

Why I Left the Rapture...Behind

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During my daughter's first year at The Master's University (an institution with a decidedly dispensational rapture theology), the school spent a week of chapel services devoted to the topic of the rapture of the church. Confused by the topic, she texted me, "What is the rapture? I've never heard of that before!" For her, the rapture was a totally foreign concept. As a pastor's daughter, that may seem like a travesty! But it doesn't surprise me as I don't remember ever preaching a sermon on the rapture. Some reading this might be thinking, "You're right! You haven't taught on the subject—not directly anyway!" There are reasons for that.

Before I get to those reasons, however, let me offer a brief account of my own journey with relation to the rapture. In my early church experience, one's view on the rapture was a big deal. If you questioned the pre-tribulation rapture of the church, then your commitment to orthodoxy and a high view of Scripture were seriously questioned. I know this, because I had my own judgments about friends who left rapture theology behind. In hindsight, it's kind of ironic to think that I left behind the "Left Behind."

My first doubts about the biblical veracity of the rapture were in 1990, while staying in the home of a pastor in England. While there, our conversation somehow shifted to the topic of the rapture in connection with the European Union. I will never forget what he said. He said something to the effect that rapture theology was largely an American evangelical phenomenon that arrived relatively late in church history with a man named [John Darby](#) in the early 1800's—a theology that most European evangelicals did not embrace. I was shocked! I assumed every conservative Christian in the world believed in the rapture. What was equally startling was this British pastor was not a theological "liberal" or someone who played fast and loose with the Scripture. That conversation planted a seed in my head. From then on, I would scour the Scripture (specifically the New Testament) to see if, indeed, the rapture of the church was a truly biblical doctrine. In what follows, I want to lay out—as concisely and as clearly as I can—what I discovered from that day forward.

But first, I want to make one thing perfectly clear. I do not consider the subject of the rapture as a major doctrine. Not even close! One's commitment to orthodoxy or a high view of Scripture should NOT be questioned simply because of an alternate view of a rapture or its timing! However, since it has surfaced once again in the turbulent events of 2020/2021...AND because I've been asked about it over the years, I thought I should address it. What follows is my "why." If my reasoning does not convince you, then we can agree to disagree in the grace of Christian fellowship.

Rapture – A Conceptual Definition

First, let's start with what people mean when they speak of the *rapture*. The word carries more than a strict lexical definition of "caught up," or "snatched up." Rather, it's a word that's loaded

with theological freight. For rapture enthusiasts, the rapture is an event in which Christians rise (some from the grave, some alive) to meet Jesus in the air to proceed with him *back to heaven* for seven years. In this vein, rapture means “caught away *to heaven*” or “taken up *to heaven*.” According to this definition, Jesus comes part way down and then makes a bit of a U-turn—coming down for his people then back up to heaven. This is the case both in the pre-tribulation rapture and the mid-tribulation rapture positions. The point of departure for Christians is earth and the point of destination is heaven, so as to safeguard God’s people from the subsequent wrath poured out on the earth. Such a view differentiates between a secret coming of Jesus (to rapture his people) and the public coming of Jesus at the end of the 7-year tribulation (see footnote 3, page 5). It is this definition of rapture—Jesus coming secretly to take his people to heaven—that I find problematic, for it comes from one solitary text—1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, to which I now turn.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. (1 Thess 4:15-17)

First, let’s consider what accompanies the “coming of the Lord” (v. 15) in this passage. The Lord will “descend from heaven” with a “cry of command,” the “voice of an archangel,” and “the sound of the trumpet of God.” Note that there is nothing secret about these phenomena. The mention of the “trumpet of God” to a Jewish listener would have signaled the arrival of God himself—as it did in Exodus 19:16, which serves as the background to this text in 1 Thessalonians 4. In the Exodus passage, there are striking similarities to 1 Thessalonians 4. There is the mention of “a very loud trumpet blast” (Exo 19:16). And with that blast “The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up” (Exo 19:20). The similarities between 1 Thessalonians 4 and Exodus 19 are unmistakable—the descent of God, the sound of a great trumpet along with the ascent of Moses to meet God at the top of the mountain...in clouds of thick smoke, I might add.

