the Second Coming) is when Jesus returns to earth to

conquer it and establish His Millennial Kingdom at Jerusalem where He will rule. If the gathering of the Church to Jesus was to occur on the Day of the Lord, there would be no reason for rooms to be prepared in the Father's House, because as Jesus was coming to earth set up His Millennial Kingdom, we would remain with Him. It makes far more sense that the Church will be removed BEFORE the Day of the Lord's return to conquer the earth. In this way, the Church will celebrate the marriage ceremony of the Lamb and the marriage supper in Heaven during the Tribulation and before the Day of the Lord, when the Church will accompany Jesus back to earth to establish the Millennial Kingdom.

This is what we can see in Revelation, for after spiritual Babylon is judged (but before Jesus returns to earth to conquer the Beast at Armageddon) we see this scene in Heaven: *"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure'—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.' ... Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems, and He has a name written that no one knows but Himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords"* (Revelation 19:6-16). Furthermore, the armies of Heaven coming WITH Jesus are arrayed in fine linen, just as the Bride is described. The armies of Heaven will do no battle but will be present to see Jesus' victory over His enemies by the breath of His mouth.

Paul explained the order of things: *"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, **then at His coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death**"* (1 Corinthians 15:20-26). The destruction of His enemies in wrath and judgment comes after the Church is gathered together to Jesus.

This makes sense, for the Tribulation is a time of God's wrath being poured out upon the rebellious world, and it makes little sense for the Church to suffer under God's open wrath upon the entire earth. As Paul pointed out: *"For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, **and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come**"* (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). In this way, Jesus promised the church at Philadelphia, *"Because you have kept My word about patient endurance, **I will keep you from***

the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth ”
(Revelation 3:10).

Paul explains further: *“Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. **For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him ”** (1 Thessalonians 5:1-10).*

“Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God” (Romans 5:9). This wrath is ultimately eternal judgment, but the Tribulation is God’s “all out” judgment of earth through natural means. Will we suffer under the wrath of God? Is not God’s wrath reserved for His enemies? *“The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries and keeps wrath for His enemies”* (Nahum 1:2).

Jesus delivers us from the wrath that is to come upon the earth during the Tribulation, and when He returns to earth in the Day of the Lord to establish His Millennial Kingdom, the Church will appear with Him in His glory: *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. **When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory”*** (Colossians 3:1-4).

Paul gives us one of the clearest pictures of the Rapture: *“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words”* (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18).

The Rapture will be instantaneous: *“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 imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality”* (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

It is also bears mentioning that the “fig tree” frequently refers to Israel in prophecy. In this manner, Jesus told His disciples that the end would be near at hand when the fig tree (Israel) establishes itself: *“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that He is near, at the very gates”* (Matthew 24:32-33). When *“the fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away”* (Song of Solomon 2:13).

Furthermore, Believers have the Holy Spirit in them as a pledge of Christ’ return. Paul states that the Holy Spirit restrains the Antichrist from appearing before his time. But when the Spirit is removed, the Antichrist will be revealed. Surely, we will be removed with the Spirit (in the Rapture) and not separated from the very pledge Christ has given us that He will return for us: *“Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to Him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only He who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of His mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of His coming”* (2 Thessalonians 2:1-8).

Will we not be hidden from the day of the Lord’s anger? *“Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, before the decree takes effect—before the day passes away like chaff— before there comes upon you the burning anger of the Lord, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the Lord. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do His just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; **perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord**”* (Zephaniah 2:1-3). The Rapture is the “catching away” or the hiding of the saints on the day of the anger of the Lord. Just as Enoch “was not” and “was not found” and Elisha saw Elijah “no more,” so the Church will be hidden from the world during the Tribulation.

OLD TESTAMENT FORESHADOWING OF THE PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

The story of Noah has always been a picture of the Rapture, for before God’s wrath came upon the earth, He “hid” Noah in the ark and shut Him in. *“Then the LORD said to Noah, ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation...For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.’ And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him...In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. On the very same day Noah and his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the*

*three wives of his sons with them entered the ark, they and every beast, according to its kind, and all the livestock according to their kinds, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, according to its kind, and every bird, according to its kind, every winged creature. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him. **And the LORD shut him in [shut the door].** The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters” (Gen-esis 7:1-18). God “did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly” (2 Peter 2:5). Noah preached for hundreds of years and everyone was free to enter God’s salvation, but just before the destruction came, God shut Noah and his family into His salvation, while shutting the world out of His salvation. After this, there were at least forty days of “tribulation” upon the earth before the waters prevailed and the struggle of man against God ended with their utter destruction.*

Jesus warned that the world would suffer a similar fate in the last days – the Church (represented by Noah) would find salvation from the impending doom, but the world would perish in destruction: *“For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man”* (Matthew 24:37-39).

