

The Rapture of the Saints

1) *What is the Rapture?*

A) The Rapture is the first phase of the Second Coming in which Christ will come in the air for His church. There are three main passages¹ on the Rapture in the New Testament:

(1) “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 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 14:1–3, ESV).

(2) “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 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 Thess 4:13–18, ESV).

(3) “Behold! I tell you a mystery.² 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. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality,

¹ Note that I do not include Matthew 24:40–41. The context of these verses is the physical return of Christ to earth (the Return), not the Rapture. Thus the idea of “taken” is in reference to judgment and corresponds to “swept away” in v. 39 (cf. Luke 17:34–37 as a clarification on this same topic). For more detail, see Larry D. Pettegrew, “Interpretive Flaws in the Olivet Discourse,” *TMSJ* 13.2 (Fall 2002): 187–188.

² Paul calls the Rapture a “mystery” (1 Cor 15:51). In NT terminology, a “mystery” is something that was not revealed in the OT, and which cannot be known apart from special revelation (cf. Eph 3:1–10; Col 1:26–27).

then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’” (1 Cor 15:51–55, ESV).

B) These passages teach us the following:

(1) The Rapture is a truth that comes directly from Jesus—“for this we declare to you by a word from the Lord” (1 Thess 4:15a). This means that Paul received a special revelation from Christ Himself concerning this event (cf. Acts 9:1–6; 18:9–10; Gal 1:11–12; 2 Cor 12:2–4).

(2) At the Rapture, Jesus will descend from heaven to the air (i.e., the sky). He will come with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God (1 Thess 4:16).

(a) First, the bodies of believers who have died will be resurrected as new spiritual bodies and reunited with their spirits (1 Thess 4:16; 1 Cor 15:42, 52; cf. 2 Cor 5:6–8; Phil 1:21–24).

(b) Next, the bodies of believers who are still alive will be changed into new spiritual bodies. They will never have to experience physical death (1 Cor 15:52).

(c) Then, all believers will be taken up (lit. “to seize, to catch up”³) into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess 4:17).

(3) Jesus revealed the mystery of the Rapture so that we would have comfort and hope in the midst of grief—we have the knowledge that our loved ones who die in Christ are merely “asleep,” waiting for the call of their Savior (1 Thess 4:13, 18).

2) Is there a difference between the Rapture and the return of Christ to earth?

A) When we examine the scriptures that speak of Christ’s Second Coming, it is apparent that the Second Coming consists of two events: the Rapture and the

³ The word “rapture” comes from the Latin Vulgate of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in which the Greek word *harpagesometha* (“to seize, to catch up”) is translated as “*rapiémur*” (from *rápere* meaning “to grab, to carry off”). The Latin *rápere* eventually became the English *rapture*.

Return. When we compare the main Rapture passages (John 14:1–3; 1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:51–55)⁴ with the main Return passages (Rev 19:11–20:6; Matt 24:26–31; Zech 12–14; Joel 3),⁵ it becomes clear that these two events are separate and distinct. Specifically, we observe the following differences:⁶

- (1) At the Rapture, Christ comes for His own and calls them to be with Him (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:17; 2 Thess 2:1). At the Return, Christ comes with His own and they join Him in the fight against the Antichrist (1 Thess 3:13; Jude 1:14; Rev 19:14; Mal 4:1–3).
- (2) At the Rapture, the saints meet Christ in the air (1 Thess 4:17). At the Return, the saints come with Christ to the earth (Jude 1:14; Rev 19:14; Zech 14:4).
- (3) The Rapture involves the removal of all believers from the earth, leaving only unbelievers (1 Thess 4:17). The Return involves the removal of all unbelievers, leaving only believers on the earth (Matt 25:31–46; Ezek 20:33–38).
- (4) At the Rapture, only the saints will see Christ (1 Cor 15:51–52). At the Return, every eye will see Christ (Matt 24:30; Zech 12:10; Rev 1:7).
- (5) At the Rapture, the saved are delivered from wrath (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9; Rev 3:10). At the Return, the unsaved experience the full wrath of God (Zeph 1:14–18; Rev 6:12–17; 19:11–15). Judgment of sin is not associated with the Rapture, but it is very much a part of the Return.
- (6) There are no signs for the Rapture. The apostles expected Christ to come for His Bride at any moment, and they told the churches to eagerly await His call (1 Thess 4:13–5:3; Phil 4:5; Jam 5:7–9; Heb 9:28; 1 John 2:18; Tit 2:13). For this reason we say the Rapture is imminent—it could happen at any moment. By contrast, the return of Christ to earth will be

⁴ Other passages that refer to the Rapture include: Rom 8:19; 1 Cor 16:22; Phil 3:20–21; Col 3:4; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:19–20; 5:9, 23; 2 Thess 2:1; 1 Tim 6:14; Tit 2:13; Heb 9:28; Jam 5:7–9; 1 Pet 1:7, 13; 1 John 2:28–3:2; Jude 21; Rev 2:25; 3:10.

⁵ Other passages that refer to the Return include: Dan 2:44–45; 7:9–14; 12:1–3; Matt 24:32–41; Mark 13:24–32; 14:62; Luke 21:25–33; Acts 1:9–11; 1 Thess 3:13; 2 Thess 1:6–10; 2:8; 2 Pet 3:1–14; Jude 14–15; Rev 1:7; 22:12.

⁶ Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 179–181 and Edward E. Hinson, “The Rapture and the Return: Two Aspects of Christ’s Coming,” in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, editors, *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 151–162.

preceded by many great and terrible signs (Matt 24:4–14; Mark 13:19–26; Luke 21:11).

