

The Rapture—Is It *Really* God's Promise?

Many evangelical Christian ministries, prominent Protestant ministers, and Christian television evangelists are promoting what they believe to be a promise from God—the rapture...to a place of safety. Though the standard belief is to be wafted off to heaven, receiving protection in a physical “place of safety” on Earth is another view. Can either be true? What does our Bible say about the Rapture?

Since the 1917 publication of the Scofield Bible, which included study notes about the rapture—the notion a select group of Christians in the end-times would waft off to heaven *before* the tribulation—has been gaining popularity within the Christian Protestant community. What's so astonishing about this teaching is how it has become so widely accepted and embraced by such a large group of Christians *today*—it really is stunning!

But, in order to understand *how* it began to assuage the Christian movement, we must go to 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Much of this doctrinal advancement comes from this singular scripture. Clearly, many agree, the word “rapture” is *not*

found in the Bible, but arguably—by extension, or indirectly—you can make the case that it is there...well, sort of. Let me explain.

As many of us know, 1 Thessalonians 4 covers subject matter illustrating Paul's encouragement to the Christians in Thessalonica that those who died would *not be forgotten* in the resurrection—that they, too, would meet the Lord in the air upon His return. As Paul proceeds to explain how this would happen, he uses the Greek word *har-pad'-zo*. It means to seize, catch away, to pluck, pull, snatch, and take by force—*like being kidnapped!* Now here's the connection to the word “rapture”—it's found in the Medieval Latin—the word is *rapturo*—this is the *indirect connection* to the English



Millions believe Christians will be whisked away to heaven several years before Jesus Christ visibly returns to Planet Earth.

word “rapture.” This is how the notion the Lord is coming to carry away, by force, all believers—snatched violently, *raptured* into the air—as being kidnapped, and taken back to heaven for 3.5 or 7 years, depending on the particular rapture version being advanced.

There are primarily *three different versions* of this teaching—they’re labeled as “pretrib,” “midtrib,” and “posttrib.” Which belief one embraces—whether *before* (pretrib) or *in the middle of* (midtrib) the tribulation—determines if you will be in heaven 3.5 or 7 years. (Posttribbers may or may not believe the saints will be taken to heaven and remain there for a time.)

However, most accepting the rapture teaching believe in a pretrib event based on 1 Thessalonians 5:9: “For God has *not appointed us* to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ.” Because Paul mentions, “For God *has not appointed us to wrath*,” many take that to be interpreted as a *statement of assured protection* in heaven—avoiding the future time of tribulation. But, this is clearly an interpretation. The Bible mentions nothing about going to heaven, where God the Father and Jesus Christ reside with the heavenly host in the spirit realm.

The Rapture Doctrine Has a Rich History

Many are aware the *rapture event* is not found in the Scriptures—it is but a theory—derived though, from what some believe to be *unequivocal* scriptural support. This is what makes the doctrine so problematic—that the vast majority of the evangelical Protestant movement accepts this notion and promotes it as part of the gospel of Jesus Christ—as though it were an actual promise from God. So, how did this happen when there’s no description of it? Where did this idea come from and who is responsible for promoting it as though it’s really a promise from God, recorded in the Bible?

As early as the seventeenth century, an American Puritan minister, Cotton Mather, embraced the idea believers would be “caught up” into the air *before* the judgments of God on Earth and right prior to the commencement of the Millennium. Cotton Mather was a very prominent minister of his day in New England—writing well over 400 different publications on a variety of Bible subjects. A graduate from Harvard by the age of 15, his father, Increase Mather, was the President of Harvard for many years. Both

men were involved in the Salem witch trials. But the *term* “rapture” wasn’t actually used by them. It wasn’t used until the eighteenth century, when Phillip Doddridge and John Gill, writing their commentaries on the New Testament, coined the term.

This was followed by additional writings in an essay published in Philadelphia in 1788 by a Baptist minister, Mr. Morgan Edwards. He mentioned a *pretribulation* rapture would occur *before* Christ’s return. But, then in the early nineteenth century, a gentleman named John Nelson Darby, originally from the Plymouth Exclusive Brethren congregation, began to advance dispensationalism and futurism. He even produced a translation of the Bible called “The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation from the Original Languages.” It was Mr. Darby, in the late 1820s or so—when he began to publicize his ecclesiological and eschatological teachings—who started describing the idea of a pretribulation rapture. His teachings were enhanced and promoted by a man named William Kelly, a proponent of Darby’s idea—and he continued to advance it for approximately the next 40 years, whenever and wherever he could.

