

The Rapture

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible except where otherwise indicated. Only very archaic terms have been substituted, between brackets, with correlating terms from the New King James Version (NKJV). All pronouns referring to the Godhead are capitalized.

The rapture is the secret meeting between Christ and His church, as opposed to His public appearance when every eye shall see Him.

Promise of the rapture

Biblical teachings about the rapture, the end-time restoration of the nation of Israel and the millennial kingdom have, through various phases of church history, been spiritualized and brushed aside by theologians. Faith in these promises has, however, been revived time and again to become a strong motivating power in the lives of believers.

We are living in a time which sees the fulfillment of many biblical prophecies. This is an indication of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ. When people accept the prophetic word and study it, they achieve greater clarity regarding future events. They see the unfolding of a world scene which is, on the one hand, very dark indeed and leads to awful judgments, while on the other hand, a joyous hope blazes in the hearts of true believers.

This hope comes from the knowledge that they will escape the coming judgments if they are truly born again. The promise of escape is the good news element in the prophecies. It is the blessed hope of Christ's return to which every believer should cling in these dark days (*Titus 2:13*).

Two phases

So as to correctly understand the Second Coming of Christ, we have to clearly discern its two phases, i.e. the return of Christ for His saints (i.e. all born-again believers) and His coming with His saints. During the first phase the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom will be unexpected, like a thief in the night. He will meet His bride in the air and quickly take her away to heavenly places (*John 14:2-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17*).

During the second phase, His appearance will be public and every eye will see Him (*Revelation 1:7*). He will be accompanied by His bride, as well as a heavenly army, and will set foot upon the Mount of Olives (*Zechariah 14:4-5; Revelation 19:11-15*).

The two phases of the Second Coming can also be discerned from the respective Greek terms which are used in the original language. The first phase, in which the Lord Jesus Christ will return privately to catch away His bride, is referred to as *parousia*. This term indicates His physical presence. After His *parousia* He will never again be separated from His bride, the church. At that event He will appear to all those who eagerly await Him for complete salvation (*Hebrews 9:28*). Thereafter, they will remain

with Him forever.

The second phase of Christ's coming is known as His apokalipse or faneros – that is His public appearing or becoming visible. This time, He will not come secretly, as He did for His bride alone at the parousia, but will be publicly revealed as King and Judge of the world. That is the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints (*Zechariah 14:5*). Christ and His saints will be revealed to the world in glory at the same time: "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory" (*Colossians 3:4*).

It is quite obvious that Christians could not accompany the Lord Jesus and be revealed in their glorified bodies unless they had already been united with Him at an earlier stage. The whole creation is awaiting this revelation, because harmony and ideal conditions will prevail on earth during the reign of Christ and His saints (*Romans 8:19*). The many promises of abundance and blessing in every sphere of life will then be fulfilled (*Joel 3:18; Micah 4:3-4; Amos 9:13-15*).

The Bridegroom comes to fetch His bride

During His parousia, which will of necessity precede the visible coming, the heavenly Bridegroom comes only to fetch His bride. On this occasion He will not show Himself to the millions of other people on earth at all.

In biblical times the Jewish bridegroom, after his betrothal, would depart for a lengthy period to prepare an apartment in the house of his father for his bride and himself. Having done so, he would then return to her home secretly at night to be reunited with her and take her with him to his father's house, where the marriage feast would be held. This is analogous to Jesus preparing a place for us in the Father's house and returning to take us there as promised: "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" (*John 14:2-3*).

Christ's coming at His parousia will be the fulfillment of that promise, also of the promise which was made to His followers at the time of His ascension: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven" (*Acts 1:11*).

After His resurrection, Jesus was seen only by believers. At His ascension He was separated from them, and with the rapture He will be re-united with them. The rest of mankind will be left on earth because, by their own neglect, they will not be among the born-again believers who belong to Jesus and with whom He has a special appointment: "I tell you, in that night there shall be two... in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left. Two women shall be grinding together; the one shall be taken, and the other left" (*Luke 17:34-35*).

Glorification

The glorification of Christians will begin at the moment when the trumpet is sounded, the deceased

saints raised from the dead in incorruptible bodies, and the living saints transformed in an instant to receive their glorified bodies: “Behold, I show 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” (1 *Corinthians* 15:51-53).

When Christ raises the dead and changes the living at the rapture, both will be instantly clothed with immortal bodies like His own, immediately prior to meeting Him in the air: “For our [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body” (*Philippians* 3:20-21).

Caught up

Immediately after the deceased believers have been raised and they, with the living believers, have been clothed with glorified bodies, Christ will take them all up to heaven to be ever with Him. That is a clear promise of God in His Word: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. 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 [go before those who] are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall 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 which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 *Thessalonians* 4:14-17).

Note that the above-mentioned meeting will take place in the air and involves only born-again Christians. The Lord Jesus does not set foot on the Mount of Olives and reveal Himself to the world at this stage, but returns immediately with His bride to His Father’s house in heaven.

The word caught up, that is used by Paul in 1 *Thessalonians* 4:17 (*harpazo* in Greek), clearly means to be raptured or snatched away rapidly. This word is also used to describe the action by which an eagle snatches and flies off rapidly with its prey.

