

10. The Rapture of the Believers

What Does Jesus Say About the Rapture?

We have come now to the original question: what about the Rapture? What exactly is it, and when does it take place? From the preceding chapters, readers will hopefully have received some decisive direction already. But now we will focus more closely on what the Bible says about the Rapture.

There are only a few Bible passages that elaborate on the Rapture. Those that exist are very clear and easy to understand, so the Rapture is not a strange and mysterious occurrence about which we can only speculate.

In his sermon on the signs of the end of the age, Christ himself refers to the Rapture. We find the following in Matthew 24:31: “And he (Christ) will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” This passage may not specifically mention the Rapture, but important elements are found here that are also connected to the Rapture elsewhere. We therefore note this passage as a Rapture text.

It is important to know that our Lord Jesus Christ was quite aware of the coming Rapture and referred to it. It may not have been central to his teaching, but it was always implied. (Some explainers suggest that there may have been an oral tradition as well, to which Paul refers, but it is not wise to speculate.)

Christ taught about his return and its impact on the believers. In Luke 17:34, the Lord speaks about the night of his return and says, “I tell you, on that night two people will be on one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.” This may very well be a direct reference to the Rapture.

I think also of Christ’s prayer just before his betrayal, as recorded in John 17:24: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am,

and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” The believers can expect to see and share in the glory of Christ.

The apostle Paul, dealing with the resurrection, also refers to the Rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:50-52. We read there, “I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

The Apostolic Teaching

The main passage which speaks about the Rapture is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Because of the importance of this passage, I want to quote it in entirety. Writing about the coming of the Lord, the apostle Paul says,

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

The verb that is crucial here is “to be caught up.” The original uses a verb *arpazo*, from which the word “Rapture” is taken. The verb means to take away swiftly and powerfully. This is the only place where the word

“Rapture” actually occurs. This Rapture was never kept secret, and what Paul writes is also what he said publicly to the Thessalonians. When Paul refers back to “the Lord’s own word,” he must mean what Christ taught in his sermon on the signs of the end of the age, as recorded in Matthew 24.

The Problem among the Thessalonians

Paul’s rather lengthy discourse on the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4 had a very specific reason. Apparently, there was a problem in the Thessalonian church that was causing severe division and needed to be addressed emphatically. This explains Paul’s direct and clear approach to the matter; there was no room for misunderstanding.

The problem may be identified as follows. In the church at Thessalonica, there was a faulty idea about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes about it particularly in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2: “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.”

It seems that Paul was not certain about the source of the faulty information, and therefore he mentioned “some prophecy, report or letter.” The source could have been an oral statement or a written document. It does not really matter, for the content of the so-called apostolic message was that the Lord had already come.

Paul does not indicate where the Lord had arrived at this point, according to the erroneous sources, but his arrival may have been expected in Jerusalem. The idea may have been that Christ was moving westward to Rome, but this idea is not supported by any statement in Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians.

This error had two main practical consequences. (There may have been more, but two are mentioned.) The first was the idea that those who died while Christ was coming westward would not experience the joy and beauty

of his coming. They would have to miss “the big day.” They had come so close, only to miss the grand finale. This really bothered some members of the church at Thessalonica.

The second idea was that if Christ had returned and was coming to their town, the world would soon come to an end and so it made no sense to keep one’s daily job. In the mind of some, it was probably better to await the coming and prepare for it. They did not work anymore and simply celebrated in anticipation. They felt that others in the congregation had to provide for them. The idea may have been that all believers together could live from the riches of the congregation and so await Christ’s arrival.

Paul’s Response

With regard to the second idea, Paul states that it is unseemly under any circumstance to stop working and providing for one’s own living. He himself always kept a day job in order not to burden the believers financially. This is not a rule for office bearers, but was Paul’s own preference (2 Thess 3:9). He refers to his practice and the reasons for it elsewhere as well.

The first idea – that Jesus Christ had already descended and so deceased believers would miss the great moment – was much more serious. Paul makes clear that many things need to occur before the Lord Jesus returns, such as the coming of rebellion, the appearing of the man of lawlessness, and the exercising of final judgment. Perhaps the Thessalonians had not properly understood Paul’s teaching in this respect. In any case, this “new” information was unsettling and dividing them.

Paul makes it quite clear that he is not giving the Thessalonians any new information on this point. He writes, “Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?” (2 Thess 2:5). This is important. Paul had not withheld from the Thessalonians any vital information that now needed to be updated. In sincerity and truth, he preached to them the *whole* Gospel. New messages were simply not necessary.

