

# *The Rapture—Today's Most Popular Heresy!*

## **Paul Didn't Believe in a Rapture, Jesus Didn't Believe in a Rapture; Neither Should You!**

This is still one of the most influential beliefs in Protestant Christianity. The old mantra goes, "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through." But is that true? Are we just sort of stuck here until something apocalyptic happens like the second coming of Christ, the rise of the Anti-Christ, and a rapture?

Of course, this belief is usually combined with something that gets referred to as the "Great Tribulation." Although I won't have time in a single article to fully explain this concept, I want to demonstrate what I've come to understand about both Jesus and Paul—neither of them taught or believed in something like a rapture. So, I'm going to invite you to consider whether or not you should believe in the rapture either.

### A History of the Idea

1. Rapture doctrine is one of the most recent "new doctrines" in the history of the Church. The only doctrine more recent is the invention of the sinner's prayer for salvation by Billy Sunday in 1930, which was made popular by Billy Graham in 1935.
2. The fact that John Nelson Darby invented the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine around 1830 AD is unquestionably true. All attempts to find evidence of this wild doctrine before 1830 have failed, with a single exception: Morgan Edwards wrote a short essay as a college paper for Bristol Baptist College in Bristol England in 1744 where he confused the second coming with the first resurrection of Revelation 20 and described a "pre-tribulation" rapture. However, Edwards ideas, which he admitted were brand new and never before taught, had no influence in the modern population of the false doctrine. That prize goes to Darby.
3. Prior to 1830, no church taught it in their creed, catechism or statement of faith.
4. Darby has had a profound impact on religion today, since Darby's "secret rapture" false doctrine has infected most conservative, evangelical churches. While the official creeds and statements of faith of many churches either reject or are silent about Rapture, neither do they openly condemn this doctrine of a demon from the pulpit.
5. While not all dispensationalists believe in the Rapture. All those who teach the Rapture also believe in premillennialism. Both groups use Israel's modern statehood status of 1948 to be a beginning of a countdown to the end.

6. All premillennialists, rapturists and dispensationalists alive today believe the Bible reveals the general era of when Christ will return. The date setters of the 1800's (Seventh-day Adventists who are date setting premillennialists who reject the rapture, Jehovah's Witnesses who have set many dates) based their predictions upon speculative arrangements of numbers and chronologies in the Bible. Today's date setters without exception wrongly believe that Israel gaining state hood in 1948 fulfilled Bible prophecy and that Christ would return within one generation.

Modern proponents include William Miller, Charles Russell, Ronald Weinland, Harold Camping, Jack Van Impe, Hal Lindsay [The Late Great Planet Earth], Tim LaHaye [Left Behind - 5 film series], and Kirk Cameron [Left Behind movie]).

## **Paul's "Rapture"**

The famous "rapture" passage is found in 1 Thessalonians 4.15-17 and reads:

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.

This passage, when placed in the larger context of the chapter, answers questions that Christians in Thessalonica had concerning death. *What has happened to our loved ones who have died before the return of Christ to earth? What is theirs and our ultimate destiny?*

Paul's answer: bodily resurrection at the return of Christ to earth. Not an escape into the sky (on this point, see especially 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 8).

## **"Air" Doesn't Mean "Way Up in the Sky"**

Nowhere does this passage claim an escape into the sky. The Greek word for "air" (which many Christian interpreters have associated with "sky") that Paul uses is interesting in and of itself. It looks like this—**ἀήρ (ăār)**— In the New Testament, this refers to the lower atmosphere, the air that surrounds the earth and is breathed by living creatures.