There is, therefore, no truth in the allegation by some critics that the word rapture does not appear in the Bible. The word *harpazo* can be translated as:

- Catch up,
- Rapture, or
- Snatch away swiftly.

In his internationally acclaimed *Studies in the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, K.S. Wuest says:

“HARPAZO. This is a Greek word that has various meanings. It is not translated by one uniform English word. The meanings are as follows: to seize; to carry off by force; to claim for one’s self eagerly; to snatch out or away. It was used proverbially in the sense of to rescue from the danger of destruction. It was used also of divine power transferring a

person marvelously and swiftly from one place to another.

“The word is used in *Matthew 11:12, 13:19; John 6:15, 10:12, 28-29; Acts 8:39, 23:10; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Jude 23; Revelation 12:15*. The procedure in Greek exegesis when a word has a number of meanings is to use only those meanings which are in accord with the context. For instance, in the case of *harpazo* in its use in connection with the wolf (*John 10:12*), it would not do to interpret it in the sense of rescuing from the danger of destruction. It would mean here to seize and carry off by force, to claim for one’s self eagerly. Study these places where the word occurs, using as many meanings as agree with the context. Pay special attention to *1 Thessalonians 4:17*, and see how much new truth you obtain regarding the Rapture of the Church.”

The following are a few examples of Scripture verses in which the term *harpazo* is used. Please note that the basic meaning of the term *harpazo* is of being removed swiftly and purposefully from one place to another:

- “Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more” (*Acts 8:39*).
- “And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle” (*Acts 23:10*).
- “I knew a man in Christ [more than] fourteen years ago... such a one was caught up to the third heaven” (*2 Corinthians 12:2*).
- “We who are alive... shall be caught up... to meet the Lord in the air” (*1 Thessalonians 4:17*).
- “And she brought forth a male Child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her Child was caught up unto God, and to His throne” (*Revelation 12:5*).

The first resurrection

A concept which is closely related to the rapture is that of the first resurrection. At this event, the Lord Jesus will come to raise only born-again believers; this is why Paul says that “the dead in Christ shall rise first” (*1 Thessalonians 4:16*).

Nothing whatsoever is said here about the resurrection of the unbelieving, unjust dead. Since a first resurrection also implies a second, and since we know that the just as well as the unjust will be raised (*Acts 24:15*), it follows that the unjust dead will be raised at a later resurrection.

Revelation 20 says that at least a thousand years will separate the two resurrections. John refers to all the saints who will be raised in the first resurrection to reign as kings with Christ during the millennium: “...and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection” (*Revelation 20:4-6*).

Those who share in the first resurrection are declared blessed; therefore, to be declared part of this resurrection signifies a very privileged status.

Various other Scripture references offer irrefutable evidence that born-again believers will be resurrected first. Paul refers to a strictly chronological order of resurrections: “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who slept. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at His coming. Then cometh the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father” (*1 Corinthians 15:20-24*).

Between the resurrection of Christ as firstfruits and the resurrection of the born-again just at His coming (the first resurrection), the entire dispensation of the church, presently approaching two millennia, will elapse. It is clear from *Revelation 20* that the further one thousand years of Christ’s reign will elapse between the resurrection of the just and the end of this present earth, when the unjust dead will be raised (the second resurrection) to face the final judgment at the great white throne.

The following are expressions which refer to the first resurrection only:

- The first resurrection (*Revelation 20:6*).
- The resurrection of the children of God (*Luke 20:36*).
- The resurrection of those who died in Christ (*1 Thessalonians 4:16*).
- The resurrection of the just (*Luke 14:13-14*).
- A better resurrection (*Hebrews 11:35*).
- The resurrection to life (*John 5:29*).
- The resurrection from the dead through Jesus (*Acts 4:2*).

When the resurrection from the dead of either Christ or of Christians is referred to in Scripture, the Greek expression *ek nekroon* is used. It means from among the dead and is only used when other dead are not raised at the same time, but are left behind in their graves. This expression, which is used 49 times in the New Testament – 34 of which refer to the resurrection of Christ Himself – is not used even once when the second resurrection is referred to. When the latter, i.e. the raising of the unjust dead, is referred to, *toon nekroon*, meaning of the dead, is used instead.

At the rapture, the just will be raised from among the unjust dead and, together with the living just, who will be instantly changed, both will rise in glorified bodies to meet Christ in the air. The unjust (unsaved) dead will remain in their graves, since they did not “die in the Lord” (*Revelation 14:13*).

Escape

In the light of the circumstances which will prevail on earth, the rapture will offer Christians an escape from the threatening judgments. As the moment of the rapture nears, it will be a dark time of massive spiritual deception. Evangelical Christians will be declared unchristian, unloving and judgmental, and will be despised. They will be regarded as prophets of doom because they proclaim the imminent judgments of God which will fall upon the world during the great tribulation. They will also be regarded as disloyal to the Christian cause because of their unwillingness to join the ecumenical movement and accept the unitary reforms of the New Age Movement.

As the time for the revelation of the Antichrist approaches, true Christians will be subjected to immense pressure, intimidation and threats. However, they should take courage in the light of the promise that the truly born-again children of God will escape the coming tribulation period: "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye 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*; According to *Revelation 3:10*, we will be kept from the hour of tribulation).

