

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).

The Bible plainly does *not* promise that God will take believers to heaven to protect them from the Great Tribulation. That idea is read into the Bible—a strong statement to make, but one that is verified by what we have shown you.

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 two false teachings, both of which continue to this day. First, some believe that the actions of men will bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. Second, some discount Kingdom prophecies as entirely symbolic, denying that a Kingdom will ever come (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”).

However, Darby departed from the Scriptures himself with his rapture theory, which brings us back to the fact that we must look at what God says in His Word, rather than what men say about it. Merely being sincere does not make your beliefs or your teachings accurate.

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).

Paul tells us we will “always be with the Lord” after meeting Him (1 Thessalonians 4:17), so we should ask, “Where will Christ be?” 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).

There is no rapture. There *is* a second coming.

Have You Been Misled by 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 major prophetic 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 sudden snatching to heaven of believers—originate? Why do so many people believe that the Bible prophesies a rapture, when it says no such thing?

The *Left Behind* series of books and videos 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, 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. But the books do not tell readers the theology of the rapture idea. That is, they do not explain the scriptural basis for the belief or how one might prove it from the Bible. And the truth is, *they can’t*.

The rapture as doctrine

Although millions embrace the idea of the

rapture as absolute fact, its proponents cite only a few biblical passages, which they misinterpret 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, but the Bible is clear. Some point to a single word in the Latin translation of another 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.” From that solitary word comes

that occurs on earth.

- Believers are snatched away in a rapture to protect them from the Great Tribulation.
- The rapture doctrine is valuable to Christians, for it inspires them to be ready at a moment’s notice for being grabbed by a passing Christ.

Supposed scriptural proof

Some readers have only heard the word “rapture” and the publicity surrounding books and movies making money off of it. Others strongly embrace the idea to the point of reacting with anger to these words. But what you or I hold as opinion isn’t what counts. The authority for our beliefs has to be God’s Word.

What you or I hold as opinion isn’t what counts. The authority for our beliefs has to be God’s Word.

the artificial construct of the rapture theory—the concept 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.”

But, even this definition does not accurately reflect the prevalent explanations of the rapture theory. Rapture defenders teach that Christ will do the snatching of believers *before* and *separate from* His return, not “upon His return.”

Summarizing the most common version of the theory (there are differing ideas):

- Christ, they say, will approach the earth, not return to it, to seize believers away years before His actual return—what the Bible calls the second coming.
- Christ revealed the rapture to the Church in the apostle Paul’s epistle of 1 Thessalonians.
- This is a secret coming, which people will know only by the sudden disappearance of Christians.
- At the rapture Christians will be changed to spirit and transported to the safe haven of heaven to wait out a seven-year “tribulation”

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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. We don’t ask readers to take our word, but we do challenge them to believe the Word of God. 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 teaching that Jesus will make a secret sweeping pass at the earth to snatch away living believers. It teaches *only* the doctrine of the second coming, which is consistent with the entire Bible.

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*.”

This is another major point that disproves the rapture: Living Christians and predeceased Christians meet Christ in the air *at the same time*. We will see that the Bible clearly tells us when that time is.

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).

Let’s summarize what God’s Word in fact says:

- All true Christians, living and dead, will be included in the events described in verses 16-17.

- The return of Christ is heralded by a powerful angelic announcement (not a secret removal of a few).

- Deceased Christians will be brought to life at that time (the main subject addressed by Paul, according to the context).

- This will involve 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

We see that the reasoning of the rapture theory is entirely out of alignment with the principal verses that people claim support it. Also, the theory does not stand up to what the Bible reveals about related events.

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

How Long Is the Great Tribulation?

The “great tribulation” refers to the time of crisis at the close of the age of man. Jesus spoke of “great tribulation” in Matthew 24:21 and told John to write of it in Revelation 7:14.

Several events are prophesied to occur during the crucial last days:

- The area outside of the temple in Jerusalem will be controlled by non-Israelite powers (Revelation 11:2).
- The two witnesses of God will fulfill their commission (verse 3).
- The beast power, a counterfeit of the Kingdom of God, will dominate world politics, religion and economics (Revelation 13:5).

An unparalleled “time of great trouble” will come on the people of Israel, affecting also “the holy people” (Daniel 12:1, 7).

