



WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT

The Rapture




You may have seen movies about “the Rapture.” Typically, a passenger jet is cruising above the clouds when the pilot and several passengers suddenly disappear. A passenger, still in the aircraft, looks at the empty seat beside him. The seat belt is still buckled, and a book lays open on the seat. It’s a Bible, and the words of Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians 4:16-17 are highlighted:


For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord.




Or you have, assuredly, seen the bumper sticker: *Warning! In case of Rapture this car will be abandoned!* Who hasn’t come across the Left Behind series of books so popular that at their peak they were as likely to be found in grocery, drug, and greeting card stores as in bookstores? The theme of this series is the fate of those humans who are not born-again Christians at the moment the Lord Jesus Christ “first” returns to our planet. When all true believers are safely removed to heaven the rest of humanity are left behind to face seven years of God’s terrifying judgment.



Believers in the Rapture say Jesus will appear in the sky, high above the earth and call to himself all who have accepted Christ as their personal savior, whether they are alive at the time or have died. They will then be led into heaven.



And, to be sure, Christians of all times have lived in the faith-filled hope and expectation of Jesus’ return, a return that will bring to fulfillment all the promises of the reign of God. The Rapture, however, adds the notion that Jesus, in initiating the second coming, will come and take away his Church before his final return. The Rapture, in other words, signals the end of God’s patient offering of grace to the whole world and inaugurates a period of intense judgment against all humanity before the second coming.



According to many who believe in the Rapture, only those who possess a personal relationship with Jesus Christ will experience the Rapture. Many Rapture believers assume that Catholics are missing this relationship. Of course, there is nothing more Catholic than the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died for our salvation. This is the belief of all Christians—Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants.

The Rapture, however, is not the belief of all Christians. It is a new doctrine—one never taught or believed before the nineteenth century—that requires a particular understanding of God’s action in history. It is an understanding that overemphasizes a kind of divine retribution and underemphasizes God’s mercy, and one that ignores the human history and cultures in which the inspired Word of God was written.

But what if it’s in the Bible?

Belief in the Rapture is very popular today, especially in many so-called “non-denominational” churches. While most Christians who profess belief in the Rapture identify themselves as evangelical Christians, other evangelicals reject the idea of the Rapture. Still, due to its popularity in the media, there are now Christians from almost all denominations that take the Rapture for granted as a sure and certain teaching easily found in the Bible.

The ability to find any biblical basis for the Rapture depends largely on how you read the Bible. A Catholic and a fundamentalist will both read a biblical text with faith in its divine inspiration. However, a Catholic is far more likely to also seek understanding about the human authors of biblical texts, the literary styles and traditions they employed in writing, and the concerns they were facing. As Catholics, we profess, in the words of the Nicene Creed, that Jesus Christ, “will come again to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.” We believe that is also the clear and explicit teaching of Sacred Scripture. We also hold, however, that it is a serious misinterpretation of Sacred Scripture to claim that Christians will be rescued by God in a Rapture that removes them from the earth either before or during a period of earthly tribulation.

Those who believe the Rapture is taught in Sacred Scripture cannot point to it in any particular passage or any one book of the Bible. Passages read in one section of one book will be interpreted by using “clues” found in another. The most frequently quoted passages arguing for the Rapture are from Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, the book of Revelation, and the Old Testament book of Daniel. Typically, these passages are lifted from their context and shuffled together in order to create a teaching about a Rapture. Two of these passages are representative of a very special style of Bible literature known as “apocalyptic literature.” When this kind of literature is read in a way that respects their historical and literary contexts, it becomes difficult to find support for any notion of a Rapture as described and taught today.

The message of hope in the Bible’s apocalyptic literature

Apocalyptic literature is the literature of hope in dire circumstances. It is literature written in code language to convey a “secret” message of both judgment and salvation to a people who are facing the threat of destruction



What have you heard about the Rapture?

What do you associate with this teaching or belief?

In your own experience, how has Catholicism helped you develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ?



The Bible is like a library of many different books, written in a wide variety of literary styles and under differing circumstances. Understanding the styles and circumstances can affect the message we hear from God.

at the hands of a powerful enemy. Its use of bizarre, symbolic language was intended to hide a powerful message from outsiders who might be in league with their oppressors. For this reason, apocalyptic literature is often written as if dealing with another time, whether the past or the future. The hidden, secret message encourages those enduring persecution to hold fast to their faith and to face their circumstances with hope.

