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What You Need to Know About The Rapture of the Church: Part 1

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

During the final three Mondays of this semester (April 14, 21, 28) we will briefly overview what many Bible students believe to be the next great event in prophecy, namely, **THE RAPTURE!** The proposed game plan is as follows:

APRIL 14

1. Introduction
2. The Meaning of the Rapture
3. An Illustration of the Rapture
4. Two Key N. T. References in Regard to the Rapture
5. The Holy Spirit and the Rapture

APRIL 21

1. Old Testament Believers and the Rapture
2. Two O.T. Foreshadows of the Rapture
3. Contrasting the Rapture with the Revelation
4. The Five Views in Regard to the Nature of the Rapture
5. Challenges of the Believer in Light of the Rapture

APRIL 28

1. Possible Reactions Following the Rapture
2. Various Views in Regard to an Unsaved Person Being Able to Accept Jesus Following the Rapture
3. Three Views in Regard to Babies and Young Children at the Rapture
4. Four Commands to Keep While Awaiting the Rapture
5. An Event Which Could Well Trigger the Rapture
6. A Grand and Glorious Conclusion in Regard to the Rapture

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW REGARDING THE RAPTURE

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1975 I signed up for a course in Historical Geography, which was offered by the American Institute of Holy Land Studies, located on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, Israel.

This was also the time when the American Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger was flying in and out of Jerusalem, Damascus, Ammon, and Cairo, attempting to secure a peace treaty for that troubled part of the world.

One afternoon during that summer I stood at a bus stop near the Jaffa Gate along with some Israeli citizens, seeking transportation to downtown Jerusalem. As we waited, a car suddenly sped by with a sign on its bumper that read:

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO JERUSALEM SOON?

All of us saw this sign, prompting one of the citizens to address a rabbi who was also waiting for the bus as follows:

"Did you see that sign? You know, I haven't read the *Jerusalem Post* this morning, but is Henry coming again?"

The rabbi responded that he did not know. Well, ignoring Alexander Pope's wise insight that fools rush in where angels fear to tread, I approached the rabbi, introduced myself and suggested to him the strong possibility, indeed probability, that the sign writer may not have had Henry in mind! "Oh," said the rabbi, "If not Henry, then who?"

Taking a deep breath I told him that he probably wouldn't believe my answer, and sure enough, he didn't!

James Walker Whitcomb's beautiful song offers the probable correct answer to the sign maker's question:

Jesus may come today, Glad day! Glad day!
And I would see my Friend;
Dangers and troubles would end
If Jesus should come today.

Chorus

*Glad day! Glad day! Is it the crowning day?
I'll live for today, nor anxious be, Jesus my Lord, I soon shall see;
Glad day! Glad day! Is it the crowning day?*

I may go home today, Glad day! Glad day!
Seemeth I hear their song;
Hail to the radiant throng!
If I should go home today.

Why should I anxious be? Glad day! Glad day!
Lights appear on the shore,
Storms will affright never more,
For He is at hand today.

Faithful I'll be today, Glad day! Glad day!
And I will freely tell
Why I should love Him so well,
For He is my all today.

THE MEANING OF THE RAPTURE

The next great event in prophecy is often referred to as the rapture. Some time ago I received a letter from a very upset viewer of the "Old Time Gospel Hour" TV program. In essence the letter read:

"You people down there in Virginia bother me. Your choir sings songs about an event called the rapture. The TV preacher preaches sermons on the rapture. And you—you've actually written a book on the rapture. Now my concern is this: You folks are singing, preaching, and writing about a word that's not even found in the Bible!"

In answering this letter I agreed that he was indeed correct, inasmuch as the word rapture is nowhere to be found among the 774,747 words in the King James Version of the Bible. But I then pointed out that neither are the words Trinity, demon, Bible, or grandfather mentioned in that version of the Word of God. But there is a Trinity, there are demons, grandfathers do exist, and the rapture is a reality!

Actually, the word rapture is from *rapere*, found in the expression "caught up" in the Latin translation of 1 Thess. 4:17. However, if one so desires, the rapture could be scripturally referred to as the *harpazo*, which is the Greek word translated "caught up" in 1 Thess. 4:17. The identical phrase is found in Acts 8:39, where Philip was caught away by the Holy Spirit, and in 2 Cor. 12:2, 4, when Paul was caught up into the third heaven. Or if you'd rather, the rapture could be known as the *allasso*, from the Greek translated "changed" in 1 Cor. 15:51, 52. *Allasso* is also used in describing the final renewal and transformation of the heavens and the earth. (See Heb. 1:12.) So then, use whatever name suits your fancy. Of course, the important thing is not what you name it, but rather, can you claim it? That is, will you participate in it?