But, admittedly, it was Darby’s popularization of the *pretribulation rapture* that really advanced the teaching. Using his influence among many of the Plymouth Brethren—impacting American Christianity, especially in the area of eschatology and fundamentalism—Darby’s idea increased with greater acceptance. Many of his writings and presentations at the Bible Conference Movement and the Niagara Bible Conferences were large forums to use *for promoting* his idea of a “pretrib rapture.”

These conferences offered opportunity to improve the endorsement of the futurist premillennial and pretribulation rapture position for many Baptists, Presbyterians, and other Brethren congregational members. Books began to be written with the rapture in mind, late in the nineteenth century, resulting with increased exposure among many Christian denominations and leading to a much broader adoption of the concept.

But what not only really boosted the information on the rapture but also *enhanced the credibility* of this doctrine was when the Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909 and again in 1919, included it in its reference notes. This generated a perception in the eyes of the public that the pretribulation rapture was indeed a *credible doctrine* and must be true—especially now

that we find it printed in the accepted scholarly work of the Scofield Reference Bible! So, with this as the backdrop, going into the twentieth century, the rapture doctrine gained enormous momentum as a direct result of this *perceived endorsement!* But, regardless of what the Scofield Bible's reference notes say, what really matters is what the Scriptures say—this is at the heart of the issue.

Back To the Bible

The gospel of Jesus Christ includes the message of a world-ruling kingdom—with Him as King of kings and Lord of lords. We find this fact described throughout the Bible, whether in the Old or New Testaments. The Prophets are filled with descriptions of this kingdom *on Earth*, with bears playing with cows, lions eating straw like an ox, while children play on the holes of snakes (Isaiah 11:1–9). Whether in the book of Micah, Jeremiah, Amos, Zechariah, Isaiah, or Hosea—they all mention this coming kingdom of God that will be established on Earth, where war will no longer be taught (Isaiah 2:4), and Jerusalem will become the capital city of the world (Zechariah 14). Unquestionably, this message was foremost in the mind of Christ also, as it was His message from the beginning until the end of His ministry—and He promised it would be announced, published, and spread throughout the world until the end of this present age (Mark 1:14, Luke 1:33; 4:43; Matthew 4:17, 23; 24:14; Acts 1:8).

It also included the revelation of *how* human beings would achieve immortality (2 Timothy 1:10); how the gospel was about Christ crucified—that He died for our sins so we might live with Him (1 Corinthians 1:23–31; John 3:16) eternally in His Kingdom, located here on Earth, where we will rule and reign with Him as kings and priests for a thousand years (Revelation 5:10; 20:4). This is at the heart of the gospel message and this is the *substance* of the *commencement—our introduction—into eternal life*. Yet surprisingly, as you review these scriptures, study the context of each one, which can include many more, especially those in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21—you will see there is *no indication*, mention, or notion given of any kind of preemptive “secret” return of Christ to whisk His followers off to heaven for some kind of *preliminary stay* before they return some years later to Earth as a conquering army from heaven.

Portraying Christ's return to include a rapture, *as traditionally believed and taught*, is just *not found* in the biblical narrative—it's simply not part of the *detailed process* by which God is bringing many sons and daughters into eternal life. So, what is the biblical alternative—the truth—the narrative we're to understand?

Let's begin by considering what is actually illustrated and explained, specifically, in Matthew 24—using it as a baseline reference. In this chapter we see Christ outlining some details of signs that will precede His return to Earth. He lists quite a few items for consideration, but as you go through the *sequence* it becomes very plain, there is no mention of the rapture. Admittedly, Jesus did not intend to detail every nuance of His return in this chapter, but He poignantly *specifies the significant “benchmark events,”* which define what happens upon His return; and clearly, you would think something so vital and important to the personal safety of God's people—the preliminary protection from the tribulation—would be detailed, *but He doesn't!*

Instead, we are introduced to many things that identify the end-time conditions that will grow worse and worse (Matthew 24:1–14). Our Lord reminds us that only those who endure to the end will be saved (verse 13). However, what is very curious about this information is, all through this narrative of so many horrific events there remains *no mention* of any thing remotely describing an unannounced, secret rapture—a whisking of Christians off to heaven!

Now, in verse 15 we are told an event called the “abomination of desolation” will occur. When that happens, those in Judea—*that part of the world*—are told to leave, get out, and do it quickly (Matthew 24:15–21). This invasion is also described in Daniel 11:40–41. It is at this time the King of the North counter attacks the King of the South, which results in the *King of the North occupying Palestine*, or Israel, as the world presently views it. We are also told, “and let not them that are in the countries (*outside of Palestine*) enter there into” (Luke 21:21). In other words, don't go to the Middle East at that time—it won't be safe—you will be going into harm's way if you should “enter there into.” *So stay out!*

This will be a time of such distress, danger, and chaos that, Christ explains, it's unlike any other time in the history of mankind. Christ warns, “And

except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved" (Matthew 24:22). What He's saying is if the days weren't shortened *humanity would self-destruct*—no flesh would be saved alive—"but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened" (Matthew 24:22). Due to His people there *on Earth*, He will shorten the days for their sake—that's His reason for cutting the days short.