The simple fact that Jesus’ descent is couched in Exodus terminology (descent, ascent, clouds, trumpet) indicates that a cosmic, eschatological event is in view as anticipated by the Old Testament prophets. This event is the arrival of God! Consider the following samples from the prophets and note the similarities with 1 Thessalonians 4.

¹³ And in that day a great *trumpet* will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem. (Isaiah 27:13 italics added)

¹ Blow a *trumpet* in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, ² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of *clouds* and thick darkness! (Joel 2:1-2a italics added)

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. ¹⁵ A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of *clouds* and thick darkness, ¹⁶ a day of *trumpet blast* and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. (Zephaniah 1:14-16 italics added)

What becomes obvious (to me, at least), in light of these texts, is that Paul is using the same language to describe the great return of Christ with clear implications of final judgment and salvation.

As we move into the New Testament, the same language is used in texts which clearly speak of the grand, public arrival of Jesus upon earth—his second advent.

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ 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. (Matt 24:29-31 italics added)

The descriptors in Matthew 24 are the same as those used in 1 Thessalonians 4. Why is this? Because Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4 are describing the same event – the second advent of Jesus. And notice that this coming takes place “after the tribulation of those days” (Matt 24:29).

If 1 Thessalonians 4, then, is describing the second advent of Jesus, the next question is to consider the purpose of his descent (1 Thess 4:16). What is the messianic destination of Jesus’ return? The answer that runs through the Bible is, *the earth*. From Adam’s primal mandate to exercise dominion over *the earth* (Gen 1:26) to the promise of *land* to Abraham, which Paul understood to mean the whole *earth* (see Romans 4:13), the final inheritance of God’s people is *the earth* over which the Last Adam rules. Zechariah 14:9 clearly envisions a day in which God would stand *on the earth* and rule the nations. Moreover, Jesus’ final victory is envisioned by the apocalypse to take place *on the earth* (Rev. 19:19). It’s at that time the blessedness of the meek will be seen as inheriting *the earth* (Matt 5:5). The point of Jesus’ coming is to establish his rule *on the earth*. In other words, there is no U-turn back to heaven.

So far, we’ve interpreted 1 Thessalonians 4 to be referring to an eschatological judgment-salvation event (the coming of God) AND that his coming is to establish his consummate kingdom *on earth*. The question remains, what does Paul mean when he says that we, “will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:17)?¹ It

¹ The Greek word translated “caught up,” (ἀρπάζω) means to take something by force. This strong word is used to display the power of Christ over the grave to forcibly lift up his people into the great eschatological gathering. The word in other contexts of the New Testament, is used

means several things. First, unlike the people of Israel who were prohibited from coming up the mountain to meet with the descending Yahweh (because of sin), Christians, cleansed and qualified by the death and resurrection of Jesus will all rise and meet the Lord as he descends in the air as the ultimate consummate meeting between God and his people. This meeting, as seen through the background of Exodus 19, will be a moment of ominous joy! In Moses' day, the people trembled with fear at the sight of Yahweh's descent (Exodus 20:18).

Second, it means that what's in view is not a rapture—as in, “caught up to heaven.” Rather, what this envisions is the ancient custom of citizens going out to greet dignitaries in the last leg of their journey to welcome them in.² There is a reason why many followers of Jesus went outside the city of Jerusalem with palm branches to greet Jesus as he entered the city on Palm Sunday. They did so precisely because this was the ancient custom in welcoming someone important by going out and then escorting them *back into the city*. With this in view, what Paul is describing is not a *catching up to heaven*, but the consummate *welcome to earth* as we receive our great King. To me, this is not a rapture, this is a climactic *welcome*.