Thus, the next scheduled event predicted in the Word of God will take place where the Savior himself appears in the air to catch up his own!

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE RAPTURE

A man is cleaning out his garage and discovers a small box filled with a mixture of tiny iron nails, wooden splinters, sawdust, and pieces of paper. Suppose he desires to save the nails. How could he quickly separate them from the wooden splinters? If a magnet

was available, the task would be quite simple. He would simply position the magnet over the box. Immediately all those objects possessing the same physical nature would be caught up to meet the magnet in the air.

If his wife were watching all this, spotting a particular object in the box, she might say: "Look at the sharp point on that! I bet the magnet will zap that up!" But unknown to her, that tiny item might be a sharp sliver of wood which would not be taken up. Or, she might conclude: "That fragment over there is a piece of wood for sure." However, in reality it could be a "backslidden" nail with some rust on it. But in both cases the magnet would quickly and accurately discern the character of the piece and act accordingly.

When Christ appears, He will not come especially for black or white people, for Catholics or Protestants, for Jews or Gentiles, but only for those individuals who possess the same nature as Himself. One of the most thrilling things God does for each repenting sinner is to give him or her the very mind of Christ and a brand new creation! (See 1 Cor. 2:16; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24; 2 Pet. 1:4).

TWO KEY NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES IN REGARD TO THE RAPTURE

- John 14:1-3

The first mention of the rapture in the Bible is found in John 14:1-3.

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

While the Old Testament prophets spoke in glowing terms of the Messiah's eventual return to earth and the establishment of his perfect kingdom upon the earth (Isa. 2:2-5; 9:6, 7; 11:1-6; 32:1; 35:1-10; etc.), they knew absolutely nothing of the event whereby God himself would (for a brief period of time) remove his people from off the earth. For whom will Jesus come? It is the view of this theological summary that Christ will come again for his church, which is composed of all saved people from Pentecost up to the rapture itself. (Other passages that speak of the rapture are 1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:20; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28.)

Thus, even though Jesus spoke of the Rapture, it would remain unknown until the later writings of the apostle Paul:

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed"(1 Cor. 15:51, 52).

- 1 Thess. 4 and 1 Cor. 15

The two most important passages describing the rapture are found in 1 Thess. 4 and 1 Cor. 15. Let us briefly examine these two passages.

A. 1 Thess. 4:13-17:

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall 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 so we shall always be with the Lord"(1 Thess. 4:13-17, NASB).

In this great passage Paul answers a question that had bothered the Thessalonians. When he was among them (Acts 17) they had doubtless learned many precious truths about the glorious return of Christ to earth someday and the establishing of his kingdom. In fact, to some this all seemed to be just around the corner. But since the apostle's departure, a number of believers had died. They obviously then would not be on earth at the time of Christ's return. Did this mean they would miss everything? This then is the background to the great rapture passage before us here in chapter 4. These six verses thus present for us:

1. A realization: *"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope"*(1 Thess. 4:13). This is but one of four key areas that Paul would not have us to be ignorant. The other three are:
 - a. The events in the Old Testament (1 Cor. 10:1)

- b. The restoration of Israel (Rom. 11:25)
- c. The manifestation of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1)

2. A repose: *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him"* (1 Thess. 4:14). The death of a believer is looked upon as a peaceful sleep. (See Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 2 Pet. 3:4.)

However, it should be quickly stated that this verse in no way teaches soul sleep. That unscriptural doctrine is refuted by Matt. 17:3 and Rev. 6:9-11.

3. A revelation: *"For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent (precede) them which are asleep"* (1 Thess. 4:15). Note Paul's usage of the pronoun "we." The apostle apparently hoped at this time to be here when Christ came. He would later know otherwise. (See 2 Tim. 4:6.)
4. A return: *"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God"* (1 Thess. 4:16). It is often supposed that Michael will be this archangel on the basis of Dan. 12:1, 2. However, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Gabriel will be the angel involved at this time because of the vital part he played in those events surrounding the first coming of Christ. (See Luke 1:19, 26; Matt. 1:20; 2:13.)

Note the little phrase, "with a shout." This is the final of three instances in which Christ shouted. On each occasion a resurrection took place!

- a. The shout at Bethany.
"And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:43, 44).
- b. The shout at Calvary.
"Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent

in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent: And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose. And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many”(Matt. 27:50-53).

5. A resurrection: *“... and the dead in Christ shall rise first”* (1 Thess. 4:16).
6. A rapture: *“Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds ...”*(1 Thess. 4:17).
7. A reunion: *“... to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord”*(1 Thess. 4:17).
8. A reassurance: *“Wherefore comfort one another with these words”* (1 Thess. 4:18).

