

Rapture: The Resurrection of the Living or In Case of Rapture, Can I Have Your Car?

Waiting for the Rapture

I remember waiting for the rapture. When I was an American Evangelical that was the thing to do. One year in particular stands out, 1993 I believe. I had read an article by a “Bible teacher” who had done the math, and based on the date of Israel's becoming a nation (1948) and the average length of a generation in the Bible, had figured out that 1993 would be the year that Jesus would return. I knew that the Bible said that no one would know the day or the hour, but it didn't say anything about not knowing the year.

I remember my anxiousness as the year wound down. After Christmas I knew there were only a few days left. Then came New Year's Eve, Jesus was coming today. The day passed so I knew that I would be raptured out of bed. The morning came with disappointment until I realized that it could still be 1993 somewhere in the world, I had only to wait a few more minutes until the rapture.

My experience is not unique. While it's not true that all teachers who teach the rapture are setting dates and predicting times, it is true that the teaching of the rapture drums up a kind of escatological frenzy (escatology is the study of the end times). Thus this relatively new and obscure teaching of the secret rapture has become one of the most popular teachings in many churches, and is the backbone of any number of books, movies and bumper stickers. What is the popular teaching of the rapture? Is it Biblical? And, how are we to understand the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus?

In Case of Rapture, This Car Will Be Unmanned: The Popular Teaching of the Rapture

My wife had this popular bumper sticker on her first car: “Warning: In Case of Rapture, This Car Will Be Unmanned.” This friendly warning tells all those around her to look out, for if the rapture occurs while she's driving down the interstate there will be no one to steer or stop, and the car will go careening into the oncoming traffic. Thus the seven-year tribulation will begin with monstrous traffic jams.

The idea here is that Jesus will return half-way to earth and secretly snatch away all Christians. They will suddenly disappear. Here's how the folks at leftbehind.com define this event:

The Left Behind theology is built upon a belief in the Rapture. This is the conviction that in a moment of time, in the blink of an eye, every true believer in Jesus Christ will be physically transported up into the clouds to meet Jesus, then return with him to his Father's house in heaven. All this will happen within a split second of time and will occur before the onset of the horrifying seven-year Tribulation. At the same instant, the raptured believer will undergo the transformation of his or her current physical body into a new physical body, equipped to live forever with God in heaven. In conjunction with this astounding event will be the resurrection of all believers who have lived and died on earth within the two thousand years of the church age. They too will be given new bodies fit for heaven. Both groups will meet Christ in the air and go to the Father's house in their new resurrection bodies to be with Jesus forever.

[From leftbehind.com (7 July 06)]

Here we have a simple definition of the rapture; it is the taking away of all Christians at least seven years before Jesus' Second Coming. The very popular *Left Behind* books begin with this event as people disappear from planes, cars, and their beds. A baby disappears from the birth canal and (in a generous ecumenical touch) the Pope goes missing, secretly and silently raptured. But is this what the Scriptures teach?¹

¹The name “rapture” comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:17, “We who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The Greek word behind “shall be caught up” is ἀρπαγησόμεθα [*harpagasometha*], a form of ἀρπάζω [*harpazo*], which means to catch up and snatch away. For example, speaking of His sheep, Jesus promises “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them [ἀρπάσει, *harpazo*] out of My hand.” [St John 10:28] For the other occurrences of this word, see Matthew 11:12; 12:29; 13:19; John 6:15; 10:12, 29; Acts 8:39; 23:10; 2 Corinthians 12:2, 4; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Jude 1:23; Revelation 12:5 This Greek word is translated in the Latin Vulgate (at least in 1 Thessalonians 4:17) as

Asking the Right Questions

Much of our right understanding of the Scriptures comes about when we understand the context, that is, when we understand what questions the Scriptures are answering. This is especially important when it comes to the two texts that talk about the rapture, 1 Corinthians 15:50-52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. In these two places St. Paul is addressing a specific concern, answering a certain question. If we bring to the text a different question than St. Paul is answering, then our teaching will be skewed.

The Left Behind theology brings this question to the text: “How will God get the church out of the way so He can resume His dealings with the nation of Israel?” The answer: He will secretly snatch the church up into heaven. This is certainly not the question Paul is answering.

When the Scriptures speak of the last day and Jesus' Second Coming, they speak of two major events: the resurrection of the dead and the judgment. Almost every warning, promise and parable of the Second Coming concerns these two events. It is troublesome that the church has lost her robust confession of the resurrection of the body, and now tends to speak of our eternal soul in heaven as the end of all things. No, when Jesus returns to the earth He will call forth the dead bodies of all people, and will reunite them with their souls, and then usher the believers in Him into the eternal new heaven and earth. There the Lord's church will dwell in peace and bliss with the Lord forever.

The resurrection of the dead, then, is central in the teaching of the Second Coming. When Jesus returns those who have died will be called out of the grave. The question then arises: What about those who are still alive when Jesus returns? How will they be resurrected? Will Jesus put them to death so that He can raise them to life? Or will they miss the resurrection all together? These are the questions that Paul is answering.

