

# The Rapture and Left Behind Lie Unveiled

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<http://www.gnmagazine.org/issues/gn27/rapture.htm>

## What's 'Left Behind' in the Rapture Theory?

Millions of people have read novels structured around the idea of the rapture of Christians.

Why do people believe in a rapture? Is there any biblical validity to this teaching?

by Cecil Maranville

Many people traveled to Jerusalem to be on the scene Jan. 1, 2000, in anticipation of certain events. Some expected Jesus Christ to return on that date; others thought they would be “raptured” away to meet Him. Yet the day came and went with nothing of the sort happening.

Where did the idea of a rapture—a supernatural, sudden removal of believers—originate? Why do so many people believe that the Bible prophesies a rapture?

The Left Behind series of books and videos have variably stirred, frightened or entertained millions. Authors Jim Jenkins and Tim LaHaye popularized in the 1990s the same understanding and expectations about “a secret rapture” that author Hal Lindsey had in the 1970s with *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *Vanished*.

The Left Behind novels revolve around the story line that non-Christians are “left behind” when Christ secretly and suddenly removes true believers from earth. Christians who are driving cars, piloting planes and going about their everyday activities abruptly disappear—and those “left behind” are baffled by their mysterious disappearance. Political and sexual intrigue is spliced into the religious theme of the books in the name of spreading the message to as wide an audience as possible.

Mr. Lindsey was the first modern writer to popularize the rapture theory. He still writes and speaks on the theme. The popular American TV program *60 Minutes II* recently caught up with

him on a tour he was leading in Israel. He was still preaching that end-time prophecy will begin with the rapture, which is the instant calling to heaven of Christians. "People will actually disappear, Lindsey says" ("Apocalypse Now," CBS, 1999).

Mr. Jenkins is the writer of the Left Behind material. Mr. LaHaye provides him with input from a religious perspective. Their popular works do not offer readers the theology of the rapture idea in a systematic fashion. That is, the books do not explain the scriptural basis for the dogma or how one might prove it from the Bible.

### **The rapture as doctrine**

Although the idea of the rapture is accepted as fact by millions, its proponents cite only a few ambiguous biblical passages to teach and define the doctrine.

A dictionary defines rapture simply as "ecstatic joy or delight; joyful ecstasy." Another says rapture means "a mystical experience in which the spirit is exalted to a knowledge of divine things." How do these meanings relate to the return of Christ?

Explanations are ambiguous. Some point to a single word in the Latin translation of a single word in the Greek text of the Bible (Mike Cady, *The Rapture-Prophecy Bible Study*, 1998, p. 3). The Latin word is *rapere*, meaning "to seize" or "to abduct." The concept is that Christians are suddenly snatched or seized from the earth by Christ.

So widely held is the belief that the theological definition of the rapture finds its way into another dictionary as "the experience, anticipated by some fundamentalist Christians, of meeting Christ midway in the air upon his return to the earth."

Even this definition does not accurately reflect the prevalent explanations of the rapture theory; that is, rapture defenders teach that Christ will do the snatching of believers before and separate from His return, not "upon His return."

- Christ, they say, will approach the earth, not return to it, to seize believers several years before His actual return-the second coming.
- According to the most common version of the rapture:
- Christ revealed the rapture to the Church in the apostle Paul's epistle of 1 Thessalonians.
- This is a secret coming, evidenced only by the absence of Christians afterward.
- At the rapture Christians will be changed to spirit and transported to the safe haven of heaven to wait out a seven-year "tribulation" that occurs on earth.
- The rapture's purpose is not only to protect Christians, but to motivate them to be spiritually ready at all times for their unannounced abduction by Christ.

### **Supposed scriptural proof**

What is the scriptural basis for this enigmatic doctrine? Credit for development of the rapture theory generally goes to 19th-century theologian John Nelson Darby and his interpretations of the apostle Paul's statements regarding Christ's return.

