



UNRAVELING THE RAPTURE
I THESSALONIANS 4:13-18
REVELATION 3:10

JAN 19, 2025
SAM STORMS
SAMSTORMS.ORG

I find it virtually impossible to find a doctrine or biblical truth that more quickly divides Christians from one another than that of the so-called Rapture of the Church. Instead of this doctrine being a source of encouragement and empowerment, it has become the object of endless arguments and acrimony. Simply put, the concept of the Rapture has served as both a blessing and a battleground for Christians. Today, I will try to unravel the rapture, which is to say, I will attempt to explain what it is and is not, and when it will occur.

The so-called "Rapture" refers to a moment in time when all living saints are resurrected and "caught up" or raptured both physically and spatially to meet Christ in the air. Yes, but I believe this event is simultaneous with and inseparable from the Parousia or the Second Coming of Christ itself.

There is considerable debate among NT scholars as to whether or not the Rapture will occur before a time of tribulation and trial or after it. We don't need to dive into the debate about whether or not there will be a 7-year period of persecution that comes upon the earth. Most Christians, myself included, do believe that there will be a time of global persecution, trial, and tribulation just preceding the return of Jesus Christ. But whether or not this time will be precisely seven years or some indeterminate period is not important. I happen to believe it will be an indeterminate time when the church is persecuted and oppressed. But the issue before us is the timing of the Rapture in relation to this global persecution. I believe the Rapture occurs **after** this time of tribulation.

Before we go any further, we need to define our terms. The word pretribulation refers to the belief that the rapture will occur before the so-called tribulation, hence **pre**-tribulation. A very small minority of Christians embrace what is called the **mid**-tribulation view, according to which the rapture occurs in the middle of the time of trial and tribulation. Both of these views separate the rapture from the Second Coming of Christ. My view is known as the **post**-tribulation perspective. The rapture, therefore, happens simultaneously with the Second Coming of our Lord. An even smaller group of Christians teach the **partial** rapture theory, according to which only those believers who are living godly lives and looking expectantly for the return of our Lord are raptured. All others are left behind.

Revelation 3:10

All that being said, I will take a brief moment to interact with what is typically believed to be the most important NT passage on the subject of the timing of the Rapture. In defense of their doctrine, pretribulationists often point to the words Jesus spoke to the local church in the city of ancient Philadelphia: "Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown" (Rev. 3:10-11).

The pretribulational interpretation is that "the hour of trial" refers to a future seven-year period of intense persecution, during which the judgments of God are poured out on the earth. The promise to the church is that God will "keep from" this hour all who believe in Jesus. The only way he can do this, so they say, is by physically removing the Church from the earth prior to the onset of this time of tribulation. A few observations should indicate why I don't believe that Jesus (or John) had any concept of a yet future pretribulation rapture of the Church in mind when these words were spoken/written.

First, the notion that any Christian is assured of special protection from trials, tribulations, and persecution is unbiblical. One can see repeatedly in the seven letters of Revelation 2-3 alone that suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel is something all believers must embrace (see Rev. 2:2-3; 2:9-10; 2:13; 3:8-10). According to Paul, it is "through many tribulations (*thlipsis*; the same word used in Rev. 1:9; 7:14) we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Jesus declared that "in the world you will have tribulation (*thlipsis*)" (John 16:33). Again, we are to "rejoice in our sufferings (*thlipsis*)" (Romans 5:3; see also John 15:19-20; Acts 5:40-41; 1 Cor. 4:11-13; 2 Cor. 4:7-12; 11:24-25; 2 Timothy 3:12).

Second, the trial or tribulation that is coming is designed for the judgment of *unbelievers*, not Christians. "Those who dwell on the earth" (v. 10) or "earth-dwellers" is a stock phrase in Revelation that *always* refers to pagan persecutors of the church (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8,12,14; 14:6; 17:2,8). They are the ones who suffer the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments of Revelation which *characterize the entire church age*, from the first coming of Christ to his second.

Third, the promise, then, is for *spiritual* protection in the midst of physical tribulation. Jesus is assuring his people that he will provide sufficient sustenance to preserve them in their faith, no matter what they face. The promise here is similar to what we find in Revelation 7:1-3,13-14 where the people of God are "sealed" lest they suffer spiritual harm from "the great tribulation (*thlipsis*)" (v. 14; cf. also Rev. 11:1-2; 12:6,14-17). Clearly, believers endure and emerge from tribulation spiritually secure. As Beale notes, "they are not preserved from trial by removal from it, but their faith is preserved through trial because they have been sealed by God" (Beale, *Revelation*, 292).