But wait a minute—I thought they were in heaven out of harms way! The pretrib/midtrib dispensationalist will lead you to believe His people were removed some years previous to this horribly dreadful and terrifying time in human history—so how do we corroborate this with the concept of the *secret rapture*? And furthermore, let me reiterate, there is no indication, reference, or even an innuendo of this "snatching"—*kidnap style*—of Christians wafting off to heaven. But lets continue.

In the remaining verses we are reminded false prophets will arise showing great signs and wonders, "insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect" (Matthew 24:24). Clearly, we're being told, it's the *very elect—true Christians*—that are at risk of being deceived—*at this time—the time of the end*, when the *tribulation is occurring*, meaning they are *not in heaven!* The elect are *still on Earth* during this extremely shocking and frightful time in mankind's history. Its hard to believe something as important, magnificent, and rewarding as an *escape from the tribulation* of literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people wouldn't be described, or at least mentioned and placed into the sequence of this broad overview of significant circumstances surrounding the return of our Lord, but—to our bewilderment—nothing is mentioned! Don't you find that both remarkably strange, and at least incredibly suspicious?

But Matthew continues and proceeds to clarify, "Immediately *after the tribulation* (notice the time sequence—"after") of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man *coming* in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:29–30). Now this is as plain as can be—it will happen *after the tribulation*—but notice what else is to happen. "And he shall send his angels with a *great sound* of

a trumpet (so much for a secret return), and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matthew 24:31).

What we are emphatically being told, at this time—when He returns with a great sound of the trumpet—His followers, the elect, will be collected from the four winds—implicit of the winds in our sky. This is describing the *time* of the resurrection of the dead, articulated in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. Notice: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God [this is going to be a very loud, noisy, and a frightful sound—its anything but secret, or sneaky]: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be *caught up* [Greek: *har-pad'zo*; Latin: *rapturo*] together with them [the former dead, who are now alive again] in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air [it says *nothing* about going back to heaven]: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." And this will happen *AFTER* the tribulation!

This is a thorough description of significant turning points, circumstances, and conditions portraying a *logical sequence* that outlines "watershed events" we can expect that lead up to the return of Jesus Christ and the consequent resurrection of the just. Both Mark and Luke support this configuration of circumstances, though describing it somewhat differently in their writings. Nevertheless, their accounts unequivocally agree with the general outline of events Matthew describes. And without a doubt, *most noticeably*, is the *lack of any illustration* of what the dispensationalists describe as the rapture—it's simply M.I.A. *in all cases!*

But What about the Books of Revelation and Daniel?

For some, the book of Revelation is simply a book about history—a description of Rome's "heavy hand" on the Church during that early New Testament Church period. These Christians are generally called preterists. Others view the book of Revelation more as a *sequence of prophecies* yet to occur—future events that are yet to happen in a *particular order*. It is a detailed book about certain specifics that Jesus does not explicitly mention in the books of Matthew, Mark, or Luke. But, this shouldn't be viewed dismissive by Christ, but rather understood as the broader picture of the *important*

particulars associated with His return—leaving the details for John to record at a later date. Remember, the book of Revelation is recognized by most scholars to be written sometime during the last decade of the first century CE—some sixty years after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord.

It's not the purpose of this short article to provide a detailed summary profile of the book of Revelation, but suffice it to say, one must be careful as to what one assigns as symbolic and what one would understand as literal. With that said, most will agree, regardless of the arguments associated



Up, up, and away! Will the saints “fly away” to a heavenly place of safety when the going gets tough?

with interpretations of what is symbolic, or metaphor, and what is to be taken as literal; the undeniable fact is, you will search high and low to no avail for a description explaining the rapture event as was understood and promoted by Mr. Darby and those today among the evangelical dispensationalists. Revelation 19, which is the accepted chapter by most detailing the return of Jesus Christ, clearly *does not include* any mention, expla-

nation, or description of anything that could be remotely understood as Christians returning to heaven for a period of time—only to return to earth some years later to set up God's Kingdom—*it's just not there!*

Revelation 19:11 explains heaven opens up and begins to describe Christ, the Word of God, leading the armies of heaven, *made up of angels*, all riding on white horses (Revelation 19:11–14). They proceed to earth as Christ described in Matthew 24:29–31, destroying those who oppose Him upon their approach, including the beast and false prophet, which is described in Revelation 19:17–21. This was a detail Christ didn't mention in the Gospels, but now is mentioned by John as he records this *revelation from Christ*. But, notice as you read through this chapter and on into Chapter 20—there is still *no mention* of any kind of rapture as taught by so many Protestant Christian denominations today.