I find this important especially when it comes to claims that Christ has come or will come on a certain date. It is typically sectarian to claim that one has received new eschatological information. We know all that we need to know, and those claiming subsequent revelations are, by that fact alone, already suspect. This applies to all sects and established religions, from Mormons to Muslims and all those in between. There is no new information outside of the Holy Scriptures. Nothing is needed; nothing is given.

Paul's main response is that *no believer will miss the day of Christ's glorious return!* This is the key issue in his two letters to the Thessalonians. Against this background, we can understand what is written about the Rapture. It happens so that all believers, past and present, will together and simultaneously witness the return of the Lord Jesus. If we die before the Lord returns, we will be raised and raptured with all the saints to meet Christ as he comes.

When the Rapture Will Take Place?

The idea of a Rapture depends on the preceding notion that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. If Jesus has *not* risen, all is vain and useless. But if Christ *has* risen – and he has – things are different. When he returns, he will take all believers unto himself.

The Rapture will take place when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven. There is a very specific series of events that take place in a divinely-ordained order. The Lord Jesus will come down from heaven accompanied by his angels, who will issue loud commands and blow the trumpet of God. This is put forth in an Old Testament manner (i.e. the trumpet), but it means that the Lord's descent will be accompanied by audible and visible signs. We cannot miss it.

We read in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” This means that the souls of those who have died and gone to be with Christ in heaven will be brought back with him, and so be united

with their bodies that have been raised from the grave. It is fitting that those who have lived with the Lord in heaven will also return with him and share in his great triumph.

There is one Rapture because there is only one return of Christ. This Rapture will involve all the saints who have ever lived.

What Will the Resurrection Body Be Like?

Paul clarifies that, as the Lord descends in glory, the first thing to be expected is that “the dead in Christ will rise...” Those who have hoped in Christ to their last breath will be the first to rise. When Paul writes “the dead in Christ,” he means *all* the dead in Christ. It does not matter when they passed away, whether recently or a long time ago, for all shall rise.

Not one body shall be left behind in the grave. Even those who have been buried in faraway and unfathomable places will rise to stand on the earth. They will stand on the earth with a new body, a resurrection body. It will be a body of flesh and bones, as Christ has, but glorified and no longer subject to earthly conditions of sin, suffering, and death.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul answers various questions about the resurrection. One of them is: “How are the dead raised? With what kind of a body will they come?” (1 Cor 15:35) Paul considers the question, or the intention behind it, rather foolish (1 Cor 15:36).

Even now, all flesh is not the same. Paul points out that men, animals, birds, and fish have different bodies. Even heavenly bodies have different brilliance. He writes, “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor 15:42). Our body will then be imperishable, glorified, powerful, and spiritual. The resurrection body bears the likeness of the man of heaven, of Christ. We cannot oversee or appreciate all the consequences of this resurrection now. For us, it is unimaginable. But we may accept the testimony of Scripture and eagerly anticipate the fulfilling of the promises we have received in Christ.

Those Who Are Still Alive

Only the dead will be raised. There are those who will be alive when Christ returns. Having never been dead or buried, they cannot be raised from the dead. With their sinful and mortal bodies, however, they cannot function on the new earth. The apostle Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15:50, where he writes, “I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”

As we are right now, we cannot live on the new earth. We have sinful and mortal bodies. We will lay down this body when we die, and we will receive a new body in the resurrection. Death means leaving behind that which we cannot keep. Death is therefore also a breaking with sin and with everything that is sinful.

But those who are alive when Christ returns cannot be raised to receive a new body. What will happen to them? They, too, have to be changed just as those who have died. Paul writes about this as well, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Cor 15:51-52).

In the end, all the saints will be equal in that they will all have a new body, whether by resurrection or transformation. No believer will be left unchanged. All of God’s children will be suited to live forever on the new earth.

I also think that all believers will receive a full and mature body, in the strength of life. Whether death occurred at a young or old age, all resurrection bodies will in this respect be the same. A reference to this effect can be found in Psalm 103:5 where is spoken about “...your *youth* is renewed like the eagle’s...” This is echoed in Isaiah 40:31, “...but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles...” Both passages are set within the context of becoming frail and fading away. All will die one day, but those who trust in the LORD will be renewed to soar as eagles in the strength of life. Those who are raised in Christ will experience the eternal summer of life, renewed and restored forever.

