

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 some 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 the 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 happens 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 are instantly transformed into supernatural bodies, and they 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 may 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 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 it was proposed by John Nelson Darby and others around 1830. The chiliasts (premillennialists) of the early centuries of the Church believed in a post-tribulation rapture.

Proponents of the secret rapture say that Christians will not suffer the wrath of God, so he will remove them from the world before the Great Tribulation begins. No Scripture teaches that! Rather, the emphasis in Daniel and Revelation is that there will be many martyrs. Why would God take the Church out of the world before the end of the Church age which is 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? 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? There will be a great multitude of martyrs from every nation, tribe, people, and language coming out of the Great Tribulation (Rev 7:9, 14). This makes it clear that Christians are still there. These 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 its 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? God forbid!

Christians are pervasive throughout the Great Tribulation period and are 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 3 ½ 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).

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 is normal for Christians to be persecuted and even martyred. There are currently an estimated 90,000 Christian martyrs yearly. Jesus said, “The student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master ... Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul ... Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:24, 28, 38).

What about God’s wrath you say, surely God is not going to pour out his wrath on his own people! There is a lot of parallelism between the breaking of the seals by the Lamb, the blowing of the trumpets by angels, and God’s wrath being poured by angels. Most of the distress is caused by the Antichrist and his armies, nuclear war and its after-effects, famine, pollution, and plague. It is only when the Messiah arrives and touches down on the Mount of Olives that 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 rapture will precede that event.

What Jesus taught about the rapture

“So *when you see* standing in the holy place ‘the Abomination that causes Desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel - let the reader understand - then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Matt 24:15-16).

This event occurs in the middle of the Great Tribulation, and Jesus’ words, relevant for his followers at that time, show that his disciples will be in the world at that time, during the distress.

Christians can 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 those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but *for the sake of the elect* those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you ahead of time” (Matt 24:21-25).

Jesus is warning his followers about the horrors of 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. They are still there, and they are in danger of being deceived by the false prophets. Jesus has warned us!

“Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the Earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. 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” (Matt 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. The elect are Christians, whether dead or alive. He comes with a great public and noisy display, with power and glory and a loud trumpet call. It is no secret! The Bible does not teach a secret rapture. The elect are not the Jews, because they 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, on 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” (Matt 24:40-41).

Jesus is talking about the very day when the Son of Man will be revealed, a day of which no one knows the hour, a day of judgment and separation of the sheep from the goats. It will 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. On the Earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, *stand up and lift up your heads* because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:25-28).

Jesus is telling his disciples about his second coming, the day of the Lord, when the sun, moon, and stars will be darkened, and the nations will be in a state of distress and terror. It is at that time that they will see Jesus return with power and great glory. Jesus tells his disciples that when these things *begin* to take place, before the wrath of God is poured out, they should stand up and raise their heads because their redemption is about to occur. Their redemption is not simply deliverance from distress but more specifically the transformation of their bodies (Rom 8:23), their adoption to sonship when their bodies become God’s property. 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

take place,” he is talking about signs that precede the Day of the Lord, not the tribulation period. “When you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:31). “He is near, at the very gates” (Matthew 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 is all around us. It will begin when he returns to Earth, the geographical area over which he will rule (Rev 11:15-18).

What Paul taught about the Rapture

“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ, all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him” (1 Cor 15:22-23).

Christ was the first to be resurrected. At his coming, the righteous dead from OT times will be resurrected, together with the Christian dead. The righteous who are alive at that time will be transformed by the rapture. There is no mention of some being resurrected before the tribulation 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 the living Christians on the day when Jesus returns to Earth and resurrects the Christians who have died:

“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that *God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him*. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, *who are left until the coming of the Lord*, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, *we who are still alive and are left* will be

caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess 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 resurrected. 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.

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 are going to rule the Earth with him. He is not taking them back to heaven. So 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 at the same time. 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.

“Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief” (1 Thess 5:1-4).

The day of the Lord is the day of the Lord's return. It will come suddenly like a thief in the night because just when unbelievers

say, “Peace and security,” sudden destruction will come upon them, and they will not escape. But Christians know the signs of the times and are not in darkness for that day to surprise them like a thief. Jesus’ return is not imminent.

“God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and *give relief to you who are troubled*, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess 1:6-8).

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, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled by the teaching allegedly from us – whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter - asserting that the Day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for *that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed*, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess 2:1-4).