B. 1 Cor. 15:51-53:

“Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

Dr. John Walvoord writes:

One of the two main passages on the doctrine of the rapture in the New Testament is found in 1 Cor. 15:51-58. In many respects, this passage complements the other major passage in 1 Thess. 4:13-18. In 1 Thess. 4, the question was whether those who had died in Christ would have the same benefits and experience as those who were translated. In 1 Cor. 15, the question is whether those who are translated will have the same experience and benefits as those who have died and who are resurrected.

Observe some phrases from 1 Cor. 15:51, 53:

1. *“I shew you a mystery.”*

What is this mystery or secret concerning the rapture? Let us suppose you began reading the Bible in Genesis chapter 1, and read through 1 Corinthians chapter 14. If you stopped your reading there, you would already have learned about many important facts, such as creation, man's sin, the flood, Bethlehem, Calvary, the resurrection, and the existence of heaven and hell. But you would be forced to conclude that a Christian could get to heaven only after physically dying. You would of course note the two exceptions of Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), but apart from these it would be clear that believers have to travel the path of the grave to reach the goal of glory. But now the secret is out, and here it is: Millions of Christians will someday reach heaven without dying! *"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed"*(1 Cor. 15:51). This, then, is the mystery of the rapture!

H. L. Turner's gospel hymn, *Christ Returneth*, speaks eloquently of Christ's sudden return, especially verse four which is, in essence, a musical summary regarding the mystery of the Rapture!

It may be at morn, when the day is awaking,
When sunlight thru darkness and shadow is breaking,
That Jesus will come in the fullness of glory
To receive from the world His own.

Chorus

*O Lord Jesus, how long, how long
Ere we shout the glad song
Christ returneth! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen,
Hallelujah! Amen.*

It may be at midday, it may be at twilight,
It may be, perchance, that the blackness of midnight
Will burst into light in the blaze of His glory,
When Jesus receives His own.

While hosts cry Hosanna, from heaven descending,
With glorified saints and the angels attending,
With grace on His brow, like a halo of glory,
Will Jesus receive His own.

O joy! O delight! Should we go without dying,
No sickness, no sadness, no dread and no crying,
Caught up thru the clouds with our Lord into glory,
When Jesus receives His own.

2. *"We shall be changed ... in the twinkling of an eye."*
3. *"For the trumpet shall sound."* In at least three biblical passages concerning the rapture a trumpet is mentioned (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 4:1). How are we to understand this? Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost writes, "the phrase 'the trump of God' is significant, for in the Old Testament the trumpet was used for two things—to summon to battle and to summon to worship." (*Prophecy for Today*, Zondervan, p. 30).

Which of the two meanings, however, is involved at the rapture?
Dr. Pentecost suggests that both meanings are in mind, one directed toward angels and the other to believers.

- a. To angels the trumpet blast will mean "Prepare for battle!" According to various New Testament passages (John 14:30; Eph. 6:12; 1 John 5:19) this present world lies in the hands of the evil one, the devil, and the very atmosphere is filled with his wicked power and presence. Satan will obviously resist believers being caught up through his domain and becoming freed from his wicked worldly system. Therefore, the trumpet commands the angels, "Prepare for battle! Clear the way for the catching up of those resurrected bodies and those living believers!"
- b. To all believers the trumpet blast will mean "Prepare to worship!" In Num. 10:1-3 we read, *"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Make thee two trumpets of silver ... that thou mayest use them for the calling to the assembly and when they shall blow with them, all the assembly shall assemble themselves to thee at the door of the tabernacle ..."*

Regarding the rapture trumpet, Num. 10:4 seems to be especially significant: *"If they blow but with one trumpet, then the princes, which are heads of the thousands of Israel,*

shall gather themselves unto thee." At the rapture only one trumpet is sounded, suggesting that in God's sight all believers occupy a place of utmost importance. We are all "head princes" in the mind of God.

4. *"For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."*
 - a. Corruptible: that supernatural act whereby the bodies of departed believers will be resurrected.
 - b. Mortal: that supernatural act whereby the bodies of living believers will be transformed.

To grasp this concept, let us compare a human being to an automobile. In this illustration the car will represent the body and the driver will represent the soul. Although the driver/soul, car/body are all closely related, they are nevertheless not one and the same! The driver has a car, but he is a person. The soul has a body, but he is a person. To continue the analogy, when the car breaks down, the driver makes his exit, resulting in his automobile being placed in a junkyard. When the body breaks down (physical death), the soul (person) makes his exit, resulting in his flesh being placed in a grave yard. In the body/soul illustration the believer departs to be with Christ, awaiting the resurrection of a new body. In fact, there is some scriptural suggestion he may receive a temporary body until the old one is resurrected. See 2 Cor. 5:1; Rev. 6:9-11.