Although some advocates of the rapture occasionally refer to a few other scriptures, all agree that the main argument is based on this passage from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. "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" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

It is the Greek for "shall be caught up" that is translated into the Latin rapere, the linguistic basis some claim for the word rapture. But where is the theological basis for the doctrine? Where does it say here—or anywhere else in the Bible, for that matter—that Christ will come close to the earth to remove Christians years before His prophesied second coming?

What Darby interpreted to mean that Christ would come close but not actually return to the earth are three words: "in the air." He took license from the fact that the verse doesn't say that Christ actually returns "to the earth." (Darby may well have been motivated by noble objectives, as we will note later.)

### **A theory based on inaccuracy**

Before examining other aspects of the theory, it is necessary to analyze these verses. The entire theory hinges on whether Darby's understanding was accurate or not. The Bible tells us that "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). That is, true understanding must come from God alone.

One of the important keys to an accurate understanding of any part of the Bible is to read what it says in context. The near context of these verses in 1 Thessalonians 4 begins in verse 13 and concludes in verse 18.

Paul wrote this section of the letter in answer to concerns of the local Christians. Was he responding to the Thessalonians' worries about their safety in an end-of-the-age tribulation? No. Was he addressing their worries about whether Christ would return to rescue them? No. Was he writing about their supposed neglect of their spiritual readiness for Christ's return? No.

Why, then, did Paul write 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18?

As you read verse 13, you discover that Christians in Thessalonica were grieving over the unexpected deaths of members of their congregation. Like other Christians of that day, they apparently thought Jesus would return in their lifetimes. Thus they were caught unprepared for the death of people in the faith.

Paul wrote that they should not be overwhelmed by grief as though there were no hope for life beyond the grave: “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep [died], lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”

Paul explains his main point in verse 14: God will bring the dead back to life. “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”

Paul doesn’t leave the subject there. He adds a time reference: “with Him.” Did Paul refer to an approach by Christ, or was He referring to the second coming? Nothing in this passage justifies an understanding other than the second coming. Neither is there a nuance of a “secret” coming.

Verse 15 amplifies the point about the future of Christians who have died by declaring that those who remain alive at the coming of Christ have no spiritual advantage over those who died. “... We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.” Said another way, those who have died are not at any disadvantage.

Paul continues: “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” (verses 16-17).

- All Christians, living and dead, will be included in the events described in verses 16-17:
- The return of Christ heralded by a powerful angelic announcement (hardly secret).
- The resurrection—return to life—of deceased Christians (the main subject addressed by Paul, according to the context).
- The simultaneous joining of the returning Jesus with deceased Christians and Christians still living at the time.

Verse 18, the final verse of the section, concludes and reiterates the main thought: “Therefore comfort one another with these words”; that is, with the understanding of the destiny of Christians who died before Christ returns.

### **Rapture ideology out of sync**

Not only is the reasoning of the rapture theory entirely out of context with the verses used to support it, the theory is also out of synchronization with events revealed in the rest of the Scriptures.

Another letter written by Paul also addresses the Christian hope of the “change” of a Christian from mortal to immortal at Christ’s return. In 1 Corinthians 15:50-53 he wrote of the promise of a transformation from physical life to everlasting life. This is a crucial point: What is the timing of this prophesied change from mortal to immortal?

Verses 22 and 23 are clear on the matter: “... In Christ all shall be made alive [resurrected], ... those who are Christ’s [Christians] at His coming.” Paul said nothing to the Corinthians of

anything like a snatching away before Christ actually comes, and he used no language that might imply a near approach by Christ in lieu of the second coming.

Paul provides more specifics about the timing. The prophesied change to spirit will occur at “the last trumpet” (verse 52), language similar to that used in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. What is the significance of the sounding of a trumpet at Jesus’ return and the resurrection of the dead in Christ?

