

# *Truth for Today*

## *The Bible Explained*

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## What does the Bible teach about The Rapture

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Today is the latest in our series of talks on what the Bible teaches about various subjects, and we are now going to consider “The Rapture.” Our previous considerations under this section have all been things that are described by words that are mentioned explicitly in the Bible, but today’s subject is not. Just because the exact word is not used does not mean the truth behind it does not exist. The same is true for the word “Trinity.” This specific word is not used in Scripture, but the truth behind it is fundamental to the Christian faith.

I would like to look at “The Rapture” in 3 ways. Firstly, what it actually refers to. Secondly, what it means for believers and then finally, what it means for the world in the future. So, a good starting point to get us thinking about this subject is, it’s the dictionary definition, which is “a seizing and carrying away.” Therefore, a “raptor” is a bird of prey that seizes and carries away. There can be no greater sight in nature than an eagle swooping on a loch to seize and carry away an unsuspecting fish that it spotted from a great distance above as it soared in the clouds looking for its next meal. The fish does not know when this is going to happen, nor does it have any say in how it is going to happen. Likewise, as we think about the rapture of the Christian Church, we do not know when it will happen, nor indeed have any say in how it will happen.

The clearest scriptural reference we have regarding this event is in the first epistle of Paul to the church of the Thessalonians chapter 4. I would like to read from verse 13 to the end of the chapter.

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For 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. For 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. Then 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. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

Paul also writes with very clear detail about this event in his first epistle to the Corinthians chapter 15 verses 51 and 52 which I would also like to read.

“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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

So, the term rapture that we are talking about today, is summed up in the words “caught up.” Let’s think again about the eagle as there are two relevant similarities. The eagle doesn’t actually come to earth, but its prey is lifted up from the loch or the land. Our verses make it clear that the Lord will not come to earth at this point, but rather lift His people, whether dead or alive, up from the earth. This is really important for us today as the reason for the Apostle Paul writing these words all those years ago is as relevant today as it was then; because in the very first verse I read, he explains that he does not want believers who have been bereaved to sorrow in the same way as unbelievers, who have no hope when faced with death. We have hope beyond this life. As with many things connected with faith, we accept what Scripture says even though to the natural mind these things may seem fanciful or unbelievable. We believe in the God of creation and miracles and with Him all things are possible. So every time we visit a cemetery we can be encouraged as we think about the day when “the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds.” What a day that will be! The second similarity with the bird of prey swooping to catch away its prey is that the object has no knowledge of when that is going to take place. The second coming of Christ will be in two parts: the Rapture being the first part; then later He will appear with His Church in great glory. In Matthew chapter 24 verse 36 the Lord said of that day when He appears to this world,

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.”

We will see the timeline between these two events as we go through our considerations today, but as they are dependant on each other, the sentiments behind the Lord’s words apply to both.

So, it is quite clear from these scriptures in Corinthians and Thessalonians that the Lord will first come into the air and take His Church to be with Himself before He comes back to this earth, as He promised He would, with His Church accompanying Him. The Lord’s coming with His Church is clearly described in first Thessalonians chapter 3 verse 13 and Jude verse 14. This second part of His second coming will be seen by the whole world, whereas there is no indication in Scripture that the first part, the Rapture, will be witnessed by this world. But the impact of it will certainly been seen as all believers in Christ will have suddenly disappeared from the earth. Even Hollywood has a knowledge of this - with the recent movie “Left Behind” giving a very clear idea on what the post-Rapture world might look like.

While these verses in the Corinthian and Thessalonian epistles are the most specific in terms of a catching away, the truth of Christ coming for His church runs throughout the whole of the New Testament. Let’s look at a few examples. Firstly, the Lord Himself promised it. In John chapter 14 verse 3 we read,

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself: that where I am, there you may be also.”

