

Rapture—A Word Not Found in the Bible

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The Missing Word

First Thessalonians 4:17 says, “Caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” That single verse has built an entire doctrine around the term “rapture.” But the word “rapture” does not appear in any Greek manuscript of the New Testament. Not once. It is a Latin word, borrowed from Jerome's Vulgate translation around 400 A.D.

The Greek beneath it conveys something the English never captures. ἀρπάζω (*harpazō*, meaning “snatch or seize”), the actual Greek verb behind the phrase “caught up,” denotes not a gentle departure but a violent seizure, akin to a kidnapping. Paul's own experience of it left him unable to tell whether his body was even involved.

Look at how that word behaves elsewhere in the New Testament. A wolf snatches sheep. The wicked one snatches understanding from a heart. The violent seize the kingdom by force. The same verb appears each time. Paul's twice-repeated body confession appears in Second Corinthians 12. And a civic welcome word, ἀπάντησις (*apantāsis*), is hidden in the phrase “to meet.” By the end of this article, you will know what the original word means and where the doctrine came from.

So let us begin where any honest reading should, with the word itself. Open a Greek lexicon to *harpazō*. Every standard reference gives the same definition: “To seize, to carry off by force, to snatch, to pluck, or to take by force.” The Greek verb in First Thessalonians 4:17 is ἀρπαγησόμεθα (*harpagesometha*), a first-person plural future passive, meaning “we shall be seized.”

Around 400 A.D., Jerome translated the Greek New Testament into Latin. His Latin Bible, the Vulgate, rendered that verb as *rapiemur*. That form derives from the Latin verb *rapio*, which can mean “we shall be snatched away.” The English word *rapture* comes from that Latin verb family. *Rapio* became *rapturo*, which became *rapture*. So the English word did not originate in the original Greek text. It is a translation of a translation. And something was lost each time.

The King James Version translates this single Greek word thirteen different ways across the New Testament. Across all thirteen uses, the Greek lexicon defines *harpazō* as: “Caught up” four times, “By force” three times, “Pluck” twice, and catch, pull, caught away. Thirteen appearances, but not one translation says “float,” “gently depart,” or “escape.” That is what the dictionary says.

Now watch what the word does every time it appears in the New Testament. In Matthew 11:12, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.” That phrase, take it by force, is the Greek word ἀρπάζουσιν

(harpazousin). It shares the same root as the word in First Thessalonians 4:17: harpazō. The kingdom is not handed over politely. It is seized.

Matthew 13:19, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.” Snatches away: ἀρπάζει (harpazei). The same verb appears again. But notice where the snatching occurs. It’s not in the sky; it’s in the heart. The word operates within the domain of awareness. Something is stolen from a person's understanding. This is the same verb translated "caught up" in the rapture verse.

John 10:12 says, “He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees.” The wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The word is harpazei, the same verb. The wolf does not invite the sheep; it violently takes them: predatory, sudden, and without negotiation.

John 10:28–29: “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no man is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.” “Snatch” is the word harpasei. Jesus uses harpazō to describe what cannot happen to those he holds. A forced removal from a grip so complete it cannot be broken. This is the same word that gets softened into "caught up" in First Thessalonians. But when Jesus uses it, no one softens it; everyone feels the force.

In Acts 8:39, after the Ethiopian's baptism, the Spirit of the Lord “caught away” Philip. Again, the word used is hārpasen. This is the only clearly physical harpazō in the entire New Testament. Philip did not catch himself up, nor did he choose to go. The Spirit seized him! The action was done to him, not by him. That is harpazō across six scenes: Seize, Snatch, Grip, Pluck, and Take by force. The verb lives in the language of sudden, overwhelming, involuntary force. Not one scene describes floating or a gentle ascent. Paul used this word about himself, and what he said about it changes how we read First Thessalonians 4.

Second Corinthians 12:2 “I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up to the third heaven.” “Caught up” is the Greek ἀρπαγέντα (herpagenta), the same verb root as in First Thessalonians 4:17. Paul is referring to himself.

He uses the third person out of reluctance to boast. But by verse 7, he makes it clear. This happened to him. Now notice what Paul does next; he repeats himself. In Second Corinthians 12:3, “And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—.” And I know such a man. He uses the exact same phrase in back-to-back verses. When a writer as precise as Paul uses identical words twice within two verses, he is flagging something. He is telling you that this detail matters more than anything else in the account. The detail is: the man who wrote the word harpazo in First Thessalonians 4:17 is the same man whose single sentence became the foundation of an entire doctrine. That man described his own harpazō and said twice that he could not confirm his body was involved.

In Second Corinthians 12:4, Paul tells us that he was caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. The Greek phrase is ἄρρητα ῥήματα (arrhāta rhāmata, unspeakable utterances). What Paul received in the harpazō was not a visual spectacle. It was something heard, and it could not be put into words. Notice the verb form of herpage. It is in the passive voice, which means that Paul did not catch himself up; he did not ascend by effort. He was seized! Something acted on him, and he received something. Notice that what he received went beyond the capacity of words.

What Paul describes is an awareness so complete that the question of the body dissolved. This is not being transported to a location. It is a shift in what he could perceive; he heard things that could not be spoken. He could not tell whether his flesh went anywhere. That is harpazō, from the man who wrote the rapture verse. There are three important details:

- He was seized,
- He does not know if his body went, and
- What he received could not be spoken.

There is a second word hidden in First Thessalonians 4:17, and it changes the direction of the entire scene. **Understanding this is crucial.** “To meet the Lord in the air.” The word translated “to meet” is the Greek phrase εἰς ἀπάντησιν (eis apantāsin). This is not a generic word for meeting someone. Apantesis was a technical term in Hellenistic Greek describing a specific civic ritual. When a king or a high-ranking dignitary approached a city, the citizens would exit through the gates and walk along the road to formally welcome the visitor. They would then turn around and escort him back into the city. The direction of the movement is everything. **The citizens do not leave the city permanently. They go out briefly to receive the arriving king, then accompany him back to the city. It is a reception, not an evacuation.** This word appears only three times in the entire New Testament, and each time it carries the same directional meaning.

Acts 28:15 tells us that when the Christians in Rome heard that Paul was coming, they traveled from as far away as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet him. The phrase is “eis apantesin.” They left Rome, welcomed Paul on the road, and escorted him back into the city. They did not permanently abandon Rome.

Matthew 25:6 tells the story of the wise virgins who go out to meet the bridegroom. Again, the phrase used is “eis apantesin.” They go out to welcome him to the feast. They do not depart with him to another place; they receive him and bring him in. The celebration occurs where they came from.

Three appearances in the entire New Testament, and all three are civic welcomes. The word is used three times to describe going out to meet someone arriving and escorting that person back. The direction is always toward you, never away.

So read First Thessalonians 4:17 again, with both Greek words restored. We shall be caught up together in clouds to welcome the Lord in the air. The text does not say departure; it says

welcome. The scene reads like a king arriving, with his people going out to receive him. Since this is what the text says, where did the other version come from? For the answer, see my article titled The Two Men Who Invented “The Rapture.”