Advocates of the false peace of the humanistically inspired and antichristian new world order will, however, not escape the great tribulation: "For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (*1 Thessalonians 5:3*).

In the first of these two scriptures reference is made to a group that will escape the coming judgments of God on earth, and in the second case a group that will be caught unawares and will certainly not escape the sudden destruction. The first group put their trust in the Lord and His Word, while the second group will trust in their own peace programs to make the world a better place.

A dramatic rescue operation

Apart from taking the bride away to enjoy the glory of heaven, the rapture also constitutes a dramatic rescue operation in which true believers will be removed from the scene of imminent divine judgment. Although the rapture is a unique occurrence, there are examples in the Bible of times when God poured out His wrath, but provided an escape route for true believers since they were not the objects of His wrath.

In the days of Noah, God announced His judgments upon a wicked and depraved generation: "And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark..." (*Genesis 6:13-14*). Shortly before the outpouring of God's judgments eight believers escaped the disaster area by entering the ark. God Himself closed the door behind them before He judged the wicked who despised God's way of escape (*Genesis 7:11-23*).

In the time of Lot another rescue operation took place. The night before Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, Lot and his family received an urgent command to depart from the area marked out for judgment. The angels urged Lot to leave Sodom and helped him and his family to do so before they destroyed it. Shortly after their departure, fire and brimstone rained down on the ungodly (*Genesis 19:13-25*).

The Lord Jesus says that there is a clear correlation between these historical events and God's end-time dealing with believers and unbelievers: "And as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man: They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed" (*Luke 17:26-30*; also read *Genesis chapters 6, 7 & 19*).

Because the depravity which characterized the time of both Noah and Lot is typical of the spiritual, moral and social decline of the last days, the following correlation between the historical and end-time conditions should be made:

- In the times of Noah and Lot anarchy prevailed as people in these lawless and promiscuous societies did just as they pleased. Violence was the most common means used to resolve conflicts. So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot moral depravity was widespread. People became so corrupt that they were “wicked in every intent of their thoughts.” So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot people were excessively materialistic and adopted permissive lifestyles involving all sorts of licentiousness, including sodomy (derived from the name Sodom). So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot people scoffed at the believers and chose to ignore the prophetic warnings of forthcoming judgments. They regarded them as far-fetched speculation and continued with their reckless lives. So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot God gave the degenerate sinners reasonable time to repent of their evil ways. They refused to repent and thereby sealed their own fate. They had only themselves to blame for their downfall and punishment. So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot God offered a way of escape to the believers at the critical moment before He turned in wrath to punish the wicked. The order of events was: First the prophetic warnings about the impending judgments, then the safeguarding of the believers who took heed of the appeal to repent, and ultimately the outpouring of wrath upon the wicked. So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot there was no security for nominal believers whose hearts were still devoted to the things of this world. Lot’s wife was a type of those believers who only have an outward form of godliness, but are still spiritually dead. This false pretense cost her life at the last moment. So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot an awful disaster struck this world soon after the evacuation of the believers. Death and destruction occurred as never before in history. So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah and Lot the wicked did not realize how many privileges and blessings they enjoyed due to the presence of a few believers in their midst. God was prepared to pardon a whole city if there were only ten believers in it. When these believers, who shone like lights in a wicked and perverted generation, were taken out of the way, complete spiritual darkness characterized the godless, and provoked the anger of God. So will it be again...
- In the times of Noah people scoffed at the builders of the ark, and in their ignorance were unaware of their peril “until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (*Matthew 24:39*).

The minds of those at enmity with God are darkened and they persist in pride and rebellion until disaster and judgment overtakes them. If this describes your condition, will you not rather come over to God’s side today and be reconciled to Him through His Son’s death on the cross? He alone can make you worthy to escape the approaching tribulation, which is God’s judgment on a sinful world. You can be with Jesus in the safety and joy of His Father’s house when tribulation comes upon the world.

Withholders

Noah and Lot had to remonstrate with the ungodly people of their time with persistent warnings. Christian believers of the church era have an even greater responsibility to fulfill their role as the salt of a corrupt earth and the light of a dark world. The church indwelt by the Holy Spirit is opposing the iniquitous spirit of the Antichrist in advance of his coming: "And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders" (*2 Thessalonians 2:6-9 NKJV*).

"The great and the terrible day of the Lord" (*Joel 2:31*) will not come prior to the rapture and the subsequent revelation of Antichrist. That awful period of judgment will be preceded by a great "falling away" (*2 Thessalonians 2:3*). This Greek term (apostasia) literally means "to depart". When the truth departs, the lie prevails. When Christians depart at the rapture, spiritual darkness will prevail on earth. While Christians remain on earth they are expected to make a bold stand for the truth, thus restraining the build-up of antichristian forces. After their departure at the rapture, the Antichrist will be able to take over the world unopposed. A spirit of delusion will then prevail and, as "the man of sin" (*2 Thessalonians 2:3*), the Antichrist will display to all the world a personal example of an utterly amoral, godless life-style.