For me, this is the promise from the Lord and the letters of Paul are simply the detail of how this is going to happen. It is worth noting that the Lord doesn’t say He will come again to be with us where we are. No, He is very clear that He will take us to where He is. We are, of course, blessed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to have the Lord spiritually with us now while still on this earth, but this promise goes even further than this – He himself comes for us . Secondly, it was endorsed by the angels at the ascension of the Lord in Acts chapter 1 verse 11,

“This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

Thirdly, as we have already considered, it is often confirmed in the epistles. And fourthly, it is not surprising then that among the last words of Holy Scripture, in Revelation chapter 22 verse 20 we read,

“He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen.  
Even so, come Lord Jesus!”

I would also like to draw your attention to the fact that the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven. An event of this significance is not given to an angel. Furthermore, it will happen in the “twinkling of an eye.” No time to get ready, no time to get right with God, and no time to repent. Our lives should be lived in the expectation that this can happen anytime.

I trust this description covers our first point as to what the rapture actually is so we can now move on to our second point: what it means for believers. There are many things that we can think of, but firstly I want to mention something tradition records – that “Maranatha” was a word the early Christians used as a greeting when they met each other. It literally means “the Lord is coming” and is only used once in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 at the end of verse 22. The New King James version translates it as “O Lord, come.” As well as a greeting between believers, it was often a triumphant cry of Christians, who were nailed to crosses, put to death by wild animals or burned. Perhaps in the western world we have lost the spectre of this type of persecution, but there are more believers being persecuted for their faith all over the world today than at any other time in the Church’s history. So, for these believers the Rapture will provide instant relief from persecution and suffering; and be an immediate vindication of their faith in Christ. For those of us who do not face such direct persecution perhaps we should ask ourselves whether our more comfortable lives may be something that would make us want the Lord to delay his coming! This is the same basic challenge that follows every scriptural reference to the Lord’s coming, that is: what impact does it have on our day-to-day living? Paul tells the Colossians, in chapter 3 verses 4 to 9, that in the light of the second coming, we are to put to death things such as fornication, evil desire, covetousness, anger, malice etc. There is no doubt then that this is a practical doctrine, not just theoretical.

While for many of us in the western world persecution might not be the same as in other places, there are still many things that make life difficult. Illness, loneliness, poverty, separation from loved ones and bereavement, but we can look forward to all these being brought to an end by the Lord’s coming. As we get older, the end of our lives perhaps looms large and casts a dark shadow, but again the Rapture of the Church can bring glorious light to the darkest situation. The writer summed this up well in the hymn “It is well with my soul” when he wrote “the sky not the grave is our goal” (Horatio Gates Spafford 1873). An old friend of mine, now with the Lord was well known for saying “keep looking up.” This was both to stress the importance of seeing life from God’s perspective, but also to show that he was looking up, waiting for the shout and the trumpet of God to sound.

Another thing that the Rapture will do is take us away from the presence and effects of sin. We live in a world that has moved far away from what God intended, indeed it has largely turned its back on the very existence of God. How often do we hear and see things that only a few years ago would have been unheard of in so-called Christian Britain? I often think of the story of Lot in this respect. In Genesis chapter 13 we get the story of how Lot chose the plains of Jordan, where Sodom and Gomorrah were located, as a place to settle down. We also read in verse 13 of that chapter,

“But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD.”

In the following chapters, we read about Lot's complete integration into all the ways and dealings of Sodom, but also of God's plans for righteous judgement against them. What we do not get in these chapters, but must wait until the second epistle of Peter chapter 2 verses 7 and 8 to learn, is that Lot himself was indeed righteous and that the situation he found himself in was a daily vexation to him. However, despite his own failures, when the judgement came upon Sodom and Gomorrah, God arranged for Lot to be taken out of that place although it was at great personal loss to himself and his family. His wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt and his sons-in-law thought he was joking when he sought to warn them about the impending judgement. So, he wasn't "caught up" in the sense that we are thinking about today, but he was taken out of the way of the judgement irrespective of his own condition at the time. This is both a comfort and a challenge to us as believers today. A great comfort to know that, in spite of our failures and shortcomings, we will not be left to see the judgement of God fall upon a sinful world, but a challenge to ensure we are not just simply escaping it by the skin of our teeth.