B) The differences mentioned above justify the interpretation that the Rapture and the Return are two separate and distinct events. At the Rapture, all believers will be taken from the earth so that God's wrath can be poured out on the wicked. At the Return, Christ will return to the earth with the saints, crush the armies of the Antichrist, and establish His earthly kingdom.

3) Is there an interval of time between the Rapture and the Return?

A) Scripture indicates that the Rapture and the Return will be separated by an interval of time known as the Tribulation:

(1) Christ told His disciples that a period of tribulation would come upon the world prior to His return (cf. Matt 24:15–25). This time of judgment and distress is called “the Day of the Lord” in the Old Testament (cf. Isa 13:9–16; Joel 2:1–11; 3:1–21; Zeph 1:14–18; Mal 4:1–6). The prophet Daniel was told by the angel Gabriel that this distress would last for “one week” (a week of years, or seven years; cf. Dan 9:24–27). In Revelation, we learn that the seven years will be divided into two periods of 3½ years (“a time, and times, and half a time;” Rev 11:2–3; 12:6–7, 14; 13:5). The entire seven-year week is referred to as “the Tribulation,” and the last 3½ years of the Tribulation are called “the Great Tribulation” (cf. Matt 24:21; Rev 7:14). The middle of the Tribulation is marked by the appearance of the “abomination of desolation”—an event in which God's temple is desecrated by the Antichrist (cf. Dan 9:27; Matt 24:15).

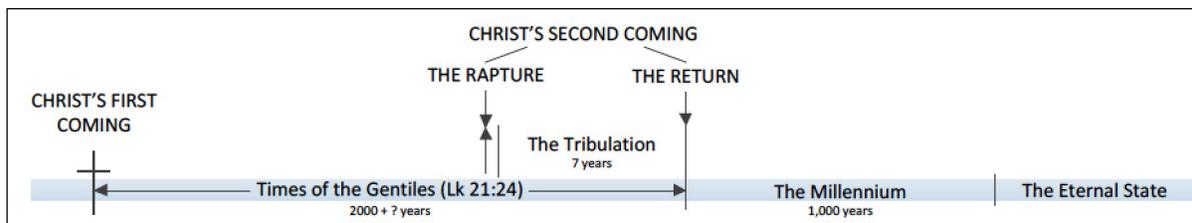
(2) The Tribulation as a whole, and the last 3½ years in particular, is the time God has appointed to pour out His wrath and judgment on the wicked. It will bring this present age to a close, fulfill the many predictions of Israel's prophets, and force mankind, especially the Jews, to choose between Christ and the Antichrist.

(3) Jesus told the church in Philadelphia that he would keep them “from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth” (Rev 3:10, ESV). Paul told the Thessalonians that Jesus would deliver “us from the wrath to come” and that “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus

Christ” (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9, ESV). Peter said that Noah and Lot are examples of the fact that “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment” (2 Pet 2:1–9, ESV). These Scriptures indicate that God does not intend believers to experience either the outpouring of His wrath in the Tribulation (which is intended specifically for the wicked; cf. Rev 6:16–17; 15:1, 7; 16:1–2; 19:15) or His final and eternal wrath in the lake of fire (cf. Rev 14:10).

(a) Clearly, some of the wicked will repent during the Tribulation (Rev 7:9–17) and they will experience some of the wrath of God. But Jesus specifically states that the days of the “great tribulation” will be shortened for “the sake of the elect” (a direct reference to Tribulation saints; Matt 24:21–22). So even here we see God’s desire for believers to escape the wrath that He pours out on the wicked.

(4) Since the church is not meant to endure the outpouring of God’s wrath on the wicked, it follows that the Rapture will occur prior to the Tribulation. Once the Tribulation is over, Jesus will return to the earth with His saints. Thus there is an interval of time between the Rapture and the Return, i.e., the Tribulation.



(a) The “Pre-Tribulation Rapture” position holds that the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation period begins. This is my personal position.

(b) The “Mid-Tribulation Rapture” position holds that the Rapture will occur at the midpoint of the Tribulation (just before the 3 1/2 years known as the Great Tribulation).

(c) The “Pre-wrath Rapture” position holds that the Rapture will occur about 3/4 of the way through the Tribulation, when the wrath of God begins to be poured out on the earth at the opening of the sixth seal (Rev 6:12–17).⁷

4) Will people be saved after the Rapture (during the Tribulation)?

A) Yes, people will be saved after the Rapture. Revelation reveals that the gospel will be preached during the Tribulation (see Rev 11:3–13; 14:6–7) and vast numbers of people will be converted (see Rev 7:9–17; 14:1–4; 20:4; Joel 2:31–32). At the Return, these believers will be ushered into the millennial kingdom of Christ and they will repopulate the earth (cf. Isa 65:20–25; Luke 20:34–36). They will live unusually long lives and will be resurrected after the Millennium is complete (Rev 20:5).

(1) At the Rapture, all believers will be removed from the earth—only the unsaved will remain. Yet when Jesus returns to the earth with His saints, large numbers of believers populate the earth (they are the “sheep” of Matt 25:31–34). How can this be? These “tribulation saints” are believers who are saved during the Tribulation period (after the Rapture but before the Return).

5) How then should we live?

A) The apostle John told the church: “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.” (1 John 2:18, 24–25, ESV).

B) The Rapture is imminent—all believers must be prepared for it to occur now, without sign or warning. This means that we ought to, as Peter said, “live holy

⁷ For a critique of this view see Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Kregel Publications, 2001).

and godly lives, as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (2 Pet 3:11–12, NIV). We should be making every effort “to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace” (2 Pet 3:14). Let us live each day saying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).