Third, meeting Christ in the air fulfills the great biblical expectation of the gathering of the exiles back home. Psalm 147 envisions Yahweh as the one who “...builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel” (Psalm 147:2). Speaking through Isaiah, the Lord says, “⁵ Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you” (Isaiah 43:5). Indeed, this is extended to the nations in Isaiah 56:8, “The LORD God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, ‘I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.’”

In short, the gathering to meet Christ in the air is the fulfillment of this very theme—the grand reunion of God's people. I believe this is what's in view in Matthew 24:31 when Jesus said that “³¹...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 24:31, italics added). To “gather his elect” is synonymous with “caught up together.”

“Two Men Walking up a Hill”

I can still hear the lyrics of the song in my head that speak of the unfortunate, unprepared man walking up a hill who is “left behind” at the rapture. I suspect the lyrics originate with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24:36-42.

³⁶ But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two

with reference to heaven as the destination point – “snatched up to heaven” (e.g. 2 Corinthians 12:2). In 1 Thessalonians 4, however, heaven is not mentioned—simply “in the clouds.” The destination of this “forceful grab” must be supplied by the larger biblical and theological contexts. ² The word ἀπάντησις, meaning “to meet,” is a technical term referring to, “a civic custom of antiquity whereby a public welcome was accorded by a city to important visitors” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol 1 p. 330). The sense of this term is that the people would accompany them back into the city. With this in mind, it is natural to assume that this meeting in the clouds is a welcome to earth, not a departure to heaven.

women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matthew 24:36-42)

But does this text teach the rapture? In the text, the day of Christ's coming is likened to the days of Noah and the arrival of the flood. The picture is clear that those who were swept away by the flood were the ones *taken* in judgment. The ones "left behind" (so to speak) in the flood were Noah and his family. In light of this, it's reasonable to interpret Jesus' words in 24:40 in the same manner, "Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken [aka swept away in judgment, like the flood] and one left." It's actually the reverse of the song. It's the one who is "left behind" who is actually delivered from wrath.

Escape from Wrath Argument

One of the accompanying arguments in favor of the rapture of the church to heaven, is that it delivers people from the wrath of God that unfolds during the tribulation period at the end of the age. Paul asserted this in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 when he wrote that, "⁹ ...God has not destined us for wrath...."

But what does Paul mean by "wrath?" He certainly does not mean persecution, tribulation, affliction, suffering, disease, wars, rumors of wars or death. For Jesus warned his disciples that they would face such things (Matt 24:3-14). For most rapturists, the wrath that's in view is God's eschatological wrath poured out on the nations, typically restricted to a seven-year period at the end of the age.³ During this period of tribulation, the judgments of the book of Revelation will be poured out in a sequential, intensifying manner leading up to the final return of Christ in Revelation 19. Given this understanding of Revelation 4-19, then, it is only logical that the people of God must be raptured out of the world to be delivered from the wrath to come.

But there are difficulties with this argument. First, rapturists acknowledge that there will be many people who turn to Jesus during this seven-year period of judgment (Rev 7:14). If this is the case—that people will become Christians during this period of wrath—does 1 Thessalonians no longer apply to them? Why would the church escape wrath (through rapture) while the post-rapture church experiences it?

In addition, regardless of how you interpret the symbolic judgments of Revelation, there is evidence that the outpourings of wrath are specifically targeted toward those who have worshipped the fallen powers of this world (the beast). We read, for example, that when the unholy locusts are freed from the bottomless pit, "⁴ They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but *only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads*" (Rev 9:4; see also Rev 14:9-10, 16:2; italics added). Simply put, those who have the seal of God are excluded from the outpouring of judgment.⁴ In short, even within the

³ This seven-year period is the result of a rather complicated and unlikely overlay of Daniel's 70th week (Daniel 9:27)—an orphaned week separated by a parenthesis in history during which God deals with his church—pressed down over chapters 4-19 of Revelation.

⁴ Some would argue that those who bear the seal of God are the 144,000 Jewish converts that come to Christ during the 7-year period. However, the more likely interpretation of Revelation 7 is that the 144,000 believers from the tribes of Israel are simply a symbolic way of communicating sovereign protection of the entire church, which John sees when he turns to see what he hears (this is a pattern in Revelation –

pages of Revelation God's people are protected from his wrath—not by rapture but by sovereign seal.