The message of judgment in biblical apocalyptic literature is a promise that oppressors will be ultimately dealt with in a thorough and decisive manner. It is also a warning to the believing community to stay true to the end, lest they also suffer terrible consequences.

Those who find the Rapture in the Bible read many of its diverse apocalyptic passages together without recognizing the different circumstances of the believers to whom each was addressed. Instead, what should be understood as separate apocalyptic books are seen as a single work of prophecy in which future events are clearly and specifically predicted.

But does the Bible actually say anything about “Rapture”?

When we read apocalyptic passages, the challenge is to try to understand the often bizarre language of these works in the context of both the time in which they were written and within the apocalyptic style of literature to which they belong. Even as the inspired word of God we are not free to treat these passages from the book of Revelation or the book of Daniel as if the human author wrote without any intention of delivering a message to the people of his own time.

The book of Daniel was written to the Jewish people during their experience of severe persecution under Antiochus IV. The apocalyptic portions tell them:

- to hold fast and keep the faith
- that the present evil will not triumph
- that God will reward all who remain faithful
- that not even torture or death is to deter them in their faithful service of God, for even after death, God can still reward them. (It is in the book of Daniel that belief in resurrection from the dead is first explicitly stated [Dan 12:2-3, 9-13].)

As with the book of Daniel, the divinely inspired message to be gleaned from the book of Revelation depends upon how it is read. Those who believe in the Rapture read Revelation as an oracle that predicts in a very precise manner the future details concerning the end of the world. Read with faith as an inspired example of apocalyptic literature, however, the message is one of hope and reassurance to a persecuted people:

- God is still in charge



What kind of messages do you send to those you love during times of stress and suffering?

What kind of message would you want to hear from God?

In 167 B.C., Antiochus IV, a Seleucid emperor, erected a statue to Zeus in the Jewish Temple. (See Dan 9:27; 1 Macc 1:20; 2 Macc 6:1-2.)



- those who persecute them will not go unchallenged; they will be thoroughly and convincingly defeated by Almighty God and Jesus Christ
- the risen Jesus, who already reigns in heaven, will certainly and ultimately bring the justice of God's kingdom to earth.

While Revelation was written to address the needs of a specific people at a specific time (the struggling Christian communities of Asia Minor near the end of the first century, A.D.), its message is nevertheless one of profound hope for Christians of all times, in all places, especially for those in dire circumstances. But it is not meant to be a literal prophecy of future events.

The opening section of Revelation is of critical importance to its interpretation. In it, John, the human author, has a vision of Christ who dictates to him seven letters, each one addressed to a specific Christian community in Asia Minor. Scholars have noted that all of the letters to the seven churches contain historical details that are specific to the location to which the letter is addressed. Only a historian or the people of the time and place addressed in the letters would be familiar with those details.

Those who believe in the Rapture often maintain that the churches addressed in these letters represent specific time periods in the history of Christianity. The letter addressed to the Church in Philadelphia (in Asia Minor) is read as though it were addressed to those future Christians who will participate in the Rapture. The Church in Philadelphia is told, "Because you have kept my message of endurance, I will keep you safe in the time of trial that is going to come to the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth" (Rev 3:10). While the letter itself makes no mention of how they will be kept safe, the letter is mistakenly taken as evidence that Paul's description of the Lord's return in First Thessalonians must occur before the time of testing in the "Great Tribulation."

The Rapture and "dispensationalism"

Christians had been reading Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians for 1800 years before anyone questioned that Paul was describing the Second Coming. Those who now see in it a Rapture before a period known as the Great Tribulation do so by applying a unique method to reading the Scriptures. They read selected parts of Daniel, First Thessalonians, and Revelation almost as a single piece that explicitly maps out end-time events. This approach has led to a view of all human history known as "dispensationalism."

Dispensationalism is the belief that God has divided human history into several distinct segments, each governed by a unique set of rules instituted by God. While the basic rules of morality do not change from dispensation to dispensation, how God deals with humanity is believed to change, as well as how humans are to seek and obtain favor from God.



What does having hope in Christ mean for you in the circumstances in which you live?