The final point I want to make regarding what the Rapture means for the believer is that we will be given new bodies. Our verses in first Corinthians tell us we will all be changed, given bodies like Christ's own resurrected and glorified body, that will make us fit for heaven. These bodies we have now, and those of the departed that have returned to the dust, are not suitable for heaven: they all need to be changed. They have been corrupted by the effects of sin, through ageing, disease, and death, but all these things will be done away with forever at the Rapture.

So, we have looked at what the Rapture actually refers to, and what it means for believers. Finally we will now look at what this means for the world in general. As already mentioned, Hollywood has already attempted to show what this world will be like for those who are "left behind." While it portrays the chilling reality quite well, the Scripture would suggest that perhaps, after the initial chaos, things will get back to normal and this world will seem quite glad to be rid of Christians for a time. The reason I suggest this is based on a prophecy of Daniel's, which we read of in chapter 9. Daniel is given understanding way beyond his time when he is instructed as to what will happen in the future with regards to his people, the ancient people of God, the Jews. The prophecy uses the phrase seventy weeks. The word "weeks" literally just means "sevens." While it is not within my remit for my talk today, the statements he makes many years before they occurred have been so accurately proved by history that many scholars have sought to disprove that Daniel could have written with such accuracy as he did. Sixty nine of these seventy weeks have already come to pass exactly as Daniel prophesied, for verse 26 of Daniel chapter 9 tells us,

"Messiah shall be cut off."

When Jesus was crucified, the Jewish nation, the people initially chosen by God to represent Him, were put into the siding as it were, for they had rejected their Messiah. At that moment in history a new period began, the day of grace, the day of the Church's witness to God. The blessing of God is no longer based on one's nation of birth, but by one's personal faith in the finished work of Christ. We still are in this Church period. Sixty-nine weeks of the seventy weeks have therefore taken place and the Church period is, in effect, a break in the seventy week's timeline before the seventieth week takes place. Sixty-nine, seven year periods fulfilled with astonishing accuracy have taken place and it just leaves one more period of seven years before Christ sets up His millennium kingdom on earth. These seventy "weeks" represent the history of this world when man is in charge. Although as believers we believe that God is behind the scenes, as far as the world is concerned mankind is in charge. This final week will see this come to an end when Christ will actually return to earth and sit on the throne of King David in Jerusalem.

This final week also takes up a great deal of the prophecies of the Book of the Revelation. Some Bible commentators suggest that almost everything contained in chapters 4 to 19 will occur during this seventieth week. These chapters lay out the judgements that will come upon this earth. The emergence of the two beasts of Revelation chapter 13 will initially bring about apparent peace and

stability and will remove the chaos first experienced in the immediate wake of the Rapture. In Daniel chapter 9 verse 27 we read,

“Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week, He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate.”

With careful comparison to chapter 13 verses 11- 18 of the Revelation, it is quite evident that this is the same event that is being referred to. How incredible to think that the Holy Spirit can reveal these things to Daniel and then again to the apostle John as an old man exiled in Patmos many centuries later; and then have these things preserved for us today! The point I would like to make is that this final seventieth “week” is divided in two. The full week can be referred to as the “tribulation”, but the second half of the week is specifically referred to as “the Great Tribulation” by the Lord in Matthew chapter 24 verse 21,

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been seen since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.”

So, it is quite clear that there are many prophecies to be worked out on this earth before the Lord appears with His Church in great glory. But the starting point of all these things, the starting gun if you like, requires nothing else except the Rapture to happen. The Rapture of the Church of God will not only mark the start of these righteous, but awful judgements against His enemies, it will also mark the end of the day of grace, the Church period. The Holy Spirit will be removed and the preaching of the gospel, as we know it today, will no longer be relevant: the day of salvation will have passed away. This event, therefore, while it should be longed for by every Christian believer, will be an awful day for the unbeliever and for the future course of this world.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on The Rapture, talk number T1219, and I trust the message will have been a real encouragement and a challenge to us all.

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