Notice that a common time-period is mentioned in conjunction with these events:

- 42 months.
- 1,260 days.
- “A time, times, and half a time.”

These are variations of the same period—3½ years (not seven years, as commonly suggested by many rapture-believers for the time of the great tribulation).

Note *Wycliffe Commentary’s* notes on Daniel 12:7:

“The consummation is to take place when the three and one-half times (3½ years; 1,260 days; 42 months) so frequently mentioned in Daniel’s previous prophecies and in the Revelation are run out.”

Rapture theorists base their idea of a seven-year tribulation on a single reference, Daniel 9:27, which tells of a covenant made “for a week” by a “prince who is to come.” This prince will cut off sacrifices “in the midst of the week,” an act that will herald the beginning of the crisis at the end. A week in prophecy, goes the reasoning, represents a year and hence refers to a seven-year period.

(Some believe the prince to be the Antichrist, while others believe it is Christ. The Messiah was cut off in the midst of a week, or after 3½ years of His earthly ministry, as well as on a Wednesday, the middle of a literal week.)

If this is a prophecy of the Antichrist, the crisis begins “in the middle,” or after 3½ years, leaving another 3½ years remaining for the fulfillment of the close-of-the-age events mentioned above. Note as well that the period would also be the same as prophesied in the above references to the main events of the end.

Clearly the Bible does not support the idea of a seven-year tribulation, which totally removes another main pillar of the rapture theory.

The Need for Spiritual Readiness

The rapture theory helps a Christian be in readiness for Christ’s unexpected appearance to take him away, or so goes the reasoning of those who adhere to the belief. On the other hand, the need for spiritual readiness is a valid teaching found throughout the New Testament regardless of any supposed rapture teaching. The Scriptures invariably connect it to Christ’s actual return to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, not to a near approach to the earth by Christ years before His final coming.

Christ’s comparison between the time immediately preceding His coming and the time just before the flood of Noah’s day illustrates this fact. “But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matthew 24:37). The comparison continues with a description of how some people who lived and worked side by side with Noah were caught off guard by the coming of the flood.

Similarly, in the end of the age people living and working side by side with Christians will be caught off guard by Christ’s return. “Watch therefore [meaning stay alert to one’s spiritual commitment and responsibility], for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming” (verse 42). There is no intimation, either in Greek or English translations, of any secret aspect to this coming. It is the prophesied return of Christ.

Take note of this fact, for it means the rapture theory has no basis in Scripture.

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 to earth by Christ to snatch away saints *before* His 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 trumpetlike 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 . . . [It] 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*.

Lest some miss the point, we say again that Christians who have lived and died in ages past and Christians still living at the end of the age are changed to spirit *at the same time*. And, that time is clearly when Christ returns to the earth to set up His Father’s Kingdom.

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 shall be taken . . .”

In their eagerness to buttress the misinterpretation of Paul’s writings, teachers of the rapture point to several prophecies that speak of Christ’s return. They reason that these prophecies, which speak of the constant need for Christians to be prepared for Christ’s return, prove their theory of a rapture.

That’s circular reasoning—starting from an error and using verses about another subject to reinforce their error. As we have shown, there is no rapture prophesied in the Bible. Of course, prophecies of the second coming urge preparedness. However, it twists the Scriptures to say urgings about preparedness bolster the nonexistent rapture.

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.

Luke records a parable in which Christ went to some length to emphasize the need for Christians to conduct themselves to be ready at all times for His return. “Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning,” He said (Luke 12:35). In other words, be dressed and equipped to move at a moment’s notice. After three separate analogies to illustrate His point, He summarizes it with the plain admonition, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (verse 40). Notice that He obviously refers here to His coming; that is, to His return, not a near approach to earth.

Are there signs by which Christians can recognize the time of the end? Yes, and Paul reminded the Thessalonians to be aware of those signs at the time he repeated Christ’s message that He will come as unexpectedly as a robber visits his victim (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2). Jesus inspired John to write it again in Revelation 16:15.

Peter urged his readers to hold to the identical perspective, adding advice concerning what we should do in light of it: “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless [in character and conduct]” (2 Peter 3:11, 14). In other words, be ready at all times.

The Scriptures do not connect the need for spiritual readiness with a rapture of Christians.

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.

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