

# What to Think About the Rapture

Hespeler, November 12, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Amos 5:18-24, Psalm 70, [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#), Matthew 25:1-13

**H**ave you heard about the Rapture? If you move in certain Christian circles – or read the right books or watch the right YouTube channels you almost certainly have heard about the Rapture. In some churches it is taught as doctrine.

It is part of a belief about what is to come, what will happen at the end of all things when Christ returns. The most common teaching about the Rapture is that, just before the end of the world as we know it – just before Christ returns – there will be a time of great tribulation and suffering. As you can imagine, with all of the awful things going on in the world lately, there has been a lot of talk about such tribulations starting soon.

But the Rapture is an event that is supposed to take place just before the worst of the tribulations set in. In this event, those who believe in Christ are to be snatched up into the air and taken away into heaven where they will be spared from all the suffering that is to come.

## Popular Belief

A lot of people have come to believe this, especially as it has been popularised in a series of fictional novels known as the Left Behind series and also a movie. It is supposed to be a comforting belief, I know, but I have got to admit that, when I first heard about it as a young man, I did not experience it as comforting.

The very idea tended to create anxiety. It was portrayed as something that could happen at any moment – that people would suddenly just disappear. I worried that it would happen when I wasn't ready – that I would just be left behind to face the worst events imaginable.

Among many Christian groups, particularly the more evangelical groups, belief in the Rapture has become very common. So much so that it often seems as if it is something that all Christians believe in and always have believed in. So, I thought that it would be helpful to outline where the notion came from and look into what it might indicate about the state of Christian belief today.

## Where it Comes From

So, where does the Rapture come from? If you Google it or look it up on Wikipedia, you will almost certainly land on the passage of scripture that we read this morning from the First Letter to the Thessalonians – in particular the verse that says, **“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever.”** But let me tell you a few things about the interpretation of that verse.

For the first approximately 1780 years since the Apostle Paul wrote that letter to the church in Thessalonica, as far as we can tell, nobody understood that that verse was describing anything like what is today understood as the Rapture. The idea that all good Christians would be caught up into



the air at the beginning of the end times was completely absent from all forms of Christianity until sometime around 1830 AD. So, first of all, when people tell you that the Rapture is something that is spoken of in the Bible, you really have to ask the question, if it is plainly in the Bible, how is it that so many Christians never found it there for so very long?

## John Nelson Darby

The person who first introduced the idea of the Rapture to the world was a preacher named John Nelson Darby. He popularized the notion through his translation of the Bible, still published today as the Darby Bible. But before him, no one had ever suggested that the Bible taught any such thing. He is kind of the inventor of the idea of the Rapture. It was not an idea that caught on at all for many decades. Most Christians thought of it as a rather kooky fringe theory for a very long time. It only began to be more widely known and believed in the 1970s because of Hal Lindsay's influential book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

But, over the last 50 years, the idea has become quite popular, so much so that many people seem to assume that it is what all Christians believe. And so, it seems to me that it's something that we have to deal with.

## Some Problems with it

Let me say, first of all, that I do see some real problems with the notion. I honestly feel that belief in the Rapture has had a very detrimental effect on Christianity itself. When you teach people that they can expect a quick and easy escape from this world and all of its problems, it really doesn't help people to be invested in working to make the world a better place or solving some of those problems.

And that is exactly what has developed over the last several decades among those who put emphasis on the Rapture. There has been a distinct lack of concern about problems like global warming, poverty, social justice and inequality. After all, why would you bother working on such problems if you knew that you were going to be snatched up at any moment and leave them all behind.

## Christianity in Disrepute

But these are real problems that are affecting people's lives and endangering our future. The very fact that so many Christians have such a callous disregard for any such concerns has brought Christianity itself into disrepute in our world. And, what's more, just imagine what could be accomplished if only we could persuade all of those Christians to do what Jesus asked of his disciples and put their efforts into working on these issues. What couldn't we accomplish together?

So, my personal opinion is that this teaching about the Rapture has done us little good. But that is just one person's opinion. I mean, if the Bible actually does teach something, it shouldn't matter whether we like that teaching or not, right? So, what does the Bible actually say? What is supposed to happen to believers at the end of all things?

## Parousia

There was a protocol in the ancient Roman Empire. It was called a *parousia*, which was just a Greek word that meant an appearance or a coming. When an Emperor or some other high official paid

a visit to a city, everyone knew what the proper Parousia Protocol was and were careful to follow it to the letter. It was pretty simple, but no deviation was allowed.

