

Is There a Rapture? (If so, when, so I can be there?)

One summer day I was out swimming at Lake Manchester north of Ipswich many years ago. Near me on some rock cliffs were some kids who I gathered had a christian background from a comment that was made when some of the guys were trying to persuade a girl in the group to jump. One of them happened to say to her, "If you are lucky the rapture will occur when you jump off." After hearing that I just couldn't resist the temptation to jokingly say, "Yeah, it'll be just like bungee jumping!"

When I was a teenager I read Hal Lindsay's popular book "The Last Great Planet Earth". I got quite excited and was convinced by his arguments that there was going to be a secret rapture of christians to heaven at the beginning of the Great Tribulation. I was so excited and convinced by it that I even tried to convince an office staff member of the church behind the Plain Truth magazine that I was learning much from at the time when I called to order some literature. The person from their office was polite and offered to send me some of their own literature on the subject. To my surprise and chagrin, the literature highlighted a number of scriptures that made me look at the subject in a different light.

This doctrine is very popular with evangelical churches and has been made very popular by the Left Behind movie series. Just what does the Bible say on this topic?

Well, there are a few key Bible passages used in relation to this subject. Let's take a look at what each of them has to say and compare these verses. The first scripture usually quoted to support the rapture is **1 Thessalonians 4:15-17** which says:

"For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive *and* remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

The words "caught up" are translated from the Greek word "harpazo". When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin in the 4th century he used the Latin word rapture. Some say this word means to be taken up suddenly, without warning, to be in heaven with Jesus. The expression caught up suddenly is a correct translation but it can just as easily refer to the first resurrection at Christ's visible second coming. By and of itself, it does not prove that there is a pre-Tribulation rapture.

A very important thing to note about 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is that the time period for this is not given. The Greek word for "meet" is "apantesis". One source has the following comments about this word:

Apantēsis (Strong's Greek 529) is a technical term that refers specifically to the practice of sending a delegation outside the city walls and gates to receive a dignitary who was coming. This was the practice when a king and his army were returning from war. All the people would pour forth from the city gates and welcome them with pomp and circumstance. The people would meet them outside and then usher them back into the city with shouts of joy and acclamation. **W.E. Vines says 'It is used in the papyri of a newly arriving magistrate. It seems that the special idea of the word was the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary.'** (<http://kingdomstudies.blogspot.com.au/2009/07/apantesis.html>)

This appears to give more support to christians meeting Jesus in the air and returning with Him to this earth at His visible second coming to the Mount of Olives than it does to a secret coming of Christ to take His followers to heaven and avoid the horrors of the Great Tribulation. Adventist writer Steve Wohlberg says this about 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

Left Behind describes this event as silent and secret, yet doesn't it seem rather loud and visible? **There is a shout, a voice, and a trumpet.** Have you ever heard of a silent trumpet? Some

people have even called 1 Thessalonians 4:16 the noisiest verse in the Bible! (The Left Behind Deception, p.22)

1 Corinthians 15:51-53 also discusses the same resurrection that 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 talks about. What can we learn here about when the resurrection is and if this proves the rapture? It says:

“Behold, I speak a mystery to you; we shall not all fall asleep, but we shall all be changed; in a moment, in a glance of an eye, at the last trumpet. For a trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

This mystery to many is the rapture. The dead are raised first just like in 1 Thessalonians 4 before the rest who are alive and in both verses trumpets sound. Unlike 1 Thessalonians 4, in this passage in 1 Corinthians 15 we are told the time period. It says that the resurrection occurs at the “LAST TRUMPET”!

The sequence of the Great Tribulation in the Book of Revelation is seven seals and then the seventh seal opens up the seven trumpets. At the seventh and LAST trumpet the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord (Revelation 11:15) and this last trumpet occurs at the end of the Great Tribulation, not before.