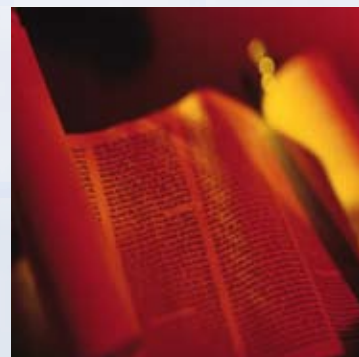
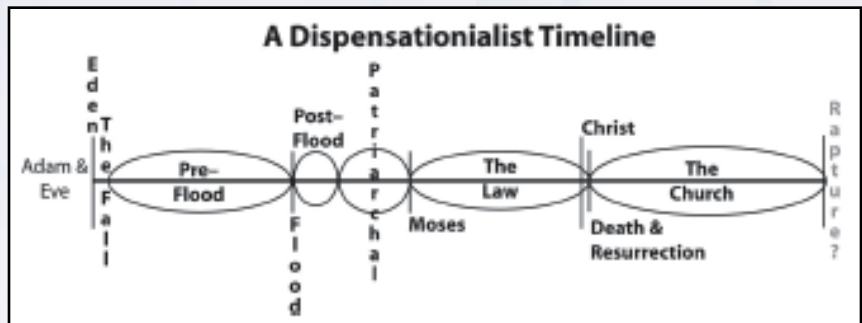
Dispensationalists believe the time after Adam's fall to Noah, from Noah to the Patriarchs, from the Patriarchs to Moses, and from Moses to Christ, were all distinct dispensations during which God had different expectations and different rules for dealing with a sinful humanity. The time of the Church represents yet another dispensation, and there are more to follow after the Rapture. In contrast, most traditional Christian teaching has stressed that the grace offered through Christ is the ultimate communication of the divine will for humanity and that it will not be replaced in a new dispensation during human history.

According to the teachings of dispensationalism, however, a new dispensation is expected to follow the disappearance, or Rapture, of the true Church. God's plan of salvation will then no longer be focused on humanity as a whole but be centered on the nation of Israel. This dispensation will be very brief, lasting only seven years, and will be marked by the outpouring of God's wrath against all the nations of the earth except Israel. At the end of these seven years of tribulation, Christ will return "again" to begin a thousand-year reign (known as the Millennial Kingdom) of glorious peace over all the earth.

Those who teach the Rapture insist that both the book of Revelation and the book of Daniel prophesy that all humanity living on earth must endure the wrath of God during these last seven years. At the same time, according to their beliefs, it is inconceivable that the Church would be subject to the wrath of God. Therefore, the Rapture must take place first and, for that reason, the promise Paul makes to the Thessalonians—that at the end of time the dead in Christ and the living faithful will be caught up in the air with Christ—must occur before God's wrath is poured out on the earth. While Scripture never explicitly states when Christ's return will occur, the belief in dispensationalism coupled with a problematic interpretation of Revelation lead to this popular scenario.

Is God waiting to punish the Earth?

More than just Catholic theologians are also troubled by the literal acceptance of a seven-year period at the end of history, known as the Great Tribulation. Belief in the Great Tribulation assumes that at the end of time God will unreservedly punish all the inhabitants of earth with war, disease, pestilence, earthquakes, and various other natural disasters. This is an extremely literal interpretation of biblical apocalyptic literature which are passages written in some of the most symbolic language found in all of Sacred Scripture.



Has what God expects of us changed over time, or have we changed in our understanding of what God asks of us?





What does the Bible say about Christians and suffering? Read some or all of the following passages: Acts 14:22; Rom 8:17-18; 2 Cor 1:5-7; Phil 1:29; 3:8-10; Col 1:24-29; 2 Thess 1:5-10; Heb 10:32-34; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 2:19; 3:14-18; 4:13-16; Rev 2:10.

Not only wars, but also many natural disasters inflict untold suffering year after year on Christians and non-Christians alike. What ought a Christian's response be to those who suffer in these tragedies?

What is the difference between the Rapture and the belief in the return of Christ?

We live in an age when mass communication makes us increasingly aware of the terrible suffering of much of humanity at any given time and in many places on our planet. The assumption that God punishes us through these means undermines a core teaching throughout the Christian tradition that regards the suffering of Christ as a sign of God's compassionate desire to heal our wounds.

In apocalyptic literature, such wholesale threats of divine punishment are intended to convey to those who are persecuted the sure and certain reality of God's justice. It is, in the first place, the assurance that God recognizes their suffering and, secondly, that God opposes the injustice that is responsible and will bring an end to it. Asking God to turn the hearts of persecutors and to bless our enemies (Matthew 5:44) is a far better reflection of God's unceasing compassion as found in Christian revelation. What would have become of Paul if God chose violence as a response to persecution?