The Antichrist cannot be revealed until the one who restrains him has been taken out of the way. This role is fulfilled by the church as the body of Christ indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Do not attach any credibility to the theory that the rapture will occur in the middle of the tribulation period of seven years. After 3½ years the Antichrist will break his covenant with Israel, desecrate the temple and declare himself to be God (*Daniel 9:27, 11:36-37; Matthew 24:15-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:4*). Then Israel will have to flee to the wilderness for survival (*Matthew 24:16; Revelation 12:14*). This flight to the wilderness in the middle of the seven-year tribulation period is not to be confused with the rapture. It is something quite different.

The unscriptural teaching of a mid-tribulation or a post-tribulation rapture leads to a warped perspective and wrong priorities. Instead of awaiting the coming of Christ, people are awaiting the Antichrist. In this way they compromise their commitment to Christ. Instead of striving for sanctification in expectation of the imminent coming of the heavenly Bridegroom, they start planning an earthly survival strategy for the tribulation period. Such activities are irrelevant as they are motivated by a distorted prophetic vision of future events.

The command to us is not to prepare for the coming of the Antichrist, but for the coming of Jesus Christ! We should remain engaged in His work until He comes. If we are constantly occupied with the work assigned to us by Christ, we will not be on earth when the Antichrist is revealed.

People who think that they can calculate the time of the rapture by waiting for the Antichrist to come and then add another 3½ years until the Lord comes, are missing the point and also a very important aspect of the prophecies.

The judgment seat of Christ

The rapture should never be viewed in isolation, but as a means to an end. It describes the way in which all true believers will be swiftly removed from earth to heaven where they must appear before the judgment seat of Christ (this is the subject of a separate booklet). To be ready for the rapture, therefore, implies readiness to give account of one's life and stewardship before Christ's judgment seat: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (*2 Corinthians 5:10*; see also *Romans 14:10-12*).

After having received crowns as reward for faithful service, the glorified believers will gather around the throne of God to worship Him for His great creation and worship the Lamb for His righteousness and great work of redemption (*Revelation 4 & 5*). They will keenly anticipate their return to share with Christ in judging the world (*1 Corinthians 6:2*), and to reign with Him as kings during the Millennium:

"And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (*Revelation 5:9-10*; see also *Revelation 19:11-15*, *Zechariah 14:4-5*).

Chronology of Revelation

The rapture of the church to heaven before the coming tribulation period is also clearly evident from the chronology of the events described in the book of Revelation. In these events, the true church of Christ mysteriously vanishes from the earth before the start of the tribulation period, only to re-appear when Christ comes back after the seven years. The believers of the tribulation period do not constitute the church. The main events in the book of Revelation occur in the following order:

- The glorified Christ after His ascension (*chapter 1*).
- The dispensation of the church on earth (*chapters 2-3*).
- The heavenly vision, including the glorified church after the rapture (*chapters 4-5*).
- The seven years of the tribulation period (*chapters 6-18*).
- The Second Coming of Christ, accompanied by His saints and the armies of heaven (*chapter 19*).
- The millennial reign of Christ and His glorified saints (*chapter 20:1-6*).
- The final judgment (*chapter 20:7-15*).
- The new heaven and the new earth (*chapters 21-22*).

After describing the church on earth in *Revelation 2-3*, it is subsequently shown in its glorified state in heaven in *Revelation 4-5*. *Chapter 4* opens with the words, "After this" (Greek *meta tauta*), which clearly indicates that the events which follow are in chronological order. This expression often occurs in the book of Revelation, thereby confirming its general chronological ordering of events.

During the dispensation of the church (*chapters 2-3*) the following words are repeated seven times: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (*Revelation 2:7,11,17,29*;

3:6,13,22). The believers of the tribulation period, who are saved after the rapture, do not represent the church. To them it is merely said: "If any man have an ear, let him hear" (*Revelation 13:9*). In *Revelation 19:7-14* we again read about the church as the wife of the Lamb, who will return with Him to earth after the tribulation period.

Getting ready

The next important event on the prophetic calendar is the rapture. Before the Antichrist can be revealed and the tribulation begins, the meeting between the true church and the heavenly Bridegroom has to take place. As members of the true church of Christ we have to be ready, hence the many exhortations in the Bible to expect the Second Coming and to be watchful and vigilant at all times.

It must be stressed that sanctification and the consequent spiritual readiness render believers worthy to receive rewards at the judgment seat of Christ directly after the rapture. It is clear from Scripture that the spiritually unworthy servants of the Lord who are nevertheless born-again, will also appear before the judgment seat in heaven, but empty-handed and without receiving any rewards (*Luke 19:20-26; 1 Corinthians 3:8-15*).

To appear before the Lord in a worthy state it is important to receive Him not only for salvation but also for sanctification. He made provision for a complete work in our lives: "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (*Ephesians 5:25-27*).

Everyone who has the hope of the return of Christ "purifieth himself, even as He is pure" (*1 John 3:3*). The Christian endeavors, therefore, to be like Jesus and to abide in Him: "And now, little children, abide in Him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (*1 John 2:28*).

Paul says that the grace of God teaches us that: "...denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (*Titus 2:12-13*).