Notice the important point: this sort of "air" is the "lower" region of the atmosphere, specifically differentiated from the "higher and rarer air." The Greek word οὐρανός (often translated as "heaven") has a different meaning when used as "air" than ἀήρ. Rather than referring to the "lower and denser air as distinguished from the higher and rarer air," it means:

*1. the vaulted expanse of the sky with all things visible in it a. the universe, the world b. the aerial heavens or sky, the region where the clouds and the tempests gather, and where thunder and lightning are produced c. the sidereal or starry heavens*

2. *the region above the sidereal heavens, the seat of order, of things eternal, and consummately perfect where God dwells and other heavenly beings [1]*

**Just for fun**, I want to break down this word a bit:

- Acts 22:23...εἰς τὸν ἀέρ...dust into the air,
- 1Co 9:26...ὡς οὐκ ἀέρα δέρων...one that beateth the air:
- 1Co 14:9...γὰρ εἰς ἀέρα λαλοῦντες....shall speak into the air.
- Eph 2:2...ἐξουσίας τοῦ ἀέρος τοῦ πνεύματος.....power of the air, the spirit that...
- 1Th 4:17...κυρίου εἰς ἀέρα καὶ οὕτως.....the Lord in the air: and so shall...
- Rev 9:2...καὶ ὁ ἀήρ ἐκ τοῦ.....sun and the air were darkened by...
- Rev 16:17...ἐπὶ τὸν ἀέρα καὶ ἐξῆλθεν.....vial into the air; and there came...

It seems that the difference between these two words matters for our study. The word in the 1 Thessalonians text indicates the “air” of the “lower” region as opposed to the “heavens” as οὐρανός can also be translated (heavens – 24x, heavenly – 1, heaven – 218). In other words, Paul had an option to use either of the words to talk about the “air” but he chose to use the word that refers mostly to the lower atmospheric region.

This should already make us wonder. But, it isn't enough to win us over yet. Because there remains a series of mixed metaphors that need to be addressed. Even more than the word "air," these are what contribute to a "rapture" reading of Paul.

We will find that Paul never had in mind a future event where Christians would be evacuated from this planet. And this has nothing to do with the timing of such an event. Paul never imagined a pre-, mid-, or post-Tribulation rapture. Why? Well, because just like Jesus, he had no concept of a way distant future Great Tribulation. More on that in a moment. Let's consider Paul's challenging language before we jump ahead, briefly, to Jesus.

## **Paul's Mixed Metaphors**

Paul, the great Jedi Master of metaphor, borrows two specific images from the Old Testament that would have been familiar to Jewish converts and Gentiles who were familiarizing themselves with the Hebrew tradition.

The **first** of these that Paul employs in the text has to do with *Moses who comes down from Mount Sinai with the Law with the great blast of the trumpet*. Something significant will happen, which will be like that powerful moment when God came down to the mountain to meet with Moses. Notice God's trajectory is downward. And although Moses goes up to the mountaintop, he doesn't go any higher.

This encounter with God invites him to mimic this God's action: moving from an upward space to a downward space, for the benefit of those below (of course, we also notice the limitations of ancient cosmology when we talk about "up" and "down," but that is for a different day).

The **second** image is taken from *Daniel chapter 7* where the “one like the son of man” (or “human being” or “The Human One”) and the community he represents is vindicated over the enemies of the people of God. Clouds here symbolize the power and authoritative judgment of God about the rescue of his people. This idea now seems to be applied to Christians who are facing various forms of persecution.

Finally, there is a **third** image in the text that comes from outside of the canonical context. This is *the image of an emperor who visits a city. The people of that region would have gone out to meet him to usher him into their home in a royal procession out in the open air.* This, Paul seems to apply to the church who will usher in their King into the new creation. [2] Rapture, as it is popularly understood, is nowhere to be found in this famous “rapture” passage.

Paul does certainly believe that Christ will return. But as we see in other Pauline passages, including this one, Christ will return to render resurrection to humankind (of which Jesus is the first). Pulling other passages in Paul together the picture of what God will do when Christ comes back is more profound than escaping this planet. God's goal in Christ is to resurrect, purge, heal, and establish the eternal kingdom of God on this earth. Heaven and earth will unite like a bride and husband – for all eternity. That’s it. But Paul isn't the only voice we need to reckon with. What about Jesus?