Those who support the rapture do not believe that this last trumpet is one and the same as the seventh trumpet of the Book of Revelation. There is some truth to what they propose it could be. The last trumpet is a Hebrew idiom for the Feast of Trumpets (which the Jews today refer to as Rosh Hashanah). Trumpets were blown leading up to this feast culminating in the trumpets blown on that day. The resurrection will occur on either the seventh trumpet of Revelation or the Feast of Trumpets or perhaps even both! Let's go now to our next scripture for more detail.

Revelation 11:15-18 tells us: “And the seventh angel sounded. And there were great voices in Heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ. And He will reign forever and ever... The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that **You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints.**”

So here we are at the end of the Great Tribulation at the seventh and last trumpet when Christ's rule begins. Only now at the end of the Great Tribulation are we told that the saints are **rewarded**. If the saints have already been in heaven during the Great Tribulation wouldn't they have already received their reward?

Matthew 24:30-31 tells us: “And then the sign of the Son of Man shall appear in the heavens. And then all the tribes of the earth shall mourn, and they shall **see the Son of Man coming in the clouds** of the heaven with power and great glory. And He shall send His angels with **a great sound of a trumpet**, and **they shall gather His elect from the four winds**, from one end of *the* heavens to the other.”

Notice some key points and comparisons with our previous verses we have looked at. Like 1 Thessalonians 4 we see Christ in the clouds, there's a great trumpet and a gathering of the saints. In this passage we are specifically told that all peoples will **SEE** Christ in the clouds and **FOLLOWING** that we read about the resurrection of the saints. The chart on the side compares the details of these four passages we have examined so far.

There is one other passage used by supporters of the rapture and that is **John 14:1-3** which says: “Let not your heart be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. 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, so that where I am, you may be also.”

Are these mansions or places, as rendered in other translations, some hiding spot in heaven during the Great Tribulation? Ray Vander Laan in a Focus on the Family DVD shot on a tour of Israel called "Faith Lessons on the Life and Ministry of the Messiah" explained that this passage is drawing on bridal imagery from a Jewish wedding.

What would happen when a man married a girl is generally they wouldn't go off to some different location from their parents. They would build another house attached to the house of the man's parents. A man would pick out a bride. He would then negotiate a bride price with the bride's father. They would exchange a glass of wine to seal the deal and then the man would go to His father's place and build a new house or unit next to his father's place. This might take many months but the bridegroom would come back for the one he loves. Jesus is coming back for His church that He loves and they will be together always after His second coming. It's not referring to a rapture.

There is one clear passage that does talk about how God will protect His church during the Great Tribulation. We find it in **Revelation 12:14-17** where we read:

"And two wings of a great eagle were given to the woman, so that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time [that is, 3 ½ years], from the serpent's face. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water like a flood after the woman, so that he might cause her to be carried away by the river. And the earth helped the woman. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the river which the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged over the woman, and went to make war with **the rest of her seed, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.**"

Some people believe that the woman spoken of here is the nation of Israel since we are told in Revelation 12:5 that she gave birth to Christ. In a sense this is true, however, Paul refers to the church in the New Testament era as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). The rest of the woman's seed is referred to those who have the testimony of Jesus Christ. This is clearly not the Israeli nation but the church. The woman is protected and nourished by God in a wilderness area on earth, not in heaven! Jesus Christ even gave us warnings about **NOT** believing people who will say that He will come back secretly in Matthew 24:26-27!

Not all Christians will have this protection mentioned in Revelation 12. Christ promises those who are wholehearted in their devotion to Him and His work: "**Because you have kept the Word of My patience**, I also will keep you from the hour of temptation which will come upon all the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth" (Revelation 3:10).

Not all in God's church will be on the ball spiritually and some will not go to this place of safety God prepares for His church. The Great Tribulation, no doubt, will shake loose the complacency of many Christians in this situation. Some will even lose their life in martyrdom for their faith which is the prophesied fifth seal of the Book of Revelation (Revelation 6:9-11).

Luke 21:36 encourages us to be close to God and living His way wholeheartedly. In that verse Jesus said: "Watch therefore, praying always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things which shall occur, and to stand before the Son of Man."