

Bimonthly Bible Reading
Stark Road Gospel Hall
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The Rapture of the Church

Readings: Jh 14:1-3; Ac 1:9-11; 1 Cr 1:4-9; 15:50-58; Ph 3:20-21; 1 Th 1:9-10; 4:13-18; Tt 2:11-14; Rv 3:10; 4:1-3

The Rapture Defined: The Rapture refers to the coming of the Lord Jesus for His bride, the Church. This event is a “mystery,” meaning that it was not revealed by OT prophecy. It is imminent—it could happen at any moment (1 Th 4:13-17; 5:6). And since the Rapture relates only to the Church, it must occur before God resumes His dealings with Israel as a nation. The Rapture will thus occur before the seven-year Tribulation period (Daniel’s 70th week, Dn 9:24-27; 2 Th 2:3-4) and before the 1,000-year reign of Christ on the earth (the Millennium, Rv 20:1-10).

This Rapture is one of six in the Bible. Four have already taken place, and two are still to come. Enoch (Gn 5:24; Hb 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kn 2:1,11) were taken from earth to heaven without experiencing death. Christ’s ascension to heaven was also a rapture (Mr 16:19; Ac 1:9-11; Rv 12:5), as was Paul’s visit to the third heaven (2 Cr 12:2-4). The future raptures are the translation of the Church (1 Th 4:17) and of the two witnesses (Rv 11:3,11-12), after God raises them from the dead.

I. The Vocabulary of the Rapture.

- **Harpazo:** To snatch or catch away with power or by force (1 Th 4:17).
- **Parousia:** a “presence with”—both an arrival and a continuing presence. It points not only to Christ’s sudden coming for His saints, but also to His presence with them from that moment until He is revealed to Israel and the world. Some passages using *parousia* emphasize the Rapture, the beginning of that period (1 Cr 15:23; 1 Th 4:15; 5:23; 2 Th 2:1; Jm 5:7-8; 2 Pt 3:4). Others stress the duration of that period (Mt 24:3,37; 1 Th 3:13; 1 Jh 2:28), and still others emphasize the end of that period (Mt 24:27; 2 Th 2:8).
- **Apokalupsis:** an unveiling. Christ will first be revealed *to* the saints at His coming (1 Cr 1:7; 1 Pt 1:7,13; 4:13), and later will be revealed *with* His saints when He returns to execute God’s judgment (2 Th 1:7; Rm 2:5).
- **Epiphaneia:** a shining forth. “In brightest glory He will come and take His waiting people home.” The glory of Christ will be manifested when He comes to the air *for* His saints (1 Tm 6:14; 2 Tm 4:1,8; Tt 2:13). He will shine forth again “as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west” (Mt 24:27) when He returns to the earth *with* His saints (2 Th 2:8).
- *Parousia*, *apokalupsis*, and *epiphaneia* can refer to the Rapture, or the Second Coming, or both (depending on the context). When referring to the Rapture, the words also often have the Judgment Seat in view.

II. The Rapture is a Preliminary Stage in the Second Coming of Christ.

When Christ came to Bethany to raise up Lazarus, He first came only as far as the outskirts of the town and called out the two sisters to where He was (Jh 11:20-29). Only later did He enter the town with the sisters to raise up their dead brother, symbolic of Israel (11:38-44).

The Rapture: The First Stage	The Final Stage
1. The Lord Himself (1 Th 4:16); The Savior (Ph 3:20)	1. The Son of Man (Mt 24:27,30)
2. A “mystery”—not found in OT prophecy (1 Cr 15:51)	2. Specifically foretold in the OT (Dn 7:13)
3. To take the Church, His bride (1 Th 4:17)	3. To deliver Israel (Zc 14:3)
4. Into the air (1 Th 4:17)	4. Down to the earth (Zc 14:4)
5. For His saints (1 Th 4:16-17)	5. With His saints (Zc 14:5)
6. Those taken will be “forever with the Lord” (1 Th 4:17)	6. Those taken will be judged (Mt 24:39-41)
7. He will appear “without sin unto salvation” (Hb 9:28)	7. He will come to take vengeance on His enemies (2 Th 1:7-8)
8. As the Morning Star (Rv 22:16)	8. As the Sun of Righteousness (Ml 4:2)
9. Secretly (1 Cr 15:52)	9. Publicly, “every eye shall see Him” (Rv 1:7)
10. Foreshadowed only by moral signs (2 Tm 3)	10. Ushered in by physical signs (Mt 24)
11. Independent of earthly dates	11. Dependent on earthly times and seasons and certain dates (Ac 5:1; 1 Th 5:1)
12. Imminent: an immediate hope (1 Th 1:10; Ph 3:20)	12. Could not happen at once

III. The Promises of the Rapture.

- “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” (Jh 11:25-26).
- “Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going” (Jh 14:1-4).

