

Study Guide #2: The Secret Rapture

Introduction

The word “rapture” comes from a Latin word that means to be “caught up in the air.” The word itself doesn’t appear in the Bible, but its meaning certainly does—most notably in I Thessalonians 4:16-17, where it’s stated that the resurrected righteous dead and the living righteous are caught up to meet the Lord in the air. What is the rapture’s relationship to the Second Coming of Jesus? Is the rapture a secret event? Does the rapture occur before or after the final tribulation? These are the chief questions that this Study Guide answers.

Question #1: What is the secret rapture?

Answer: The popular use of that term refers to the concept that the Church will be raptured to heaven at some point—usually 7 years—before the visible, audible, glorious Second Coming of Jesus. This Rapture will be a secret event in that those raptured will instantly and miraculously disappear when they are taken to heaven. The popular bumper sticker illustrates this teaching: “In case of Rapture this car will be unmanned.” Sometimes it’s called phase I of the Second Coming, while others prefer to simply call it the Rapture, and the visible, audible, glorious return of Jesus as the Second Coming. This is part of *dispensational futurism*, a concept we referenced in Explorer II, Study Guide #26. In the most popular version, the 7 years between the Rapture and the Second Coming, (a) the Antichrist makes his appearance; (b) the Jews are converted to Jesus; (c) others have a 2nd chance to be saved; and (d) then the Second Coming of Jesus puts a final end to the Antichrist and his allies.



Example of a Raptured Body

Question #2: When and how did this entire theological perspective originate?

Answer: It originated in the 19th century from the teachings of John Nelson Darby (d. 1882), the Anglo-Irish leader of the Plymouth Brethren movement in Britain. Cyrus I. Scofield (d. 1921), an American Protestant theologian, adopted Darby’s views in his Scofield Reference Bible, 1st published in 1909. The creation of the modern nation of Israel in 1948 was viewed as confirming the dispensational futurist paradigm, and the Rapture teaching has enjoyed popularity among more conservative Protestant Christians ever since. Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, published in 1970, and the *Left Behind* series of books, 1st published in 1995, have given the movement renewed popularity. In doing so, it left the older traditional Protestant end-time prophetic paradigm with very few adherents today.

Question #3: What is the theological foundation for the Rapture teaching?

Answer: The basic *theological* foundation for the secret rapture thesis is the interpretation that all of the promises of glory made to literal Israel in the Old Testament must be fulfilled because God never lies. Since God would not have 2 different groups as His chosen people operating at the same time—Christians and the Jewish nation—they believe that the Church must be raptured to heaven in order to have the Jewish nation become His chosen people again. This is the fundamental foundation for the Rapture teaching because without it, there's *no* theological justification for the Church to be raptured before the visible, audible, glorious 2nd Coming of Jesus. [NOTE: See Explorer III, Study Guide #3 for a Biblical analysis of "Israel and the Church."]

Question #4: What is the Biblical textual basis for the Rapture teaching?

Answer: The *textual* basis for the Rapture teaching is the understanding that Jesus will return (a) in the air and (b) to the earth, implying 2 different returns of Jesus. The coming in the air is viewed as the time of the Rapture, although it's understood to be an invisible coming (thus, *secret* rapture). His coming to the earth is seen as the visible, audible, glorious Second Coming, after which He will establish His millennial kingdom on the earth. The textual basis for this view is largely based on the judgment scene described in Matthew 25, where Jesus divides the sheep from the goats. However, references to sheep and goats to represent the saved and the lost, respectively, are clearly metaphors. Also, to interpret the conversation Jesus has with these 2 groups literally would require that all of the righteous and then all of the wicked respond to Jesus in choral unison (see Matthew 25:37-39, 44). As a poetic description of a judgment, it's safer to simply interpret this as the fact that Jesus will save some and not others, without necessarily implying He will literally touch the earth. The clear statement in I Thessalonians 5:2-3 that the wicked will experience **"sudden destruction"** (NKJV) at the return of Jesus doesn't allow any time for a literal judgment scene at that time.



Question #5: How do Matthew 24 and I Thessalonians 4 relate to each other?

Answer: The Rapture thesis says that I Thessalonians 4 applies to the Rapture of the Church, while Matthew 24 applies to the visible, audible, glorious 2nd Coming of Jesus. But a careful check of the 2 passages strongly suggests they are describing the same event. Note the key parallel words or concepts below:

I Thessalonians 4:16-17

Lord...from heaven
the clouds
trumpet
caught up together

Matthew 24:30-31

Son of Man...appear in heaven
the clouds
trumpet
gather together the elect...from one end of heaven to the other

Not only do these passages naturally read as describing the same event, it's inconceivable that I Thessalonians 4 can be describing a secret event because 3 different noise elements are mentioned: (1) **"a**

shout” (v. 16); (2) “the voice of an archangel” (v. 16); and (3) “the trumpet of God” (v. 16). Therefore, we conclude that these 2 passages are discussing the same event—the visible, audible, glorious Second Coming of Jesus.



Question #6: Is there any specific Biblical evidence for the concept that there’s only *one* return of Jesus?