A trumpet like instrument was used “in early times chiefly, perhaps exclusively, for warlike purposes. It gave the signal ‘to arms’ ... [and] warned of the approach of the enemy ... [It] was heard throughout a battle ... and sounded the recall ... Afterward it played an important part in connection with religion. It was blown at the proclamation of the Law ... and at the opening of the Year of Jubilee ... heralded the approach of the Ark ... [It] hailed a new king ... and is prophetically associated with the Divine judgment and restoration of the chosen people from captivity” (International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, electronic database, 1996, “Music”).

The trumpet mentioned in Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians and Thessalonians is the same as the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11:15-18—the last trumpet, which announces the second coming. The dead in Christ are resurrected, living Christians are changed to spirit, and Jesus Christ returns to earth—all at the same time.

Attempting to read into a few words in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 the concept of a near coming before the second coming and a different time line for the resurrection prophesied to occur at the second coming is not “rightly dividing the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

### **The rapture theory is in conflict with the Scriptures.**

“One will be taken . . .”

In their eagerness to uphold belief in the rapture, supporters use various prophecies that speak of Christ’s return to bolster their belief in the rapture. They reason that their interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 requires Christians to be in a constant state of readiness for their unannounced removal by Christ.

Prophecies of the second coming are not in doubt. What is in doubt is the application of these messages to their forced interpretation of a precoming.

One such prophecy is Matthew 24:36-44. It starts with “But of that day and hour [of the second coming] no one knows” and ends with “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” The point of this passage is the need for Christians to be prepared for the second coming.

(You will want to read the article The Return of Yahshua

[https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon\\_2015/?page\\_id=20](https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/?page_id=20) and Conjunction or Sighted Which? [https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon\\_2015/?page\\_id=22](https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/?page_id=22) to get a full understanding of the Hebrew expression “But of that Day or Hour no one knows”. You must be keeping the Holy days in order to understand that on the Feast of Trumpets is the day

Yahshua returns and it is on this day that the 7th month is determined by the Sighted moon and because of this no one will know the day or the hour.)

However, some will lift verses 40 and 41 out of context and use them to support belief in a rapture. You will probably recognize the verses immediately: “Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and the other left.” If one ignores that the context of these verses talks about the second coming, they may seem to lend credence to the rapture.

But it is unsound theology to interpret any verses out of context. In addition, the understanding of any reference must agree with the teaching of the rest of the Bible.

In the context of this passage, Christ makes plain the fact that no one will know the exact timing of His coming (notice that Christ repeatedly refers to His coming, not a supposed near approach). His warning, in light of that fact, is that Christians should be constantly alert and spiritually prepared (verses 42, 44-51).

Now the understanding of verses 40 and 41 becomes clear. People who are not prepared will be caught off guard by the abruptness of His coming. Some who live or work close to others will be caught off guard while their companions will not be. Some will be “left”—not “left behind” after a secret rapture, but left unprepared. (Again it is because they do not keep the Holy days and as such do not understand how they tell us the plan of Salvation)

### **Protection promised**

Another reason offered by rapture theorists in defense of their interpretation of end-time prophecy is God’s promise of protection. To be sure, God says to His Church through John: “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).

In Matthew 24:21-22 Jesus spoke of abbreviating the terrible crisis at the close of the age of man to spare His chosen people: “For there shall be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, not ever shall be. And unless these days were shortened, no flesh would be saved alive; but for the elect’s sake, those days will be shortened.”

But nothing in these references or in others concerning the protection of the saints indicates that they will be protected during this time in heaven. To the contrary, if there is any indication of a location, it is described in Revelation 12:14, where it is called simply “the wilderness.” Even then, the same prophecy foretells that Satan will assault at least some of the people of God.

“And the dragon [Satan] was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (verse 17).

The focus of godly men and women needs to be on spiritual preparation and maturity. The faithful are promised that nothing, including tribulation, warfare and Satan’s hostilities, can separate them from the love of God (Romans 8:35-39).

Being swept off to heaven to be sheltered from tribulation is nowhere detailed—or even hinted at—in the Scriptures.