A literal acceptance of this supposed period of torment as part of God's plan for earth is troubling enough; that it is often coupled with the belief that God would ensure that all Christians will escape this suffering is baffling. Catholics are in no way alone in believing that Christians are called to bring God's compassion to those who suffer in the world, regardless of whether those who suffer are sinners or not. Paul tells us in the Letter to the Romans, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (5:4). Christians and non-Christians alike suffer from many maladies and oppressive circumstances in the world. God's presence is made known to us all, not through acts of punishment, but through acts of compassion.

How to read Paul's message of hope

What about those of us who are faithful Catholics wanting to read the section of First Thessalonians quoted above with faith and understanding in the twenty-first century? We should be able to receive its message of hope and expectation of the Lord's return with the same joy that the Thessalonians themselves would have received it long ago. However, we cannot help but be mindful that Christians have been living in joyful expectation of the Lord's return for two thousand years. Our Lord's own caution to his first disciples is well taken: "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matt 24:36).

When Catholics read Paul's reassuring words concerning the Lord's return to gather the living and dead in First Thessalonians 4:13-17 we are careful to read it in light of its own literary and historical context. It is the first known example of a letter of Christian encouragement from the apostle Paul. Not only is it Sacred Scripture, First Thessalonians is a great treasure for anyone interested in early Christianity. It was probably written around 50 A.D., and



some scholars even date it as much as five years earlier. Either way, it is the very earliest document found in the New Testament, and the very first written account anywhere of faith in Jesus Christ and the importance of his death and resurrection.

The mainstream of Catholic biblical scholarship would regard Paul's words as a clear statement of his own joyous expectation that the Lord's return was near. Paul includes himself among the "we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord" (1 Thess 4:15). Had divine inspiration informed him that there would be at least seven different ages that the Church must pass through before the Lord's coming, he could not have counted himself among those who would still be living.

In the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, noted Catholic Bible scholar Raymond Collins suggests this exposes just how imminent Paul and other apostles believed the Lord's return was when they first preached the Gospel to Gentiles. It had evidently never occurred to Paul until the writing of this letter that he needed to teach them about death and what it meant for a follower of Jesus.

Today, a long life and a peaceful death are the hope of most Christians. We also know that we live in a world fraught with natural disasters, wars, terrorism, and even the possibility of nuclear holocaust. But we do not need a Rapture to face the future with faith. God's Word, the Bible, is a continuous source of comfort, courage, and challenge. We wait in joyful hope the return of our Savior, but we do not forget the many ways the Good News of his first coming calls us to love and serve our neighbor—and those we might otherwise consider our "enemy"—today and tomorrow.

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Scripture study, with the right aids and done in the context of faith, can be a wonderful source of joy and renewal in the faith. The study of God's Word is more important than ever for Catholics as popular misunderstandings of Scripture or interpretations of Scripture meant to serve only the specific beliefs of a particular denomination reach us through the mass media or even word of mouth. Why not consider joining or starting a small group Bible study under the auspices of your local Catholic parish?



**Complete this sentence:
When I consider the second
coming of Christ, I feel . . .**

**How do Advent celebrations
in your faith community help
prepare you for the Lord's return?**

*Advent is a liturgical season when
we prepare for Christ's coming as
an infant, at our death, and at the
end of time.*



Glossary of Terms

Apocalyptic Literature: Those events associated with the ultimate destiny of the world, or events which are so decisive and dramatic that they resemble those associated with the ultimate destiny of the world.

Dispensationalism: The belief that God has divided human history into specific segments, each of which are distinguished by a unique means by which humanity can approach God and enjoy God's favor.

Evangelical Christians: There is no official definition of an evangelical Christian, though those who claim to be evangelicals frequently belong to conservative, Protestant denominations, profess a personal relationship with Christ, and believe in the Bible as the sole source of revelation. The term "evangelical" is also usually associated with a belief in the importance of leading others to embrace a similar faith.

Fundamentalist: While many evangelical Christians might also be considered fundamentalists, a fundamentalist is usually distinguished by a strict adherence to a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible in all matters, whether they are theological, historical, scientific, or of any other matter.

The Tribulation: The seven-year period of great suffering on earth following the Rapture. The "Great Tribulation" is usually considered to be the last three and a half years of this seven-year period of divine judgment against the world.

Millennial Kingdom: Those who read and accept the book of Revelation in a literal fashion often speak of a thousand-year period in which Christ will reign as king over all the earth.

Rapture: The belief that those who profess a personal belief in Christ will be removed from the earth in order to spare them during a time in which "the wrath of God" will be displayed against all the peoples of earth.



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