The Thessalonian church had a strong expectation of the Second Coming. Paul encourages this attitude: "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing... Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings... Abstain from all appearance of evil. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it" (*1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*).

Peter reminds us that all the material things around us are going to be dissolved, so we should live serene, blameless, holy lives as we await the coming of Christ: "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in holy [conduct] and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God... Therefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found by Him in peace, without spot, and blameless" (*2 Peter 3:11-14*).

You should be on the alert lest you be influenced by the world and your spiritual standard be lowered, resulting in your being distracted from the work of the Lord. One of the signs of the times is a spirit of backsliding and lukewarm commitment among believers. Many Christians, instead of being inspired to renewed holiness by the growing unrighteousness in the world, lose their motivation and give up: "And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall [grow] cold" (*Matthew 24:12*).

Amid the general falling away, our attitude and motivation should be in the diametrically opposite direction: "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he who is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and My reward is with Me, to give every one according as his work shall be" (*Revelation 22:11-12*).

Guard against spiritual passivity. The devil encourages people to hide behind full programs and exhaustion as excuses to keep them from prayer. In the garden of Gethsemane the disciples were unable, in a time of spiritual crisis, to watch and pray for even one hour with the Lord Jesus. His command was: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (*Matthew 26:41*).

Christ gave us a similar command for watchfulness and dedicated prayer regarding His sudden coming: "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, 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*).

Remain in union with Christ, stay alert and keep looking for the "bright and morning star" (*Revelation 22:16*) that will soon appear above the dark horizon of this present evil world. In the twinkling of an eye the battle on earth will be over and we will stand amazed at what the Lord has prepared for us (*1 Corinthians 2:9*). Our biggest joy will be at the sight of the Bridegroom "when He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all those who believe in that day" (*2 Thessalonians 1:10*). Make very sure that you will be among them!

Signs of the times

The rapture definitely has a strong element of surprise to it as no one knows when it will occur. But, there are certain signs which clearly point to the nearness of the rapture. As will be shown in this section, many of the signs that were popularly regarded as referring to the end of the church age, or 'the end of the world', really only apply to the tribulation period. Among these are the enormous natural disasters, wars, famines and pestilences predicted in *Luke 21:10-11*.

An example of signs given to indicate the nearness of the Second Coming of Christ (His appearing at the end of the tribulation, not the rapture) is the following: "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear and [the expectation of] those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then

look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (*Luke 21:25-28*).

The signs that point to the consummation of the church age prior to the tribulation period include: a steady increase of natural disasters as a prelude to the tribulation, unprecedented moral and spiritual apostatizing, the restoration of Israel, globalization and the build-up to the Antichrist's emergence and wicked reign. Although these signs are very evident, they cannot be fitted into a rigid time frame. They may unfold faster or slower, and there is always the possibility of more developments before the time is finally ripe to lower the curtain on this dispensation.

Further down, two sets of signs are given which indicate the end of the church age. The first set deals with the end of the existing old order, and the second set with the rise of a new world order in anticipation of the coming of the Antichrist. He can only appear after the world stage has been properly set.

We are now witnessing the decay and collapse of the existing world order. The signs of decay cover a broad spectrum and include all walks of life:

- Economic decay is evident in many places with poverty, unemployment and rampant inflation in some countries.
- Political decay is seen in the acceptance of humanistic constitutions, anarchy, chaos, and violence.
- Social decay leads to disintegrating social structures, crime and the breakdown of marriages and the family.
- Religious decay leads to spiritual confusion, turning to New Age philosophy, the occult and amoral life-styles.

From the ashes of the old order, the global structures of a new world order will arise. They will constitute the framework for the global society, global economy, global religion, and global government of the Antichrist:

- A unitary global economy will be set up in which 666-related PIN numbers are used for financial transactions.
- Political unity in the form of a world government and a global peace-keeping force will emerge.
- Social unity among the internationalized planetary citizens will give further expression to the ideology of globalism.
- Religious unity will be based on the deceptive idea that all religions worship the same God.

Another phenomenon which must occur toward the end of the church era is the progressive return of Jews to Israel to become the largest single Jewish population in the world – a situation that last prevailed in the first century. At the time of writing the 5.4 million Jews in Israel were almost the same number as those in the USA. When the Israeli Jews are the largest single concentration of Jews in the world, Israeli leaders will be able to take decisions and sign covenants, etc., on behalf of all Jews. Spiritual leaders in Israel will then also be empowered to decide on behalf of all Jews regarding the authenticity of any claimant to be the Messiah. Their true Messiah, whom they rejected at His first coming, predicted that, tragically, they will accept the wrong man (*John 5:43*).

Last days of the church dispensation

In the last days perilous times will come upon the world and many professing Christians will only have "a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). "Because iniquity will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). The Spirit says, "In the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils" (1 Timothy 4:1). The great falling away of the last days will yield to the emerging new world order of the coming Antichrist.

Dismantling the old order

The old order is dismantled and boundaries removed.
Judeo-Christian teachings and morality are rejected.
Individuals freed from restraint become selfish and permissive.
Moral depravity, violence and break-down of family life.
Criminal and abnormal lifestyles become the norm.
Christian beliefs phased out to make way for occult practices.
Excessive democratization and human rights promote anarchy.
Corruption and the abuse of power become general trends.
Gender differences are denied in many areas of public life.
Nations lose their ethnic, cultural and political identities.
Israel is condemned and the hatred of Jews rapidly increases.