1 Corinthians 15:50-52. We consider, then, 1 Corinthians 15:50-52:

⁵⁰Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—
⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

After discussing the resurrection of the dead for the entire chapter, Paul now takes up the question of those who are alive when Jesus returns. He starts by restating the theological problem: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” in other words, we who are alive cannot simply walk into the new heaven and the new earth. Our corruption is unfit for eternity. We must first be resurrected, given incorruptible and immortal bodies if we want to enter the eternal kingdom of God. But what about we who are not dead but are still alive when Jesus returns, how will we be given resurrected bodies? “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep (i.e. die in the faith), but we shall all be changed...” We who are alive will, along with those who sleep in the grave, be changed. This, then, is how we want to understand the Scriptural teaching of the rapture: it is the mystery of the resurrection of the living, the instantaneous changing into immortal resurrected bodies of those who are alive when Jesus returns. Paul explicitly states this in the next verse: “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” We see these two things together, the resurrection of the dead and the rapture, the resurrection of the living.

Notice also that instead of being a precursor event of an unfolding apocalyptic scenario, the rapture is concurrent with the last trumpet and the resurrection of the dead.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. St. Paul is answering the same question in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: how will the living be resurrected?

¹³But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring

rapiemur, a form of *rapio*, “to tear, snatch, carry away, plunder.” From this Latin word we, presumably, get the name “rapture.”

with Him those who sleep in Jesus.¹⁵For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Notice again how Paul is talking about two groups of people, those who have fallen asleep (died in the faith) and those who are alive. The dead will rise first (the resurrection of the dead), and “then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

Who, in the text before us, is raptured? “We who are alive and remain.” Thus we see again that the rapture is the mystery of the resurrection of the living, the means by which Jesus makes fit for eternity those who are alive when He returns. Also note again that the rapture is concurrent with Jesus' return and the resurrection of the dead.

Will You Be “Left Behind”

The phrase “left behind” comes from Jesus' teaching concerning His Second Coming, especially the 'Olivet Discourse', St. Matthew 24-25. There we hear these words:

³⁶“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. ³⁷But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. ³⁸For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. ⁴⁰Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. ⁴²Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.”

[*St Matthew 24:36-42*]

Is this text teaching the secret rapture?

It is clear from the context of Matthew and the texts we have considered [1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4] that this event is no secret. A surprise, yes, but certainly no secret. “He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, and one end of heaven to the other.” [*St Matthew 24:31*] “...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound...” [*1 Corinthians 15:52*] “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.” [*1 Thessalonians 4:16*] Jesus shouting, archangels yelling, trumpets blowing, it doesn't seem like the Scriptures could do more to indicate that this event is not a secret.

The idea that those who are not taken to the Lord will go about wondering what happened to their friends is nowhere in the text, as if those who were swept away by the flood were puzzled over the whereabouts of Noah. This text is a picture of the judgment. Like those who were destroyed by the flood, like the unfaithful servant who is cut in two [*St Matthew 24:51*], like the foolish virgins who are locked out of the wedding [*St Matthew 25:11,12*], like the wicked and lazy steward who is cast into outer darkness [*St Matthew 25:30*], and like the sheep who are sent away [*St Matthew 25:41*], so will be the unbeliever who is in the field or at the grindstone, they will be left in judgment. Those who are left are cast out and thrown away, judged in their unbelief to be fit only for God's wrath. With the illustration of the days of Noah, then, Jesus is teaching that His coming in glory and judgment will be totally unexpected by the unbelieving world, and that it will come with such severe swiftness that they won't even have time to stop what they are doing before they know the brunt of God's wrath.

The believer, on the other hand, will escape God's wrath through the blood of His Son our Lord Jesus. Jesus has been judged and suffered God's wrath in our place. Like Noah and his family who escaped the flood, like the faithful servant who is called “Blessed” [*St Matthew 24:46*], like the wise virgins who are welcomed to the feast [*St Matthew 25:10*], like the good and faithful servants who are commended by their master [*St Matthew*

25:21, 23], and like the sheep who “inherit the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world” [St Matthew 25:34], so will the believer inherit the blessed promise of life everlasting. These are the ones taken to be with the Lord Jesus.

Notice, again, that the taking and leaving of the text, the judgment of all people, is concurrent with Jesus' Second Coming. “Watch, therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.” [St Matthew 24:42] All of these events, Jesus' return, the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the living (the rapture), and the great judgment, all occur at the same time. With these words of warning and promise, Jesus would have us, His church, to be ever watchful for His return in glory.

The Law and Gospel of Jesus' Return in Glory

These texts are both warnings and promises. Jesus would have His church to be ever watchful and vigilant for His return. We expect Him at any moment, and are therefore careful to treasure His words and promises, and to be found faithful when He returns. Alas for those who squander the gifts the Lord has given, these texts stand as a strict warning.

On the other hand, Paul would have us “comfort one another with these words.” [1 Thessalonians 4:18] Jesus has promised to return in order to deliver us from this sin and death-filled world, and bring us to His own home in eternity, the new heaven and the new earth, where we will live in perfection before His face forever. As we walk through this veil of tears and struggle in the valley of the shadow of death, we look for “the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” [Titus 2:13], comforted by His sure promise: “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house there are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” [St John 14:1-3]

May God grant us all His Holy Spirit, that trusting in His promises we wait with longing and look with hope and eager expectation to the Lord's return in glory. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller
Hope Lutheran Church, Aurora, CO
Trinity 6, 2006