Fourth, pre-tribulationists have typically insisted that the only way God's people can be spiritually protected from the outpouring of divine wrath is by being physically removed from the earth. But this is clearly not the case, as John 17:15 makes clear (as also does the presence of the Israelites in Egypt during the time of the ten plagues). In this Johannine text we find the only other place in the NT where the precise phrase "kept from" (*tēreō ek*) is used. There Jesus prays to the Father: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you *keep them from* the evil one."

It's important to note that in this text "keep from" is actually **contrasted** with the notion of physical removal. Jesus prays not that the Father "take them out of the world" (i.e., physically remove them), **but** that the Father "keep them from" Satan's effort to destroy their spiritual life. Thus, when we turn to Revelation 3:10 we see that it is from the wrath of God poured out on "earth-dwellers" (unbelievers) that he promises to "keep" them. In the face of certain opposition and oppression from Satan, the Beast, and unbelievers, this is a glorious promise indeed.

A related argument of the pretribulationist is that since this alleged great tribulation is to be a time when the *wrath* of God is poured out on an unbelieving world, Christians cannot be present. After all, believers will never suffer God's wrath, insofar as Christ has already suffered in their stead on the cross. But this falls short of a convincing reason to posit a pretribulation rapture. In the first place, even pretribulationists concede that on their view believers will be present on the earth during what they believe will be a seven-year "Great Tribulation" (having come to faith at some time subsequent to the rapture). But if they do not suffer God's wrath (and it is certain that they wouldn't), why should it be any different for those who were purportedly removed from the earth by the rapture?

The simple fact is that ***no believer at any time in redemptive history will ever suffer divine wrath***. Thus, if the pretribulationist admits that blood-bought believers will be in the tribulation, a time of God's wrath, on what basis does he say that blood-bought believers of the Church cannot be present? We mustn't forget that in Revelation the "wrath" of God never falls on the believer, but only on the wicked (this is true whether the term for "wrath" is *thumos*, as in Rev. 14:8, 10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 18:3; 19:15; or *orgē*, as in Rev. 6:16, 17, 14:10; 16:19; 19:15).

Fifth, we must never forget that it is precisely in remaining faithful unto death that our greatest victory is achieved (not in being "raptured" to safety; cf. Rev. 2:10). Believers conquer Satan and the Beast "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, *for they loved not their lives even unto death*" (Rev. 12:11; emphasis mine).

But *what*, precisely, is "the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world," and *when* will it occur?

Of one thing I'm certain: the promise of protection must be of practical benefit and reassurance for the people of the church in Philadelphia ***in the first century***. Thus, contrary to what is argued by dispensationalists, this "hour of trial" can't be restricted to (although it may be inclusive of) a time of tribulation at the end of the present age.

If you are inclined to insist on a strictly futurist interpretation of the "hour of trial", ask yourself whether it seems odd (dare I say, impossible) that Jesus would promise one church in Asia Minor in the first century that they were to be protected from an event that not one single individual in that church would ever see, indeed, an event that allegedly would not transpire for at least another 2,000 years! How could this "hour of trial" be an event centuries after the Philadelphian Christians lived, especially since their protection from it is the very specific reward *to them* of their very specific, and historically identifiable, resistance to persecution and steadfast faithfulness in proclaiming the word of God? *They* are promised protection because *they* "kept the word" of Christ's perseverance.

I'm persuaded that Jesus is referring to that "tribulation" (*thlipsis*) which has already begun for Christians (including the Philadelphians) and will continue throughout the present age. In writing to the churches, John identifies himself as their "brother and partner in the tribulation [*thlipsis*]" and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus" (Rev. 1:9). In other words, ***"the hour of trial" is likely a reference to the entire, inter-advent church age***, during which there will always be suffering and tribulation for those who stand firm in their witness for Christ.

This isn't to deny that there will emerge an especially intensified and horrific period of tribulation in connection with the return of Christ at the end of history (regardless of how long you conceive it to be). But Jesus must have in mind an experience that was impending or already present for the Philadelphian believers in the first century and for all believers in subsequent centuries of the church's existence.

Sixth, pretribulationists often argue that Revelation 3:10 must describe the removal of the Church from the earth insofar as the Greek word *ekklēsia* ("church") is wholly absent from Revelation 4-18, chapters that purportedly describe the "Great Tribulation." The *ekklēsia* or "church", so they say, must be present in heaven.

But this argument cuts both ways, insofar as the word "church" is not found in any text in Revelation 4-18 that describes a *heavenly* scene. Should we conclude from this that the Church must be on the earth? Such arguments from silence are extremely dubious. After all, the word "church" is not found in Mark, Luke, John, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, Jude, and not until the sixteenth chapter of Romans! Unless one is prepared to dismiss large portions of the NT as irrelevant to the Church, the absence or presence of the word itself cannot be made a criterion for determining the applicability of a passage to the saints of the present age.

