

What is the Rapture?

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1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

(<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Thessalonians%204.13%E2%80%9318>

is Paul’s teaching about what is popularly called the rapture.

The rapture is the miraculous transportation of all living Christians to heaven at the return of Jesus. There is a lot of misinformation about this event, but this passage gives us some definite truths about it. Paul made it clear that Jesus’ return will not be secret but will be visible; it will be a bodily return; and it will be a triumphant return, for He will not come in lowliness and meekness as He did at His first advent, but in power and glory. The angels told the disciples, “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (**Acts 1:11** (**(<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%201.11>)**). Just as He left visibly on the shekinah cloud, so He will come again visibly on this cloud of glory.

There is a view, one that is very widespread in the church today, that holds that Jesus will come back to rapture the church out of the world, but that the great tribulation will then occur, after which Jesus will return again. I think this view is a result of a serious misunderstanding of what the Apostle described here in 1 Thessalonians.

I once spoke with one of the leading representatives of this school of thought, a man who teaches the “pretribulation” rapture. I said to him, “I do not know a single verse anywhere

in the Bible that teaches a pretribulation rapture. Can you tell me where to find that?" I'll never forget what he said to me: "No, I can't. But that's what I was taught from the time I was a little child." I told him, "Let's get our theology from the Bible rather than from Sunday school lessons we heard years and years ago."

Let us look at the events Paul described. First he noted: "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven.... And the dead in Christ will 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" (**1 Thess. 4:16–17**

(<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Thess.%204.16%E2%80%9317>)

). Here we see that the purpose of the dead rising and our being caught up into the sky is not to go away but to meet Jesus as He is returning. He will not be taking us out of the world to stay. He will be lifting us up to participate with Him in His triumphal return.

When the Roman legions were dispatched to go into a foreign country on a military campaign, their standards bore the letters SPQR, an abbreviation for Senatus Populus Que Romanus, which means "the Senate and the people of Rome." It was understood in Rome that the conquests of the military were not simply for the politicians who governed, but for all the citizens of the city.

The army might be gone for a campaign of two or three years. Finally, the soldiers would return, leading captives in chains. They would camp outside the city and send in a messenger to alert the Senate and the people that the legions had returned. When that news arrived, the people began to prepare to receive the conquering heroes. When everything was ready, a trumpet was sounded. With that, the citizens of the city went out to

where the army was camped and joined the soldiers in marching into the city. The idea was that they had participated in the triumph of their conquering army.

This is exactly the language that Paul used here. He was saying that when Jesus comes back in conquering power, believers, both dead and alive, will be caught up in the air to meet Him, not to stay up there, but to join His return in triumph, to participate in His exaltation.

It seems that Paul's goal here was to comfort the Thessalonians, who were saddened that their dead loved ones were apparently going to miss the triumphal return of Christ, the great conclusion to the ministry of Jesus at the end of time. Paul assured them that the dead in Christ will not miss His return at all. In fact, they will be there first. The dead will rise first, and then those who are still alive and are Christ's will be caught up together with this whole assembly to come to the earth again in triumph.

Excerpt adapted from R.C. Sproul's ***The Work of Christ*** (<http://www.ligonier.org/store/work-of-christ-hardcover/>). Available now from the **Ligonier Store** (<http://www.ligonier.org/store/work-of-christ-hardcover/>).

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