IV. The Doctrine of Imminence.

- Imminence means that Christ’ return could happen at any moment. Nothing else has to happen before His return. The Bible teaches imminence by telling us that the Lord is near at hand (Ph 4:5 Jm 5:7-9), or by expressing that the NT writers were eagerly awaiting His return when they wrote (1 Cr 1:7; 16:22; Ph 3:20; Tt 2:11-14).
- The imminence of Christ’s return demands that the Rapture precede the Tribulation. If the rapture occurred in the middle or at the end of the Tribulation, believers would know quite clearly when Christ would be coming. The Second Coming to the earth is unknown as to the day or hour, but not the month or year. It is not imminent.
- Paul and the NT writers anticipated the return of Christ at any moment. The Thessalonian church was marked by this same belief (1 Th 1:9-10). Believers were waiting for the Son of God to come again from heaven. The Lord Jesus had promised it to His disciples (Jh 14:1-3). The angels confirmed it at the ascension of Christ (Ac 1:6-10). Peter preached it following Pentecost and wrote of it later, particularly in his second letter. When Paul spoke of the coming of Christ for the Church in 1 Th 4:13-8, he counted himself as among those who would be alive at that time. “Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord” (4:17).

V. The Descent of Christ with a Shout, the Voice of the Archangel, and the Sounding of the Last Trumpet (1 Cr 15:52; 1 Th 4:16).

- “This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Ac 1:11, NAS).
- He went personally, bodily, and visibly; so He will return personally, bodily, and visibly.
- Only His disciples saw Him go, so only His saints will see Him return.
- He left in the act of blessing His own (Lk 24:51), so He will return to bless His own.

VI. The dead in Christ shall rise first, imperishable (1 Cr 15:52; 1 Th 4:16).

- Rather than missing out, the dead in Christ actually have priority.
- Those asleep will be raised and clothed with incorruptibility.

VII. The bodies of those who “are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord” will be instantly changed (1 Cr 15:51-52).

- Those alive will be changed and clothed with immortality. He will “change the body of our humiliation that is might be likened unto His glorious body” (Ph 3:21).
- “All” living Christians will be changes—not just a privileged circle of especially faithful Christians. Not one unbeliever will be taken; not one believer will be left.
- Rather than threatening us with being left behind, the Scripture uses the certainty of being taken as a positive incentive to live for God (Cl 3:4-5).

VIII. The Rapture: changed living believers are caught up together with resurrected dead believers in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Th 4:17).

- Joyfully meeting Christ.
- Joyful reunion with loved ones who have gone to heaven.
- The final healing of all divisions between Christians.

IX. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Th 4:18).

- We will never be parted from Christ from that moment on, throughout eternity.

X. Motivation for today.

- Purity: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies Himself, just as He is pure” (1 Jh 3:1-3).
- Faithfulness: “That which thou hast hold fast till I come.”
- Diligence: “Occupy till I come.”
- Comfort: “Comfort one another with these words.”

XI. Saved *out of* the coming wrath (1 Th 1:10; 5:9; Rv 3:10).

Enoch was translated and escaped the flood completely. He was saved *out of* the flood. Noah, in contrast, was saved *through* the flood by the ark.

“He delivers us from [*ek*, out of] the wrath to come.”

He will keep us “from [*ek*, out of] the hour of testing.”

John is therefore taken up to heaven through an open door before the Tribulation begins (Rv 4:1).

Appendix 1: Views of the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ

The Bible says a lot about the future, but Christians have disagreed about *what* it says. Disagreement results from using different principles of interpretation, so that a person’s view of end time events reveals his general method of interpreting the Bible. The debate involves four future events: The Rapture of the Church, the Tribulation, the Return of Christ to the earth, and the Millennial Kingdom.