Answer: Yes. There are 3 different Greek words used in the New Testament to describe the return of Jesus:

- **Parousia**—it means an “arrival and resulting presence”
- **Epiphaneia**—it means an “appearance” or “a shining forth”
- **Apokalupsis**—it means a “revelation” or “unveiling”

These 3 Greek words occur a total of 41 times in connection with the return of Jesus. *Parousia* occurs 16 times in this connection. *Epiphaneia* occurs 14 times, and *apokalupsis* occurs 11 times. In Matthew 24, *epiphaneia* appears 2 times (vv. 27, 30), and *Parousia* occurs 4 times (vv. 3, 27, 37-39). Furthermore, Luke 17:22-27 is obviously a parallel to Matthew 24, and Luke 17:30 uses the verbal form of the word *apokalupsis* translated as “**revealed**” (NKJV). Therefore, all 3 Greek words are used to describe the same event, and the context is that it’s a visible, audible, glorious event. In addition, 25 of the 27 times that these 3 Greek words are used in connection with the return of Jesus in the noun form, the definite article (“the”) is present. In the 2 exceptions—I Peter 1:7, 13—the definite article is implied. Therefore, the linguistic evidence means that *there is only 1 return of Jesus*.

Question #7: Does I Corinthians 15:51-52 mean that the Rapture will happen in an instantaneous moment?

Answer: I Corinthians 15:51-52 reads as follows:

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 (NKJV).

The Greek word for “**moment**” is derived from a word that means “atom,” something the Greeks thought could not be further divided. The point is that believers in the Rapture teaching interpret this word to mean, in this context, that the change of the saved will be so instantaneous that no one will see it. We don’t deny that truth. But the issue is what the *nature* of the change will be. Those who teach the Rapture cite Jewish tradition that says that in the wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites moved out from the camp location when they heard the 7th, or last, trumpet sound. On this basis, they assert that the instantaneous change is a change in *location* from earth to heaven. However, the context plainly means that the change is *not* one of *location* but of the *nature* of the believer—from corruptible and mortal to incorruptible and immortal. Note this in verses 52-54:

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. ⁵³For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory (NKJV).

Question #8: Are those New Testament texts that speak of Jesus' return as a "thief in the night" teaching the secret rapture?

Answer: The 2 New Testament texts that refer to Jesus' return as **"a thief in the night"** are I Thessalonians 5:2 and II Peter 3:10. Read them before reading this answer. Neither of these texts speaks about a secret event. I Thessalonians 5:3, immediately after the comment about **"a thief in the night,"** reads, **"For when they say 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them..."** (NKJV). And II Peter 3:10 says that **"the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat..."** (NKJV). In neither case does it describe a secret event. Instead, it's describing the return of Jesus as **"a thief in the night"** in that it will come as a surprise to the unexpectant wicked. The Rapture scholars generally don't use these texts to support the Rapture teaching, but they are popularly used by many believers of that view.

Question #9: What do the texts that talk about two people being in one place and the one is taken and the other is left mean?

Answer: The passages using that language are Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-36. Most Christians, whether they believe in the Rapture thesis or not, understand that one taken is taken to heaven, and the one left is left behind on earth. However, the context suggests that the one taken is *taken in destruction* (Matthew 24:39; cf. Luke 17:29). This is confirmed by the question-and-



Vultures on a
Carcass

answer exchange between Jesus and His apostles in Luke 17:37. When His apostles asked Jesus, "Where, Lord?", they knew where the one left was, so they were asking about the one *taken*. Jesus replied that **"Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together"** (NKJV). Many believers in the popular Rapture say that at the Rapture, *both* those taken and those left survive, but these passages describe one as destroyed and the other as surviving that destruction. Again, many Rapture scholars don't use these passages because they know they don't harmonize with the Rapture teaching. But the popular masses of believers in the Rapture often misuse them.

Question #10: Where do the teachers of the Rapture get the idea that the Church will escape the final tribulation?

Answer: Again, not every believer in the Rapture believes that the Church is raptured *before* the final tribulation. But it's true that this pretribulation Rapture idea is the most common view. They usually refer to 1 of the following 3 different New Testament texts:

- ...even Jesus [who] delivers us from the wrath to come (I Thessalonians 1:10, NKJV).
- For God did not appoint us to wrath (I Thessalonians 5:9, NKJV).
- Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth (Revelation 3:10, NKJV).

The context of the 1st 2 texts concerns God's wrath against willful sinners and is contrasted with salvation through Jesus (see I Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:9). Obviously, the saved don't experience God's wrath.

The key word in Revelation 3:10 is **“keep,”** which is translated from a Greek word meaning “to watch over, preserve, keep, or watch.” It's the same Greek verb used in John 17:15, where Jesus prayed that His Father would **“not...take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one”** (NKJV). Biblical history testifies to the fact that God rarely *removed* His people *from* trouble, but He sustained and protected them *through* it. Particularly important in the light of Revelation are the stories of God's protection in the book of Daniel—Daniel in the lions' den (Daniel 6) and Daniel's 3 friends in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3). The apostle Paul promised in I Corinthians 10:13 that **“God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation [or “trial”] will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it”** (NKJV). Note that the definition of **“escape”** in this text is the supernatural ability **“to bear it,”** that is, to endure it successfully. Humanly speaking, it would be wonderful if God removed His living people from the earth just before the great tribulation at the end-time. But that simply isn't what the Bible teaches.



Question #11: Why is it important what a Christian believes about the Rapture?

Answer: *First*, let us make it clear that the Bible does indeed teach that the saved will be raptured to heaven. That's the very clear teaching of I Thessalonians 4:16-17. The difference is that the Bible teaches that the Rapture occurs *at* the visible, audible, glorious Second Coming of Jesus, *not* 7 years or any other time prior to that event. *Second*, the importance of knowing this truth, like some other truths, is that believing a false idea may set you up for Satan and his angelic allies to deceive you. If Satan can get a person to put off making a decision for Jesus, he wins, and you lose. Then when Jesus returns in glory—with no previous rapture having occurred—it will be too late for people to be saved. That's the reason that the Scriptures are so plain and urgent in declaring that **“now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation”** (II Corinthians 6:2, NKJV).