Thus to recap what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:51-53 concerning the bodies of departed believers and those of living believers: *"This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."*

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE RAPTURE

"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. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the

rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming" (2 Thess. 2:1-8, N.I.V.)

The key question here is this: Who or what is this person or entity who—even at this moment—is restraining the appearance of Antichrist? Down through the centuries many candidates have been suggested. Here is a partial list:

- The Roman Empire
- The Jewish state
- The apostle Paul
- The preaching of the gospel
- Human government
- Satan
- Elijah
- Some unknown heavenly being
- Michael the archangel
- The Holy Spirit
- The church

St. Augustine was transparent concerning the restrainer when he said, "I frankly confess I do not know what He means." We can sympathize with Augustine, but we believe that several points help us identify this unnamed power.

1. The Greek word *katecho* ("what is holding him back," "the one who is holding it back") (2 Thess. 2:6-7) means to hold back or restrain.
2. The one who is holding back or restraining is both neuter and masculine: neuter "what is holding him back" (a principle); masculine "the one who is holding it back" (a person).
3. Whatever this restrainer is must be removable.
4. Finally, it must be powerful enough to hold back the outbreak of evil under Antichrist.

In answering these four questions, only one view is satisfactory. Just ask yourself this one thing: Who would be able to restrain evil and hold back the appearance of Antichrist? The answer of course is God. In this case it is God the Holy Spirit who is at work during this age in and through God's people, the church.

For these reasons, we believe the restrainer in 2 Thess. 2:6-7 is not just the Holy Spirit or just the church. Rather, the one holding back this vast tide of evil is God the Holy Spirit, present in the church of Jesus Christ. There are four strong reasons for making this identification:

1. This restraint requires omnipotent power.
2. This is the only view that adequately explains the change in gender in 2 Thess. 2:6-7. In Greek, the word *pneuma* (Spirit) is neuter. But the Holy Spirit is also consistently referred to by the masculine pronoun *He*—especially in John 14-16.
3. Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit as the One who restrains evil—both in the world at large (Gen. 6:3), and in the heart of the believer (Gal. 5:16-17).
4. The church and its mission of proclaiming and portraying the gospel is the primary instrument the Holy Spirit uses to restrain evil in this age. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, both individually and corporately.

In summary, then, the influence and ministry of the Holy Spirit, indwelling and working through His people in this present age, is the power that holds back the dark flood of evil, which is ready to be released and sweep across our world.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse offers a very practical application in regard to all this:

Well, what is keeping the Antichrist from putting in his appearance on the world stage? *You* are! You and every other member of the body of Christ on earth. The presence of the church of Jesus Christ is the restraining force that refuses to allow the man of lawlessness to be revealed. True, it is the Holy Spirit who is the real restrainer. But as both 1 Cor. 3:16 and 6:19 teach, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer. The believer's body is the temple of the Spirit of God. Put all believers together then, with the Holy Spirit indwelling each of us, and you have a formidable restraining force.

For when the church is removed at the rapture, the Holy Spirit goes with the church insofar as His restraining power is concerned. His work in this age of

grace will be ended. Henceforth, during the Great Tribulation, the Holy Spirit will still be here on earth, of course—for how can you get rid of God?—but He will not be indwelling believers as He does now. Rather, He will revert to His Old Testament ministry of “coming upon” special people.

(*Thessalonians: An Expository Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1977, pp. 99, 100)

A concluding thought:

One of the truly great construction accomplishments in American history is Hoover Dam, located on the border of Arizona and Nevada, completed in 1935 to control and harness the mighty waters of the Colorado River. It rises 726 feet above the lowest part of its foundation. This is equivalent to a 72-story office building! 3,250,000 cubic yards of concrete were used to form the dam. This would pave a standard highway from San Francisco to New York City. Its thickness ranges from 45 feet at the crest to 660 feet at its base. The length is 1244 feet.

This powerful dam thus holds back literally billions and billions of angry, swirling waters, allowing only a controlled amount to escape through its exits. If the unthinkable ever happened and the dam broke, portions of several western states would literally be inundated, drowning scores of thousands of people!

With all of this in mind, it can be stated the Holy Spirit functions in the real sense of the word as a divine dam, both restraining and controlling the waters of sin and iniquity, allowing only a portion to pass through the exits involved.