The Church is very much like Noah: *“By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith”* (Hebrews 11:7). We too have been warned of events as yet unseen, and by our faith in Christ, the world is condemned to Tribulation and destruction.

The story of Lot is also a foreshadowing of the Rapture, for *“if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes [God] condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if He rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment”* (2 Peter 2:6-9). Here, Peter is comparing the Church to Lot, who was rescued from a doomed city and taken out of the city before God’s wrath fell upon it. In the same way, the Church will be removed from the world before God’s wrath is poured out upon it.

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST (A PRE-TRIBULATION PERSPECTIVE)

In speaking about our relationship to the world, David told God, *“We are sojourners before You, and tenants, as all our fathers were; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope [abiding, prospect]”* (1 Chronicles 29:15) in the world. A sojourner is someone who is living in a foreign land temporarily—they are aliens (belonging to another nation) but are living side-by-side with the citizens of the land: *“By faith [Abraham] lived as an **alien** in the land of*

*promise, as in a foreign land[...]*for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God[...]*having confessed that they were **strangers** and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them”* (Hebrews 11:9a-16). As people of Faith, Believers are no longer citizens belonging to the world but are aliens to it, for we have renounced it for loyalty to King Jesus. Therefore, you “*are no longer strangers and aliens [to the Kingdom of Heaven], but you are fellow **citizens** with the saints, and are of God’s household”* (Ephesians 2:19).

But how are we citizens of Heaven, when we are not physically living in the Kingdom of Heaven? Because, “*we are **ambassadors** for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God”* (2 Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador is a citizen of his country sent by his government to live in a foreign land as a representative, serving the interests of his homeland, *peaceably* appealing reconciliation: “don’t risk the wrath of my king.” While living in the foreign land, he is respectful of the customs and laws, unless they require him to do things that harm his king. Ambassadors are only recalled to their homeland when war is declared, because the time for peaceful appeal has ended—violence now decides the dispute.

In like manner, the Believer remains an ambassador for the Kingdom of Heaven in the world, so long as the “cold war” of the Church-age continues. A “cold war” is a period of hostility between two kingdoms, but as neither one is prepared yet to go to full war, they maintain their embassies and seek to peacefully (yet forcefully) appeal for their interests. The Church-age “cold war” will end when God declares war on the world (the Great Tribulation), pouring out His wrath on the “*god of this world*” (2 Corinthians 4:4) and “*all the kingdoms of the world*” (Matthew 4:8b). **In this moment God will recall all His ambassadors to Him, “catching” us away (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) because our mission in the world is suspended until we return with Jesus when He physically invades and conquers the world.** Then He will give us “*authority over the nations*” (Revelation 2:26b). Until this time, we are to be faithful citizens and loyal ambassadors of the Kingdom of Heaven while we live and work in the world, rejecting its attempts to distract and tempt us to adopt its ways and culture.

THE TRIBULATION

The Tribulation is a time of man’s self-destructive desolation of earth and God’s wrath poured out in judgment upon the rebellious world. Just as some Germans worked against the Nazi government during WWII, some people will come to serve Jesus during the Tribulation and will be martyred for their faith. These Believers will also be resurrected at the end of the Tribulation.

END OF TRIBULATION, THE GATHERING OF ISRAEL, AND THE MILLENNIAL RESURRECTION

Much of the Scriptures speaking about the Tribulation and the end of the Tribulation refer to Israel and use the word “elect” to describe them. *“And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short”* (Matthew 24:22). God must cut short the Tribulation or Israel would be utterly destroyed. *“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send out His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”* (Matthew 24:29-31). Surely, this is not referring to the Rapture of the Church, but to Israel’s deliverance as in the prophecy of Zechariah: *“And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on Me, on Him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over Him, as one weeps over a firstborn. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo”* (Zechariah 12:9-11).

We see that the people who believed in Jesus during the Tribulation of earth are also resurrected: *“Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection”* (Revelation 20:4-5).

END OF THE MILLENNIAL REIGN, THE GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGMENT, AND THE FINAL RESURRECTION

Yet another resurrection will occur at the end of Christ’s Millennial Kingdom when Satan is cast into the lake of fire, *“then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done”* (Revelation 20:11-12). These will be the non-believing dead from all history as well the Tribulation survivors and Israelites that died during Christ’s Millennial reign.

CONCLUSION

While there is some uncertainty in the interpretation of Scripture concerning the Rapture, there is none in regards to Jesus’ promise that He is coming back for His Church to gather to Himself those who have died and those who are alive. Believers will never again be parted from Jesus for all eternity. This is the promise we have from God Himself, and it is our hope in this life. *“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain”* (Hebrews 6:19). Therefore, Paul says, *“I charge you in the presence of God*

*and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and **by His appearing and His kingdom**: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:1-5). Even so, Amen.*