- A. **Amillennial View: There Will Be No Earthly Millennium.** In Rv 20, the Bible describes a 1,000-year reign of Christ on the earth. This earthly kingdom has been called the Millennium. Amillennialists, however, reject the concept of an earthly Millennium. They believe that the present state of the righteous in heaven is the Millennium. According to this view, the Church age will end in a time of trouble, Christ will come, there will be a general resurrection and final judgment, and then eternity.

Amillennialist interpretation errs by spiritualizing prophecy (assigning arbitrary spiritual meaning to Scripture while rejecting its literal meaning). E.g. it views the earthly scenes of Rv 20 as the condition of souls in heaven between the first and second comings of Christ. Such an arbitrary method of interpretation could be used to support any doctrine. Further, amillennialist interpretation impugns the character of God by taking His irrevocable promises to the nation of Israel and giving them all to the Church.

- B. **Postmillennial View: Christ Will Come After the Millennium.** Postmillennialists make the Millennium the last 1,000 years of the Church age. According to this view, there will be an ear of peace and abundance brought about by the efforts of the Church—a time of preparation that will culminate in Christ’s return to earth. After this, there will be a general resurrection and final judgment, and then eternity.

Postmillennialist interpretation commits the same errors as amillennialist interpretation: it spiritualizes the meaning of Scripture and revokes God’s promises to Israel. However, postmillennialists arbitrarily view Rv 20 as predicting a literal earthly kingdom that is brought about through the Church’s efforts. The events of the 20th Century have thoroughly discredited postmillennialism.

- C. **Premillennial View: Christ Will Come Before the Millennium.** Premillennialists believe that the coming of Christ to the air for His Church—the Rapture—will precede His literal Kingdom on earth. (Amillennialists and postmillennialists see the Rapture as concurrent and essentially synonymous with the Second Coming of Christ.) They also hold that God will resume His dealings with Israel as a nation. There will be a seven-year period of Tribulation, followed by the Second Coming of Christ to the earth, a 1,000-year earthly kingdom, the resurrection and judgment of the lost, then eternity.

Premillennialists follow the plain, normal, literal, historical, and grammatical method of interpretation. They point out that the prophecies regarding Christ’s first coming were all fulfilled literally, and thus expect the same to hold true for prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled. They understand Rv 20 literally. They agree with each other on most prophecies, but differ on their understanding of when the Church will be raptured (1 Cr 15:50-8; 1 Th 4:13-8), as follows.

1. **Posttribulation Rapture.** According to this view, the Church will remain on earth throughout the Tribulation, with the Rapture occurring at the end of that seven-year period. Proponents cite as proof that the Rapture of the Church and the Second Coming of Christ to establish His Millennial Kingdom are described by the same words, yet they also believe that the Rapture is distinct from the Second Coming—though separated by only a very short interval of time.
2. **Midtribulation Rapture.** Midtribulationists believe that the Church will endure the first three and one-half years of the Tribulation, and then be removed in the middle of that period, before the second half, known as the “Great Tribulation.” Proponents equate the “last trumpet” of 1 Cr 15:52 with the seventh trumpet of Rv 11:15, which is sounded at the midpoint of the Tribulation. They say that the Church is only promised deliverance from the Great Tribulation (Rv 11:2; 12:6), not from the entire Tribulation period. The resurrection and rapture of the two witnesses (Rv 11), which occurs midway through the tribulation, is taken as symbolic of the Rapture of the Church.
3. **Pretribulation Rapture.** Pretribulationists believe that the Church will be raptured from earth before the seven-years Tribulation begins. The Church will not go through any of the Tribulation period. Only this view harmonizes all that Scripture says about the Rapture. It satisfies Christ’s promise to keep us *out of* the hour of trouble (Rv 3:10). It explains the removal of the residence aspect of the indwelling Spirit’s work in believers, which requires the removal of believers too (2 Th 2). The Tribulation is a time of the outpouring of the wrath of God, and the Church is exempt from wrath (Rv 6:17; 1 Th 1:10; 5:9). The Rapture can be imminent only if it is pretribulation (1 Th 5:6).

The rapture question is not essential to our salvation. However, how we view the rapture reveals how we interpret Scripture, and thus has implications for all other doctrine. Our view of the Rapture is also important to our understanding of the future, and affects how we live. Belief in a pretribulation Rapture can comfort us in persecution. It gives us confidence, not complacency. It motivates us to stand firm in the truth, to hold fast to the truth, and to be fruitful for the truth.