The Rapture Makes Christ's Imminent Return Possible

Another argument in favor of the rapture (pre-tribulation rapture in particular) is that it makes the imminent return of Christ possible. By *imminent*, rapturists mean “at any moment.” A number of texts are used to support this idea of the imminent return of Christ. Consider the following in the gospel of Matthew:

³⁶ But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. (Matt 24:36)

⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matt 24:44)

The argument runs as follows. If Jesus' return comes at the end of the tribulation—in which the judgments of Revelation 6-19 unfold over a seven-year period—then we will know the approximate time of his arrival. This, it is argued, runs contrary to verses that speak about not knowing the day or the hour. Therefore, to preserve the “any moment” definition of imminence, they conclude that there must be a sudden and unexpected rapture prior to the seven years.⁵

This argument, however, presses the words of Jesus in Matthew 24 beyond the limitations of the context. Does Jesus really intend for us to expect his return any moment...as in any second? Such a statement about not knowing the day or the hour must be interpreted within the context of the rest of the chapter. One such clue is found in Matthew 24:6 where Jesus informs his disciples of what to expect saying, “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this *must take place*, but the end is *not yet*” (italics added). These instructions are in the context of the disciples' question (Matt 24:3), “...what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age?” In Jesus' own words, certain things “must take place” prior to his arrival. The “end is not yet” clearly envisions a gap of time making the “any moment” definition of *imminent* difficult.

Another textual clue is found in the immediate context of Jesus' instruction about not knowing the day or the hour. The comparison is with the days of Noah.

³⁶ But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matt 24:36-39)

hearing then turning to see the substance of what is heard; compare Revelation 5 and John's hearing about the Lion of the tribe of Judah, only to turn and see a slain Lamb—different images of the same reality).

⁵ This whole argument rests on the interpretive assumption that all the signs of prior to Jesus' public return must take place within seven years of tribulation (after the rapture). If the time limitation (seven years) is shown to be faulty, the issue of not knowing the *day* or the *hour* resolves itself.

If Noah is the point of comparison, then we must acknowledge that Noah knew the end was coming. There is no indication he knew the exact date. But he knew it was coming. He also knew there was an enormous amount of work to be done prior to the flood—building a ship is no small feat. He also spent time preaching to people in his time—presumably about the judgment to come (2 Peter 2:5). The point is that the coming of Christ is likened to the coming of the flood. The idea of “any moment” flood-arrival simply does not fit the comparison. Moreover, those who were caught off guard—unprepared—were those who refused to believe Noah’s message. Noah, on the other hand, was prepared and knew it was coming (compare this to Paul’s comments about not being in the dark with reference to Jesus coming like a “thief in the night” in 1 Thess 5:1-5). This tells us that Jesus was not teaching an “any moment” notion of his return.

Paul, as well, taught the necessity of signs prior to the return of Christ. To the Thessalonians he wrote:

¹ Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² 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. ³ 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, ⁴ 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. (2 Thess 2:1-4 italics added)

In this passage, Paul is correcting a false view about the coming of Christ, also referred to as the “day of the Lord.” The inference of the text is that the church was succumbing to false teaching that the day of the Lord had *already taken place*. To prevent this deception about Christ’s return, Paul insists that certain things must take place *first*; namely, the rebellion and the man of lawlessness. This argument would be entirely unnecessary if Paul believed the church would be raptured prior to these events. Again, this text argues against an “any moment” notion of Christ’s return.

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

Our great hope is not a rapture but a return. On that day the trumpet of God will sound once again in deafening thunder. When it does, the heavens will shake and the earth will smoke at the descent of the Son of Glory. We will be witnesses and participants in this mighty coming of God as the gathered bride of Christ. “Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy ¹³ before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness...” (Psalm 96:12-13). At long last, we shall hear the sovereign decree, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15).