Of course, they didn't have instant communications back then, and so the citizens might not know that the visit was taking place. So, the first thing that happened was that the approaching emperor and his train were announced with the blast of trumpets and the cry of the imperial messengers.

In ancient cities, the dead were always buried on the extreme outskirts of the city. And so, the first citizens that the emperor always encountered were the dead ones. And so, of course, he would stop and give honour to the ancestors of the people of the city.

## The Citizens Process out

By that time, the citizens of the city had managed to get organized and so they joined in a joyful procession out to meet the emperor on the outskirts. There, after greeting him with honour and sacrifice they would all turn, and the emperor would lead the parade back into the city where the parousia would be celebrated with feasting and other festivities.

Everyone knew this protocol and most had likely experienced it at least once. It would have been the social event of the year in any city that the emperor visited. But what does any of that have to do with the Rapture? Well let's go back to our reading from a letter that was written to the church in Thessalonica.

And let's remember that Thessalonica was the chief city of the Province of Macedonia, the seat of the governor and was situated at the crossing of two major roads. The city would have experienced many visits by emperors and high officials.

## What Paul is Describing

And now, knowing all of that, reread the passage that some would take as the only biblical description of the Rapture. Paul is describing what he calls the "coming" of the Lord Jesus. And the word in your Bibles that is translated as coming – it is the Greek word *parousia*.

And how does Paul describe the *parousia* of Christ? It is announced with trumpets and the cry of messengers (or, to use the Greek word, angels). The appearing Christ then meets first with the dead believers and then the great host of living believers go out to meet and greet him.

These are exactly the familiar steps of the imperial protocol. The only things that are different is that Christ is arriving from the sky and not down the road and the dead are presumably raised back to life to meet him. But other than that, the protocol would have been immediately recognizable to the Christians in Thessalonica.

## What Rapture Teaching Gets Wrong

So, what does all of this mean when it comes to the teaching of the Rapture that has been embraced by some Christians. Well, it means, first of all, that anyone who suggests that what is being described in this particular passage is an escape for believers from this world's trials and tribulations is wrong.

Everyone knew what the next step of a *parousia* was and it did not include all of the citizens of the particular city being visited going off with the emperor as he immediately went back to his imperial palace in Rome! Everyone knew that the next step was for everyone, now including the ruler, to return to the city and celebrate. Whatever Paul is here teaching the Thessalonians about what will happen at

the coming of the Christ, he is definitely not suggesting that they will in some way escape the world. He is promising them that their future is to be found in a renewed world.

## Hope When the World Falls Apart

But the other thing that I think all of this makes clear is how Paul meant for people to understand what he was talking about. It is true that the early church lived in expectation that, at some unexpected moment, their Lord Jesus would return to set things right in the world. This was absolutely something that allowed them to keep on going and not give up hope as they lived through some very difficult times. I don't know about you but, given some of the really difficult things we've seen lately in our world, I am feeling that this kind of teaching has gained a new relevance for believers today.

And Paul is, here in this passage in his letter to the Thessalonians, actually trying to comfort the Thessalonians because they feel as if Christ's return is just taking too long. They are losing hope because it has taken so long that people have already started dying and they are afraid those people are lost forever. And he comforts them by giving them this description of what it will be like when Christ comes. He doesn't say when that's going to happen, but he is promising that it will be an event that brings hope to both the living and the dead.

## Paul's Parable

But then he jumps into this description of the return of Jesus using imagery from a familiar imperial visitation protocol. I think that right there is an indication that he is not giving a literal description of what is going to happen. He is offering something more like a parable.

He is saying that the coming of Christ is something like what happens when the emperor comes to town. And the point you need to take from a parable like that is not that you're going to study it and find out in perfect detail what is going to happen and exactly what events will take place when. That's not the point of a parable.

## Jesus is Better

And so, I would suggest that anyone who wants to take this passage and use it to say that they know exactly what is going to happen in the future and when has missed the point of it. Paul is explaining to these troubled Thessalonians that Jesus is better and more reliable than any old Roman Emperor, populist or celebrity. You can count on Jesus who will not abandon anybody – living or dead.

And once you understand how trustworthy Jesus is, you don't need to be concerned for what the future holds – don't need to worry about the wheres and the whens.

So that is what I would take away from this passage in Thessalonians. Trust in Jesus. He doesn't abandon anyone who trusts in him. Nor does Jesus abandon the earth and its sorrows. Neither should we.