These verses are decisive, they specify clearly the timing of the rapture. Paul is talking about the coming 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 man of lawlessness is revealed. He will give people freedom to do what they like, resulting in lawlessness. A lawless man cannot become a world leader unless world society itself has become lawless. He won’t be revealed until he who restrains is taken out of the way. Many have tried to solve the mystery of who the restrainer is, but 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 will 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 is specific, known about, because the prophets predicted it. Psalm 2 is all about the rebellion against God and his Messiah. “The nations

conspire and the peoples plot in vain ... against the Lord and his anointed.” Daniel’s vision about the man of lawlessness concerns the time of the end (8:17, 19, 26). “Because of *rebellion* the Lord’s people and the daily sacrifice were given over to it (the little horn). It (he) prospered in everything it (he) did, and truth was thrown to the ground ... the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the *rebellion* that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the Lord’s people” (8:12-13). No wonder Jesus said: “So when you see standing in the Holy Place the abomination that causes desolation spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand” (Matt 24:15). No wonder John warns us:

“The beast (the man of lawlessness) was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It (he) opened its (his) mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it (he) was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It (he) was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the Earth will worship it (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 NRSV).

The Rapture in the Book of Revelation

“Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come 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 possibly millions of martyrdoms. But the hour of trial spoken of here

refers to God's wrath that is coming on the whole world to test *the inhabitants of the Earth*, an expression that always refers to unbelievers.

There is no mention of the saints in chapter 16 when God's wrath is being poured out. But they have not been raptured, they have gone into hiding or been martyred. The word 'hour' in Revelation usually refers to a very brief time of judgment at the end of the age, or the very end itself (Rev 11:13, 14:7, 15, 17:12, 18:10, 17, 19). Jesus said, that just as they have *kept* his command to endure patiently, he will *keep* them from the coming trial. The hour of trial probably refers to the pouring out of the seventh bowl of God's wrath resulting in great devastation on Earth with earthquakes, cities collapsing, islands and mountains disappearing, and the sky rolling up like a scroll. Remember Jesus' words: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). and "They will put some of you to death ... but not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life" (Luke 21:16-18). "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 opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true until you judge the inhabitants of the Earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, 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.

"Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring – those who

keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus" (Rev 12:17).

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

"They (our brothers) triumphed over him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (Rev 12:11).

"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him" (Php 1:29).

Martyrdom is looked upon 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?" (Luke 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 there will be a considerable number left alive.

"It (the Beast) was given power to wage war against God's holy people and *to conquer them*. And it was given authority over *every tribe, people, language and nation*. All inhabitants of the Earth will worship the beast - all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's Book of Life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. Whoever has ears, let him hear. "If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed. *This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people*" (Rev 13:7-10).

God's people are the saints, the Church, people from every tribe, people, language, and nation, those whose names are in the Lamb's Book of Life. They are present during the reign of the

Antichrist and God allows him to make war against his people. God will strengthen them, and they will be victorious in the face of martyrdom. “Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33). The saints are called upon to endure and be faithful.

“This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus” (Rev 14:12).

Comments like this are a warning to God’s people to be ready for a hard time during the Great Tribulation. The persecution and martyrdom come from the Antichrist, not from God’s wrath, from which they will be protected. Those who remain faithful to Jesus are Christians, not Israel.

“I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. *They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or hands.* They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev 20:4).

Revelation 20 is about the Millennium and those who will reign with Christ. They are those who had been beheaded for their Christian testimony and for the word of God, those who were courageous and didn’t worship the beast or its image and did not receive its mark. In his vision, John saw them come to life to reign with Christ a thousand years. The martyrs will be happy that they had this opportunity to prove their faith and love for Christ and to share in his sufferings.

John saw that the suffering of the martyrs was rewarded with the privilege of reigning with Christ. But it will not be them alone, all whom Christ ransomed for God from every people, tribe, language, and nation will reign over the Earth. The end times will be difficult. The apostle John said he is our brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus (Rev 1:9). Despite the difficulties, it is a time to welcome, because Jesus’ return is immanent and the

saints are the conquerors 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 is 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 between. New Jerusalem is a heavenly city that exists in the heavenly realm but is also seen in the physical realm, in the sky above Jerusalem. Overlapping the physical realm, 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 and pearls and precious stones symbolize the glory of the heavenly city. The throne of God and Jesus are in the city, and the redeemed reign over the Earth from there.