We should also remember that the word "church" as a denotation of the universal body of Christ considered in its totality does not occur at all in the book of Revelation. All nineteen occurrences of the word in chapters one through three refer to particular "local" congregations of Christians. Add to this the fact that terms commonly used to describe members of the Church, such as "servant" (Rev. 2:20; 7:3; 19:2), and "saints" (5:8; 8:3-4; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24) are used throughout Revelation.

Finally, Jesus concludes with both a word of assurance and an exhortation: "I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown" (Rev. 3:11). Is this "coming" the Second Advent at the close of history or a first-century disciplinary visitation? Possibly the former, but assuredly not the latter. After all, given the obedience of the Philadelphian church, there was no need for a "coming" of Jesus to judge or chastise (as was the case with Ephesus in 2:5, Pergamum in 2:16, and Sardis in 3:3).

However, there may be another option. Beale suggests that "the 'coming' referred to in this verse is the increased presence of Christ that will protect these believers when they pass through tribulation, as has just been mentioned in v. 1" (293). In other words, this may be a *spiritual coming* to provide comfort and the power to persevere, a drawing near to their hearts to energize them in their commitment. His "coming" or approach to them is not spatial, but spiritual and sanctifying, in which he intensifies his sustaining influence in their souls. If he can "come" to the churches at Ephesus (Rev. 2:5), Pergamum (Rev. 2:16), and Sardis (Rev. 3:3) to discipline, he can certainly "come" to the church at Philadelphia to strengthen and bless.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Now that the timing of the rapture has been settled, let's turn our attention to its nature. What exactly will happen when Christ returns at the end of the age? For that, we turn to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

The first thing you should notice about this paragraph is that the apostle Paul is not in the least concerned with the time of the rapture. He says absolutely nothing about it. It is rather the simple **fact** of the rapture and **the comfort and encouragement** it provides for those whose friends and loved ones have died that concerns Paul.

We see this immediately in v. 13 where Paul speaks of "those who are asleep." Evidently, several believers in Thessalonica had recently died. Their friends and family members are fearful that since they died they will miss out on the blessings associated with the return of Jesus Christ. Perhaps they will even miss out on the resurrection of the body. No, says Paul. The apostle doesn't want them to remain "uninformed" or ignorant of what has happened to their deceased loved ones and what will happen to them.

There are certainly many people who "grieve" because they "have no hope" (v. 13b). They are without hope because being without Christ, their deaths can mean only one thing: eternal damnation in hell. But such is not the case for those who died in Christ, having put their faith in him for the forgiveness of sins. So, it is perfectly normal and admissible for you and me to "grieve" when our family and friends died physically. But our grief is not a hopeless grief, but one that anticipates a glorious future.

Let's notice several things here.

First, Paul refers to those *“who are asleep”* (v. 13). This does not mean that when you die you enter into a state of perpetual unconsciousness or suspended animation. Sleep was a well-known euphemism among Christians to describe physical death. The point of describing the Christian's death as “sleep” is to emphasize that Christ has robbed death of its sting. Death is no more offensive or frightening to the believer than is dozing off for a nap! The body appears to be asleep, but the immaterial dimension, be that soul, spirit, or mind, is very much alive and conscious and with Christ (see Luke 23:42-43; 2 Cor. 5:8-10; Phil. 1:21-24; 1 Thess. 4:14; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:9-11).

The **second** thing Paul mentions is that our hope of being raised and glorified is grounded or rooted in the fact that Jesus himself also died and was raised and glorified. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus that guarantees the glorious future of all who have died in Christ. If Christ had not died and been raised, physical death would be the end of everything: no conscious after-life, no heaven, no hope of being reunited with our friends and family who have died, no hope of ever seeing Jesus himself. Only nothing.

Third, it is because we believe and know to be true that Jesus died and rose again that we can have absolute and unchanging assurance that when Christ returns, he will bring “with him” our friends and family members who have died. This phrase, “with him,” suggests that far from lying unconscious in the grave, Christians who have died physically are even now “with” Christ Jesus in heaven.

Fourth, Paul's authority for making this statement comes from the Lord himself. Paul didn't make up this notion of the rapture. Nor did he hear it from some other apostle. He received “a word from the Lord,” most likely referring to a direct revelation from the risen Christ.

Fifth, the “word” that Paul received from the Lord is that the living will not have any advantage over those who have died when Christ returns. Paul lived in hope that he would remain alive on earth when the second coming of Jesus occurred. He includes himself among those “who are alive” (v. 15), who are “left” on earth “until the coming of the Lord.” And his point is that those who are physically living when Christ returns will not be resurrected and glorified before those who have already died. It was the fear that those who had died would miss out on the resurrection that caused some in Thessalonica to live in fear and grief. Paul's clear declaration from the Lord is that in point of fact those who have already died will be raised **before** those who are still living.