## **Jesus on "Rapture"**

It is with the interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4 in the backdrop that many Christians come to Jesus' famous "Olivet discourse" (Mark 13, Luke 21, Matthew 24) and think that it is teaching the rapture as well.

It isn't.

In fact, this interpretation couldn't be further from Jesus' historical context. Jesus lived in a time when the Roman Empire was running full steam ahead. Many Jews of that time, especially zealous Jews who believed that a militaristic messiah was to arrive soon, wanted to be free of Roman oppression and control.

Can you imagine the subversive power of Jesus' statement to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5) in such a hotbed situation?

Jewish folks had real enemies. Not only were there various factions within the Judaeian ranks, but each day Roman soldiers made their presence known. It makes sense, then, that the Messiah that no one was looking for, a teacher of the Law who called for the love of enemies, rather than their annihilation.

Jesus said "Put away your sword" when most people wanted a Messiah who could wield a weapon with the best of them. So it makes perfect sense that Jesus would speak directly into the tension that they all felt during the first century. But Jesus didn't have a vision of escape. At least not escape from the planet. Rapture wasn't an option.

A Rapture wasn't even a concept that Jesus would have known. Like Paul, resurrection on this planet fit within his broad framework. That is the end game. Not the destruction of this planet for a new home in heaven.

## **Jesus and the Destruction of Jerusalem, Not the "Rapture"**

To be clear, because I can anticipate some of the feedback that will come in: **I affirm a future second coming.** I believe the ultimate reason for Christ's return is to: resurrect, purge, heal, and eternally reign in the renewed creation.

The "rapture" is simply not part of the biblical picture. And, it often leads to problems today like a desire for escapism, and sometimes a lack of concern for this planet (especially if we think it is going to be left to its devices and eventually destroyed). The problem I have then, is not with the second coming.

*My issue is with attributing Mark 13 (and parallels) to pointing to anything other than something that already happened in history: the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.*

All of Mark 13 describes how Jesus acted as an apocalyptic prophet to declare that God's judgment on unfaithful Israel was coming within "this generation" (v. 30). **"This generation"** doesn't mean "2000+ years from now"—it means *the generation of the disciples* who sat and listened to Jesus' answer to their questions about:

1. When will these things happen?
2. What will be the sign that they are about to be fulfilled? [3]

These questions follow Jesus' prophetic statement that "not one stone [of the Temple] will be left unturned." If those are the questions to be answered in the whole of Mark 13, then what ramifications for interpretation does the text leave us with?

After the questions, the chapter continues by answering with the kind of things that will take place leading up to the destruction of the Temple:

- false messiahs (several were present in the first century)
- wars (the Jewish War of 66-70 AD)
- food shortages (imagine Jerusalem were surrounded, where would food come from?)
- earthquakes (happened)
- persecution (by the Jews and Rome)
- the need to flee to the mountains (smart thing to do if your city is going to be burned to the ground soon, don't you think?!)
- the gospel is preached throughout the nations (Paul's missionary journeys, etc.).

Then, there will be cosmic signs (sun darkened, moon dimmed, stars falling, earthquakes), which is a Jewish way to describe cataclysmic political disaster and change. There are several

examples of this language in the Old Testament that always point to a political reality, not the literal convulsion of the cosmos.

We, too, do this with language. Imagine if you were to read the headline: “9-11 was an Earth Shattering Event.”[4] Such a description wouldn’t make you think that an “earth-shattering” earthquake caused the towers to fall, but is a way of saying that what happened shook up history as we know it. The same is true here. Jesus is simply using a Hebraic prophetic rhetorical device to explain the coming doom of Jerusalem.

## **Jesus Wept Over His Prediction of Destruction**

Jesus weeps over this city in another place, because its zealous impulses will lead to the destruction of God's holy city and Temple. This isn't something Jesus wants to happen. It is, however, something he knows will happen. And soon. Jumping back into the passage, Jesus keeps moving. The great “Son of Man” statement comes in verse 26.