Build-up to a new world order

Establishment of a new world order of international unity.
The promotion of multi-faith values in all countries.
Multi-cultural, Babylonian societies emerge everywhere.
Humanistic freedom within a new charter of human rights.
Crime is contained by force without moral reformation.
Bible replaced by non-Christian religions and mysticism.
Nations lose their sovereignty under a world government.
Military power is used to enforce the new world order.
Gender equality enforced through radical feminism.
National identities become submerged in a world culture.
Enforcement of the new world order leads to war in the Middle East.

The following is a schematic presentation of events after the rapture:

Rapture The seven year long absence of the bride of Christ after the rapture. **Second Coming**
Spiritual darkness will then prevail on earth and allows the Antichrist the opportunity to be revealed.

THE TRIBULATION OF SEVEN YEARS AFTER THE RAPTURE

FIRST 3½ YEARS

Immediately after the rapture the Antichrist will be revealed and the first 3½ years of his reign on earth will commence.

The institution of a new world order according to the Plan of the New Age Movement. World unity will be established.

Israel and an alliance of world religions will accept the Antichrist as Messiah and the Jewish Temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem.

An international campaign will be waged against Messianic Jews and Christians who refuse to accept the Antichrist.

A deceptive world peace will be achieved, based on a pact between the Antichrist and the alliance of false world religions.

A deluded global community will idolize and worship the Antichrist for his personal charisma, political skills and miraculous powers.

LAST 3½ YEARS

The Antichrist will change his image in the last 3½ years to become a military dictator who will enslave humanity.

Strict economic control will be exercised through a cashless economy by computerized 666-related codes.

The temple will be desecrated by the Antichrist when he declares himself to be God in the Holy of Holies.

The summary execution of all people who refuse to worship the Antichrist and to accept his number.

The multi-national forces of the Antichrist will surround Jerusalem, leading to the final world war of Armageddon in Israel.

Christ will descend to Mount of Olives to destroy Antichrist and his armies, rescue repentant Israel and commence His reign.

Authoritative book on the rapture

In 1995, an authoritative book on the pre-tribulation rapture (*When the trumpet sounds*, edited by Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy) was published by Harvest House Publishers in Eugene, Oregon. Contributions were made by 23 leading experts in this field. They include names such as Professor Paul Feinberg, Dr. Elliot Johnson, Dr. Tim LaHaye, Professor Dwight Pentecost, Dr. Randall Price, Professor Robert Thomas, Professor Charles Ryrie, and Professor John Walvoord.

In the Introduction, the editors say the following about the rapture as the blessed hope of the church: “The New Testament clearly teaches that each believer has a hope, a blessed hope, which is a grand and glorious destiny. This hope is both personal and a Person. First, it is given to each individual believer and, second, our hope is in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible portrays this hope as pictured in ancient Jewish marriage customs. In biblical times a betrothed maiden would eagerly await the any-moment coming of her groom to take her to his father’s house in marriage celebration.

“During this time of waiting and watching expectantly, the bride’s loyalty to the groom was tested. In a similar way, the rapture provides for the church this same sense of expectation and anticipation. The rapture expectation provides believers with a similar daily motivation for a pure and godly life until He comes. Just as the betrothed maiden eagerly waited because of her love for the groom, so also do we await our Lord’s any-moment coming. Though you have not seen Him, you love Him (*1 Peter 1:8*). Such motives are not escapism but, rather, flow from the love and devotion of a sincere believer to our Lord.

“Christ’s rapture of His bride holds a central place in the New Testament, and it assumes the same in the thought and life of the Christian. The study and implications of God’s Word are always important... The rapture is the central future prophetic event for the Christian, and its study is therefore vital in the lives of Christians...”

Thomas Ice (page 23) says: “Another point to remember is that just as there was a transition in the early church away from God dealing with Israel as a nation, so it appears that there will be a transition at the end of the church age as God sets the stage to resume His unfinished plan with Israel after the rapture. The church age clearly began on Pentecost, but about 40 years later in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, a specific prophecy relating to God’s plan for Israel was historically fulfilled. This was the final fulfillment relating to the transition from Israel to the church. During the last 100 years we have seen events occur which are setting the stage for the players to be in place when the rapture brings the church age to an end and God resumes His plan for Israel during the tribulation.”

An end-time strategy

Christians should have specific strategies, or plans of action, through which they give practical expression to their general objectives to live holy lives, to do the work of the Lord, and to be ready for His coming. The promise of the rapture is a very important motivating force in determining our objectives and the strategies emanating from them. The main guiding principles of this promise are the following:

Good news

The rapture is the good news element in a dark scenario of end-time prophecies. Without this promise Christians would be left only with the bad news about the coming of the Antichrist and the tribulation period which they would have to face before Jesus comes. Their chances of surviving all the apocalyptic disasters of the great tribulation and the battle of Armageddon would be slim indeed. A situation like that can be equated to the Flood without the ark, or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah without any provision for the escape of the believers from the scene of God's wrath. Such a situation would be highly demoralizing and contradict a clear biblical principle that true believers are never the objects of God's wrath. "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation..." (*1 Thessalonians 5:9*). The righteous will not be destroyed with the wicked (compare *Genesis 18:23*).