And there is additional substantiation of Christians *not raptured to heaven*, by the narrative claiming there were Christians that remained on earth and came through the tribulation—described in Revelation 7:4–14. In this section of Scripture, we are told, “these are they which *came out* of great tribulation,” which means they were in it—not in heaven and removed from it!

Daniel simply states, when describing the time of the resurrection, which is when Christ returns, “And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which stands for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time [the tribulation]: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book [the book of life]. And many of them that sleep [in death] in the dust of the earth [*not alive in heaven*] shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:1–2).

There is absolutely *no mention*—not even an innuendo—*referencing the rapture*. What you have is an outline of events beginning back in Daniel 11:40 that puts us in the *timeline of the “end of days,”* right before Christ's return. We know this to be true because the dead don't rise until the last trump is sounded and Christ returns to this earth collecting his saints from the four winds of the sky (heaven) (1 Corinthians 15:51–54).

So What about Protection from the Tribulation?

The rapture teaching, or the doctrine of fleeing to a *physical place of safety*, is very appealing, if for no other reason than that of avoiding the fear, terror, and heartache that comes with becoming a victim of such terrifying plunder, pillaging, and ruin anticipated to accompany the tribulation. Who wouldn't want to be removed out of the "field of play" of such death and destruction the tribulation will cause? I think all of us agree, a place of safety—be it in heaven or on earth—would be nice to have. But, is that what our God offers—*entitled protection*—because you are favored over others by Him?

Admittedly, some will point out that Luke encourages us to "Watch you therefore, and pray always, that you *may be accounted worthy to escape* all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36). The context obviously is the end times, making this statement very cogent to the idea that protection is indeed possible—and the *good news is; YES, protection is possible!* But, the *promise of protection* is considerably different from being *wafted off* to heaven, or *physically transported* to a *collective place of safety on earth* just to provide you security and comfort during a very difficult and devastating time for the rest of mankind.

The biblical record is clear: *if protection is provided*, there is *usually an expectation* associated with that condition—and it's not for the weak at heart—conversely, it will be for the *strong ones*. Consider the two witnesses: they will be protected for a time. Their purpose: to provide a witness to the beast and false prophet that they are Satanic, while executing an *Elijah-type* ministry. There were times when the prophets were protected during certain circumstances, but always for a reason deeply embedded in the purpose of God. These individuals were generally the *hardened followers* of God. They had the courage, fortitude, resolve, and faith to deal with the pressures and stresses associated with operating within such dreadful circumstances in mankind's history—to remain in, active, undistracted, and surrounded by the conditions reserved for the last days *will not be* for the cowardly or weak Christians. No, the truth of the matter is, it

will be reserved for only those who are *able to handle the circumstances* that come with this kind of *violently horrible chaos* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In Psalms 91, we are assured those who make the Lord their refuge will have the blessing of protection with the assurance of angels having charge over them (Psalms 91:1–11). What many underestimate is how much God cares about us (Luke 12:22–40)—He has us on His GPS. Furthermore, He is our Potter, we are the clay; so *He reserves prerogative* to protect us as He sees fit for *our specific purpose within His will* *IF* it becomes necessary (Romans 9:18–23).

But, we need to realize *if protection is ours* to receive, He's entitled to expect some kind of performance for that "benefit" He provided—because after all, it's for His glory—and that is our reasonable service (Romans 12:1)! Therein lies the main difference between *protection* and a *place of safety*—protection is provided for the advancement of the witness and warning for the benefit of the greater whole, *not* to just save your skin. If you are in a place of safety, you might as well concede you're on the bench—off the field of play—that is *not God's intent*. He wants you to be that light on the hill, the salt of the earth—witnesses for as long as we draw breath; that is our calling and purpose! And contrary to the opinion of some—He *will expect* those He protects to do just that—glorify Him as a witness in the face of evil! This is the legacy of God's Church down through history. Many thousands have paid the ultimate sacrifice for "standing in the gap"—why should it be any different for us?

So, brethren, "Take you heed, watch and pray: for you know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey ... left his house ... gave authority to his servants ... and commanded the porter to watch. Watch you [*watch out for yourself*] therefore: for you know not when the master of the house comes, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch" (Mark 13:33–37).

So, remain vigilant and available—a willing servant with courage—determined and committed to endure to the end, *regardless of whether we are chosen to be protected, or not*.