### **Partial understanding**

What reason did the theologian John Darby and others have for even considering such a doctrine as the rapture? An article on the Millennium in Unger’s Bible Dictionary offers a plausible explanation. In the century before Darby, Daniel Whitby promulgated the philosophy of “postmillennialism” in England. “This interpretation maintains that present gospel agencies will root out evils until Christ will have a spiritual reign over the earth, which will continue for 1,000 years. Then the second advent of Christ will initiate judgment and bring to an end the present order” (1988).

It is reasonable to suspect that Darby’s intent was to counter the false teaching that the actions of men could bring about the Kingdom of God—as well as the equally incorrect teaching that prophecies of a kingdom are only symbolic (a view called “amillennialism”). Darby believed, rightly, that Jesus Christ would return to earth to establish and rule over the Kingdom of God (called “premillennialism”).

Regardless of his motivation, Darby departed from the Scriptures himself with his rapture theory. At least he accurately understood that Christ would return to reign on earth, which leads us to an important concluding point.

### **Meeting Christ in the air**

Seeking to refute the accurate understanding of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, one author asks, “If [Christ] is already headed our way, why would we need to be caught up to meet Him?” (Todd Strandberg, *The Pretribulation Rapture*, 1999, p. 2). That’s an interesting question whose answer reinforces what we have already learned from the Bible about this much—misunderstood topic.

The answer lies in the meaning of the word translated “meet.” Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words says the word “is used in the papyri of a newly arriving magistrate. ‘It seems that the special idea of the word was the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary’ (Moulton, *Greek Test. Gram.*, Vol. I, p. 14)” (1985, “Meet”). The Jamieson,

Fausset and Brown Commentary adds in its notes for these verses that “when a king enters his city the loyal go forth to meet him ...”

How appropriate it is that His followers should rise to meet the King of Kings!

F.F. Bruce’s International Bible Commentary adds: “To meet is used in the papyri of the official reception given to a visiting governor, whom his citizens escort into the city from which they have come to meet him” (1986, notes on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Another key question to address is “Where will Christ be?” After all, Paul tells us we will “always be with the Lord” after meeting Him (1 Thessalonians 4:17). An Old Testament prophet answers: “Behold, the day of the LORD is coming ... And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives” (Zechariah 14:1, 4).

Christ will not be in heaven after the second coming, but will be on earth—and so will the resurrected saints who meet Him.

Christians are resurrected from the dead or, if living at the time, changed to spirit at the last trumpet when Christ returns. They will meet Him in the air as an escort of honor as He returns to the Mount of Olives to rule the earth from Jerusalem. They are then destined to reign with Jesus Christ in His glorious kingdom (Revelation 20:6). GN

## **Related Resources**

The Rapture—A Popular but False Doctrine!

**<http://www.wnponline.org/wnp/wnp0809/rapture-false-doctrine.htm>**

The rapture, often called “the blessed hope,” is sadly more hoax than hope, even though the man who started it had no intention of deceiving anyone. You need to know what the Bible actually says!

The Rapture Is Wrong: The Saints Don’t Rise to Run Away

**<http://www.wnponline.org/wnp/wnp0811/rapture-wrong-saints.htm>**

The Bible says the saints rise to meet Christ at His return. But they aren’t snatched away to heaven. They rise in the air to perform a fitting salute to the King of Kings and then join Him, not in heaven, but on the earth. If this is different from what you have heard or believed, you need to prove what the Bible actually says!

The Rapture: Who’s Left Behind? **<http://www.beyondtoday.tv/programs/archive/?>**

**[Title=The-Rapture-Whos-Left-Behind-&ProgramID=bt055](http://www.beyondtoday.tv/programs/archive/?Title=The-Rapture-Whos-Left-Behind-&ProgramID=bt055)**

Why do many people believe a doctrine that has no biblical validity? Isn’t it time you learned the real truth? A Beyond Today video presentation.

Bible FAQ – Does the Bible teach a secret rapture? **<http://www.ucg.org/bible-faq/bibleteach-secret-rapture.htm>**

There has been a great deal of interest in end time events based on the Left Behind series of books and movies. What does the Bible teach about the rapture?