People who are cynical about the promise of the rapture and do not heed the exhortation to be prepared to escape the coming tribulation period reveal a very irresponsible attitude. What would have been the consequence for Noah and family (and for the future survival of the entire human race!) if Noah had argued as follows: "God is a God of love and I do not really believe that He will send a flood to judge all people; therefore, I am not going to build an ark to escape this so-called judgment." Or what would have happened to Lot and his family had he taken the following stand: "I think the prophesied judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah should be interpreted symbolically. I do not have to escape for my life. Even if the disaster does occur I believe that God will protect us from His wrath here in this place." Similar arguments are often heard today.

The coming judgments during the tribulation period are irrefutable biblical facts. Jesus said there will be great tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of the world (*Matthew 24:21*), and that we should be ready to escape it. The rapture is part of the good news of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. He came to this sin-drenched world to pay the price for the salvation of sinners. He returned to heaven to prepare a place for us. He will come back to take us away to our heavenly abode. If we are truly born again we will be worthy to escape the horrors of the coming tribulation on earth by way of the rapture. We do not have to despair at the knowledge of what is coming upon the world since there is a wonderful element of good news in the prophetic word.

A correct future expectation

To believe in the pre-tribulation rapture gives us the assurance that we have a truly biblical future expectation. It does not in any way contradict other biblical truths. This end-time perspective honors the Lord Jesus and recognizes Him as the key to all prophecy in Scripture, "for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (*Revelation 19:10*). Christians should remain focused on Him and wait for His sudden appearance – not for the Antichrist's. Those who deny Him will remain behind after the rapture. Having rejected the way of escape and salvation offered by the true Christ, they will have to endure the Antichrist's dictatorship and the terrible judgments to follow. What they experience on earth will be a direct result of the seals broken by the Lamb in heaven. Never deny Jesus Christ His central position in biblical prophecies. To expect His imminent return, and to order your life accordingly, is a command which is intended to be a strong, positive motivation to all Christians of all ages.

A motivation for steadfastness

The coming of the heavenly Bridegroom will occur during a time of religious compromise and worldliness. There will be a great falling away from the truth of God's Word. A relatively small group of evangelical Christians will shine like lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (*Philippians 2:15*). As in the times of Noah and Lot, the earth will be filled with violence, materialism, and sexual perversion. Unfortunately, the spirit of unrighteousness and immorality will also take its toll among Christians. They will relax their vigilance and make downward adjustments to their spiritual standards: "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (*Matthew 24:12 NKJV*). Some Christians will become backslidden or discouraged in the work of the Lord.

Inactive Christians often compromise their dedication to the Lord and their responsibility to serve Him faithfully. Their spiritual decline may manifest itself in various ways. The most common are, either to abandon the need for sanctification, becoming worldly-minded, enjoying worldly parties and eating and drinking to excess; or to become critical and dictatorial in their relations with other Christians. The Lord Jesus warned against such sinful behavior and challenged it by using the prospect of His sudden, unexpected return as a positive motivation to remain steadfast to the end: "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing... But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him..." (*Matthew 24:45-50 NKJV*).

Correctly determining and prioritizing works

To expect the coming of the Lord Jesus before the tribulation period, guides your actions in the right direction. You prepare for His coming and not for the coming of the Antichrist. The concept of the rapture explicitly confronts you with your responsibility to give account of yourself before the judgment seat of Christ immediately after being caught up to heavenly places (*2 Corinthians 5:10*). The following crowns will be awarded to the faithful:

- The crown of rejoicing for soul-winners (*1 Thessalonians 2:19*).
- The incorruptible crown for a holy life (*1 Corinthians 9:24-25*).
- The crown of life for Christian martyrs (*Revelation 2:10*).
- The crown of glory for faithful shepherds (*1 Peter 5:2-4*).
- The crown of righteousness for those who loved the appearing of the Lord (*2 Timothy 4:8*).

The fact that our works will be judged after the rapture, and that only those with eternal value will be rewarded, is of great significance in helping us to devote ourselves to objectives that are higher than the material things of this perishable world. After conversion our lives should yield the fruit of the Spirit and we should not waste time and resources on earthly things, pleasure or valueless works: "... let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon... Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire" (*1 Corinthians 3:10-13*).

Will you be found a worthy servant or will you stand empty-handed before the judgment seat of Christ on that day, saved as by fire? If you lose sight of the possibility of the Lord's imminent return you may lapse into complacency, spiritual inactivity, and even into sin: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night... You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and for ever" (2 Peter 3:10, 17-18 NKJV).

The faithful and wise servant keeps himself busy with the work of the Lord, always realizing that the time to work for his Master is running out. The Lord Jesus Himself said: "I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work" (John 9:4). The night of God's judgments during the great tribulation is fast approaching – then, there will be no religious freedom.