From this side, we cannot understand the resurrection. Paul's use of the word "mystery" in 1 Corinthians 15:51 is very tantalizing. It is a word used by the apostle only when there is concise, new information about an important matter of the faith. It does not necessarily mean something that was never known before, but rather something that was never known before in such a clear and concise manner. What we learn in 1 Corinthians 15 is therefore very important, and it has great bearing on the way in which we view and experience death.

Paul taught the Corinthians the same order of events he taught the Thessalonians. First, the dead will rise and receive new bodies. Then the living will be transformed. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, "After that, [they] who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so [they] will be with the Lord forever."

The verb "caught up" is the verb that denotes the Rapture. This unique event will involve all believers, resurrected and transformed, who will rise together to meet the Lord in the air as he descends. We will not hang in suspension, however, but together with Christ complete the descent to the new heaven and earth. What a thrill this will be! With our new bodies and perfected souls, we will live forever with Christ on the new earth.

As stated, the original Greek uses the verb *arpazo* and this is reflected in the word *rapture*. This verb denotes a sudden, powerful, and irrevocable being taken away and lifted up. Hence the translation "caught up" aptly indicates what is being meant. I also like the translation being *snatched* up, because we are escaping at the last moment a fiery ordeal that will come over all who are left behind.

Has death now become irrelevant?

At this point we might ask whether death is still relevant in the lives of believing Christians. Is there not the danger that we take death lightly as a station that has in reality been passed?

We should not think lightly of death. It is not without reason that the Bible calls death “the last *enemy*.” In 1 Corinthians 15:26 we read that “the last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Death is not natural, as some would have us believe, for it runs counter to all that we cherish. It is called the “wages of sin.” (Romans 6:25). Death is God’s sovereign curse over the rebellion of mankind. Adam and Eve were warned that if they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die (Genesis 3:3). Created to live, Adam and Eve would fall under the curse of death and life would become meaningless in itself (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

In the Bible we find vivid descriptions of the horrible process of death. “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. (Psalm 116:3; see also Psalm 18:4). The advent of death rightly fills us with dread. We face the unknown. We must leave behind all that we have loved and amassed in this life. Death is an undoing, and whether we are 25 or 95 years old, we all abhor even the very thought of death. Death is not something that we seek or welcome under normal circumstances. If we did not know Christ and the power of his grace, how could we ever face it?

The Bible encourages us to know and experience that death has been overcome in Christ, our Savior. We experience already now by faith the beginning of eternal joy. When we are confronted with our weakness and sins, we say, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Note the expression “this body *of death*.” As long as we are in this body, we are confronted in every way with the reality of death. Who will deliver me? The answer to the question is amazing, “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom 7:24, 25)

Death is a last enemy and we all have to face it. Therefore we should never trivialize death as if it is nothing. At the same time, we may precisely in this connection cling to our great comfort in Christ, who was himself dead but has risen from the dead and has ascended into the glory of heaven. We find this calmly and deeply expressed in Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, *for you are with me...*” We never walk alone.

“When I awake...”

We also note that the Bible often refers to death as sleep. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, for example, Paul writes about the dead as those who have fallen *asleep*. Does the word “sleep” not take away some of the gruesome character of death, our last enemy?

We should not speculate about a “soul sleep”, as some have done throughout the ages, and so caused much confusion and dissension. The use of the word “sleep” has a different thrust. It is used because it emphasizes the certainty and reality of *awakening*. The word “sleep” denotes the need for awakening (*egersis*) and the word “awakening” underscores the beauty of the resurrection (*anastasis*).

It is by the power of Christ that death can be characterized as sleeping because life is not lost and an awakening will follow. The word *sleep* means that death has no lasting grip on us. There is a new day in which we will share.

There is an interesting expression in Psalm 139:18. “...*When I awake, I am still with you....*” Note the sequence of the words. It does not say: *you* are still with me, but *I* am still with you. God will never forsake us. At the same time, the believer will be directed immediately to the Lord who is always near.

This passage about awakening may refer simply to the awakening in the morning after a night of sleep. It could be an evening prayer. But the Psalm also speaks about the close bond with God, a bond that begins before *birth* in the womb and continues also through *death*. We are not always aware of this close bond. But the word of God tells us that from conception to resurrection we are always in God’s view and care. The prayer that children pray at bedtime should be the prayer of our entire lifetime: “Now I lay me down to sleep, pray the Lord my soul to keep....” Knowing: “when I awake, I am still with you.”