This points to Daniel 7 where the “son of man” comes up to the throne of God to be victoriously vindicated to a position of authority after a time of suffering (remember, Paul evoked this passage as well, applying it slightly differently, but the basic point remains the same).

For Jesus, this will ultimately happen when the Temple is destroyed, for it will be a moment when Jesus becomes the only Temple of God that is left in the cosmos. Again, we keep in mind that Jesus weeps over this point: he doesn't want the Temple to be destroyed. He simply sees the writing on the soon-to-be bloodstained and torn-down walls. Jesus is claiming to be the fulfillment of Daniel’s apocalyptic vision, and people will see this to be true once the Lord’s prophecy is fulfilled.

This happened in 70 AD. It already did. His "coming" in this passage is about his enthronement, the vindication of his suffering. It will serve as a sign to his hearers, beyond the resurrection, that he truly was the suffering one of God who overcomes his enemies by God's loving verdict: not the sword. Jesus seals the deal by following this up in verse 30 by saying: “...this generation will certainly not pass away until *all these things* have happened.”

And indeed, all these things *did* happen. Jesus was right. But notice, this passage is full of Hebrew metaphors, hyperbole, and predictions about what would soon take place among his hearers. Jesus had nothing in mind like a Rapture.

Even if we look at the other accounts, where Jesus says, "One will be taken and the other left" (Matthew 24.40), we don't get a "Left Behind" scenario here. A great disaster is coming! In this generation. The message is urgent. A war is coming. The Romans will come to arrest you. Run for the hills. Get out of dodge! That’s pretty good advice; Don't you think?

## **Rapture or Resurrection?**

The vision of the future that Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the New Testament share is resurrection. This is an embodied future, not a ghostly one in some other place called heaven. Sure, those who

are in Christ are kept safe in God's heavenly sphere of the cosmos after they die. But that isn't the end. They too will rise, just as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4.

But it isn't just humans who will get to embody the good news of the Christian hope. So will all of the created order. God will not destroy the world, rather “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” (Romans 8.21)!

The Bible teaches that when Christ comes back, it will not be Tribulation or chaos. The "tribulation" did happen. Jesus predicted it. Rome destroyed their sacred city and Temple! That is the only future tribulation Jesus had in mind: one that is decisively in our past. We must understand this—to the Jewish people the total destruction of the Temple WAS the greatest catastrophe that could ever happen. It represented them as a distinct people and was the place where all Jews focused their attention and hopes. After its destruction the Jews were dispersed all over the Earth, thus, they were no longer “one people.”

And perhaps you are curious about Revelation. Well, when it is read in its historical setting (the 90s of the first century) with its rhetorical devices and image-soaked style, it too fits the picture of Jesus and Paul. The end of the book of Revelation says it best:

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21.4).

Surely, we cannot erase judgment from the picture, but the hope is that those in Christ will be raised to eternal life and everything that is wrong with this world will be made right.

This new world is going to be our home for eternity, and we have the opportunity to reflect that future in our present. Rapture invites us to escape this world: the last thing that Jesus would have ever taught! “On earth as in heaven” is what he said, not “in heaven away from the earth!” Our world’s future is hopeful.

Why?

Because neither Paul nor Jesus believed in the rapture. Neither did any other New Testament author or figure. And neither should you!

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[1] <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/ouranos.html>

[2] You can find these mixed metaphors of Paul analyzed in a number of scholarly commentaries in a similar way. The easiest introduction is: N. T. Wright, “Farewell to Rapture,” *Biblical Review* (August 2001). <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/farewell-to-the-rapture/> (accessed May 2017).

[3] Matthew adds a 3rd question about the timing of the “end of the age.” This should not be read as meaning the “end of the world” but rather the end of the current era of Roman oppression and forms of corruption that have infiltrated their beloved Temple. We often read

*into this passage “end of the world” questions, that if we look closely enough, are not actually in the text. My view is that we have been conditioned to think this way by tradition, not by a clear reading of the text in context.*

*[4] I'm pretty sure I picked up "earth-shattering" language from Tom Wright at some point as well.*