Motivation for holiness

One of the strongest motivations that the promise of the rapture instills into a Christian is that of holiness. As members of the bridal church we should commit ourselves to the challenge of being presented to the heavenly Bridegroom as chaste virgins. That implies the responsibility to be vigilant by not allowing the wicked one to pervert or corrupt our minds and lives (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). Jesus Christ gave Himself to sanctify and cleanse the church that He might present it to Himself holy and without spot or blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27). We have a distinct responsibility to use the means of grace at our disposal to walk in the ways of the Lord and to become holy in all our conduct (1 Peter 1:15). "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 7:1). If we abide in Christ, we will have confidence when He appears and not be ashamed before Him (1 John 2:28).

Hope during trials and afflictions

Under the dark shadow of trials and afflictions, when our prospects on earth look bleak, the belief in Christ's coming for us at the rapture is a light at the end of the tunnel. Through many sorrows and suffering, millions of Christians have clung desperately to the promise of resurrection and union with the Lord at the rapture. It gave them strength to endure, counting earthly things and even their own lives as of no account so that they might win eternity with Christ. So, take courage, lift up your head, and expect the coming of the Lord, knowing your future is safe and sure in His hands.

A sense of destiny

Like Abraham we should see ourselves as strangers and sojourners in a world that "lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:18). Since our future is not here, we need a vision of the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). In our pilgrimage through this world, we need a strong sense of destiny. When the Lord comes for us at the rapture, He will take us to our eternal home in the new Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 2:9; John 14:2; Revelations 21:2).

We should not identify ourselves with this world and become one with its materialism, pleasure-seeking and moral and spiritual depravity. This would not mean we are poorly motivated and a people

without a mission. To the contrary! We are happy to proclaim the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. The unbelievers around us are in spiritual darkness, and we are “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” among whom we should “shine as lights in the world” (*Philippians 2:15*).

While serving the Lord as faithful witnesses, we should always keep our eye on Him as “the bright and morning star” (*Revelation 22:16*) that shines above the dark horizon of a troubled and hostile world. The morning star tells us the night is far spent and the day is at hand. Before Jesus appears as the Sun of Righteousness, when every eye shall see Him, Christians will have a thrilling meeting with Him in the air!

The great significance of the rapture

In the light of all the biblical facts about the rapture it is clear that this is an extremely important teaching to all believers. There are at least 12 different aspects of the rapture that need to be properly understood and taken account of:

It is a direct intervention by God

The supernatural nature of the rapture, in which millions of Christians will be caught up in the air, will be so clearly an intervention by God that no scientific explanation will ever account for this astounding phenomenon. “The Lord Himself” will remove the saints from planet earth (*1 Thessalonians 4:16*).

It is a meeting with the Lord Jesus

When the Lord Jesus descends from heaven with the sounding of the trumpet of God, those who died in Christ will be raised from the dead, while the living believers will be changed in the twinkling of an eye. Together they will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air (*1 Thessalonians 4:16-17*). The unsaved people on earth will not see Him on this occasion.

It is associated with the first resurrection

The rapture is directly related to the first resurrection when all believers will receive glorified resurrection bodies. Those who have died in Christ will be raised first – then the living believers will be miraculously changed while they pass from mortality to immortality without dying (*1 Corinthians 15:52*).

It separates true and nominal believers

Apart from the division that the rapture will effect between the saved and unsaved people in the world, it will also separate born-again believers from the nominal Christians within the professing church (*Matthew 25:1-13*), many of whom have only a form of godliness (*2 Timothy 3:5*).

It marks the end of the church age

It is important to consider the rapture in its dispensational context – i.e. at the end of the church age and just before the beginning of the tribulation period. The seven years of tribulation will be a distinct dispensation with its own characteristics (*2 Thessalonians 2*).

It makes way for the revelation of the Antichrist

The rapture is directly related to the revelation of the Antichrist. The true church of Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, is withholding the Antichrist, who can only be revealed after the church has been taken out of the way (*2 Thessalonians 2:6-10*).

It is an escape from divine wrath

The rapture also constitutes a dramatic rescue operation in which true believers will be removed from the scene of impending divine judgments upon earth, since they are definitely not the objects of God's wrath (*1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9; Luke 21:36*).

It is a motivation for steadfastness

There will be a great end-time falling away from the truth of God's Word. Christians having the hope of Christ's coming, purify themselves as He is pure (*1 John 3:3*), and resist any tendency to grow cold in their love for Him (*Matthew 24:12*).

It is a summons to the judgment seat of Christ

The certainty of the rapture confronts us with the solemn prospect of appearing before Christ at His judgment seat to give account of our lives (*Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10*).

It is a journey to the marriage of the Lamb

After appearing before the judgment seat, believers forming the bride will be united to the heavenly Bridegroom never to be separated from Him again (*Revelation 19:7-8; Psalm 45:9*).

It is a journey to our eternal home

The Lord Jesus promised that He would return to take the saints away to their heavenly abode in His Father's house with the many mansions (*John 14:2-3*). "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (*1 Corinthians 2:9 NKJV*). What a wonderful future to look forward to!

It will promote us to be co-rulers with Christ

After the rapture and the tribulation period, the glorified saints will return with Christ and reign with Him as kings on earth (*Luke 19:17-19; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:26-27; 5:10*).

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