Sixth, Paul says several things about the nature of Christ's second coming.

(1) “The Lord himself will descend from heaven.” He won't send an emissary or representative to accomplish this task. It isn't an angel who returns. It is Jesus himself!

(2) He will come with a “cry of command,” similar to what he declared at the tomb of Lazarus. He told Lazarus to rise and come forth. He will likewise tell us to come up!

(3) His return will be accompanied by “the voice of an archangel,” most likely that of Michael.

(4) He will come “with the sound of the trumpet of God.” This is undoubtedly the same trumpet we read about in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 – “Behold! I tell you a mystery. 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 all be changed.” In the OT, when God would “come down” to meet with his people, it was announced by a trumpet blast (Exod. 19:16-19). The “trumpet” was also a signal of God's coming to rescue his people from hostile oppression (Zeph. 1:16; Zech. 9:14).

Perhaps you have heard some argue that the rapture will be a silent event. Not so! It will be quite loud!

(5) In consequence of Christ's return, “the dead in Christ will rise first” (v. 16b). Not only do those who have died not suffer from any disadvantage, they will be the first to be changed and receive their resurrected and glorified bodies.

(6) Following this, “we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds.” The verb translated as “caught up” means to suddenly snatch away. The Latin word is *rapio, rapere*, from which we get our English word, “rapture.” See Acts 8:39; 2 Cor. 12:2-3.

(7) We should also note that this reference to the “clouds” is not primarily about what is in the sky above. All through the OT “clouds” were a regular feature of divine theophanies, that is to say, when God would appear to his people. His divine glory is veiled in the clouds and shines forth from them.

When God came down to deliver the Law to his people, we read in Exodus 19:16 that “there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.” When Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, we are told that “the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days” (Exod. 24:15-16).

Again, we read in Exodus 40:34-36 that “the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out.”

Once more, listen to what happened to the priests of Israel: “And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:10-11).

And we should never forget that at the ascension of Jesus, following his resurrection, “he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Then the angels said to the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way (that is, in the clouds) as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

(8) We will then “meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17). ***But we won’t stay there!*** The purpose of this meeting is to accompany Jesus as he continues his ***descent*** to destroy all his enemies and inaugurate the final judgment and the creation of the new heavens and new earth. This word translated “meet” (see Acts 28:15; Matt. 28:6) is used to describe how a delegation of citizens is assigned the honor of going to the outskirts of a city to meet and welcome the visiting dignitary, then to escort him into the city. The point is that neither those who will have died before Christ returns nor those who are alive when he returns will spend the rest of eternity in heaven. They will all join Jesus on the new earth that John describes in Revelation 21.

(9) The final and most glorious consequence of Christ’s return is that from that point on “we will always be with the Lord” (v. 17b). This is why the rapture is such a glorious truth: it leads us into the eternal presence of Jesus! Christ’s return in the clouds with the sound of a trumpet and the voice of the archangel is truly glorious. Knowing that all who have died in Christ in faith will receive their resurrected and glorified bodies first is wonderful. Knowing that we too will be changed in an instant and forever set free from the pain and limitations and sinful impulses of this earthly body is beyond wonderful.

But more than any of these things, that which stands above them all, the experience that makes all of life’s troubles and disappointments and struggles fade as a distant memory, is that ***we will be with Christ forever!*** If we could have all these experiences and enjoy a glorified body and be reunited with loved ones and friends, but not have Christ, it would be a horrible thing indeed. The rapture is precious and beautiful and powerful ultimately for one reason: it brings Christ Jesus to us and us to him, forever!

Why should we encourage one another with these truths (v. 18)? We are encouraged because it is a reminder that our loved ones who have died are at no disadvantage to us. They are with Jesus. We are also encouraged because when Jesus returns, we will once again be with them. And we are encouraged because Paul has told us here that we need never fear dying. It is as peaceful and restful as simply falling asleep. And the most encouraging thing of all is that it is followed by living forever in the presence of Jesus!

Conclusion

We see from all of this that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is a singular event that involves three dynamic realities. The first is that when Christ descends, he will resurrect and glorify all those who have died in faith. Second, immediately thereafter we who are alive when Christ returns will also be resurrected and receive our glorified bodies. This will happen as the Lord raptures us or catches us up or translates us into his presence in the sky. But third, please note that Jesus does not then ascend back into heaven but continues his descent to the earth with us, his faithful attendants, providing his royal retinue or entourage. It is then that the final judgment will occur and God will inaugurate the New Heavens and New Earth where we will live for all eternity with our great Triune God.