



Eschatology – A Study of the End Times

Lesson 9: The Rapture of the Church

Introduction

As God is working now in this age through the church, Scripture makes it clear that things will progress toward evil. This is a reminder to believers that this world is not our home. Sin is prevalent; wickedness is rampant. Wicked rulers are in authority. Evil laws are established and celebrated. In such an age, the heart and desire of all believers is for the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings, to come. This is precisely what the next event entails. We have never been closer to His coming, and each day moves us nearer. The next event in the timeline which, will initiate the end times, will be the rapture of the church. This is the reality that Christ will come for His church. In this lesson, we will consider several insights about the rapture of the church and make a case for a pretribulational rapture view.

The Rapture¹

What is the rapture of the church? The word rapture comes from the Latin word, *raptura*, which is translated from the Greek word, *harpazo*, found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In the NASB, this word is translated as “caught up.” In the New Testament, this word is used of stealing, plundering, or seizing something. The meaning of this word literally means “to snatch away” or “to be suddenly removed.” Elsewhere in Scripture it is used to describe how the Spirit caught up Philip near Gaza and brought him to Caesarea (Acts 8:39). It is also described in Paul’s experience of being caught up into the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2–4).

Therefore, the rapture referenced in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is this glorious event where those who are in Christ, both death and alive, will be caught up in the sky to meet Christ in the air and taken with Him to heaven. While 1 Thessalonians 4 is a key passage on the rapture, there are other primary passages that give us insight to the doctrine of the rapture (John 14:1–3; 1 Cor. 15:51–55). Though this term, *harpazo*, is not used in these passages, many agree it is a reference to the rapture. Based on these texts, there are four insights we can gather concerning the rapture.

¹ The following is adapted from *The End Times in Chronological Order* by Ron Rhodes and *Biblical Doctrine* by John MacArthur.

Insight #1: The Rapture is Jesus Coming for the Church

- 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17. Who is Paul referring to when he says they will be caught up? _____
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Insight #2: The Rapture was a _____

The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:51 that the rapture is a mystery. This idea of a mystery in Scripture pertains to the fact that there is truth that cannot be discovered by human investigation. Rather, it is something that has been previously hidden but now has been revealed by God. Apart from God revealing it to us, we cannot and would not know. So, the rapture of the church was a mystery just as the church was a mystery until the New Testament. It was not revealed in the Old Testament, but the apostle Paul and John in their letters through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit have revealed it to us.

Insight #3: The Rapture will be _____ and _____

In 1 Corinthians 15:52, the apostle Paul describes the rapture as occurring “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” This means that it will not be a process. Rather, it will be extremely fast and instantaneous, at the blink of an eye.

The apostle Paul also tells us that we will be “changed” and that “this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.” When Christ returns for His church, our bodies will be changed from the perishable to the imperishable. You and I will receive glorified bodies, like our Lord Jesus Christ possessed after the resurrection.

Insight #4: The Rapture is _____

The term imminence literally means “ready to take place” or that something is “impending.” There are New Testament passages that say Christ’s return will be imminent, meaning Christ could return at any moment, and we should live expecting that event.

We see this doctrine best reflected by the following passages, which highlight that believers in this age are waiting for the Lord and expect nothing else to occur before our Lord comes.

- Philippians 3:20–21
- 1 Thessalonians 1:10
- 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17
- Titus 2:13
- James 5:8–9

The rapture is, therefore, what believers are awaiting. It is a signless event that can and will happen at any moment. This is different from the second coming of Christ, which will be preceded by many signs and events. Because the rapture will take place at any time, there will be no signs that will precede it, and so we ought to live in light of His imminent return.

Pretribulational Rapture View

We considered a few weeks back the different views on the rapture. But despite the various views, the biblical data best supports the rapture of the church as the next event on the timeline. The following are four reasons why the biblical data best supports a pretribulational rapture view.

1. The Doctrine of _____

2. The _____ of the Churches' _____ from God's Wrath on Earth

It is certainly true that God is going to protect believers from His eternal wrath. Romans 8:1 says "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Paul also says "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him (Rom. 5:9). But we also find in Scripture passages that show the church will not face God's wrath in the future seven-year tribulation period that will take place on earth (Rev. 3:10).

3. The _____ of the _____ from Earth in Revelation 6-18

When one reads the book of Revelation, we are immediately confronted with the fact that John wrote the book of Revelation to seven churches. In the first three chapters, the term, *ekklesia*, which is translated as "church," is referenced 19 times. It only appears 1 time after that point in the epilogue of the book (Rev. 22:16). Nowhere is the term found in Revelation 6-18, which describe the seven-year tribulation period. The implication is that the church has been raptured before the period of God's wrath on the earth.

4. The Rapture is _____ from the Second Coming of Christ

There are some who hold to a posttribulational rapture, who say that the rapture will happen at the second coming of Christ. However, when one compares and contrasts the passages concerning the rapture with the passages concerning the second coming of Christ, there are several key differences that are observed which support that these two events are distinct.

1. At the rapture, Christ comes in the air and returns to heaven (1 Thess. 4:17; John 14:1-3), while at the final event of the second coming, Christ comes and establishes His kingdom on earth (Matt. 25:31-32).
2. At the rapture, Christ gathers His own in the clouds (1 Thess. 4:16-17), while at the second coming, His angels gather the elect (Matt. 24:31).
3. At the rapture, Christ comes to rescue (1 Thess. 4:17), while at the second coming, Christ comes to judge (Matt. 25:31-46).
4. At the rapture, believers depart from the earth (1 Thess. 4:15-17), while at the second coming, unbelievers are taken away from the earth (Matt. 24:37-41).

5. At the rapture, unbelievers remain on the earth (implied), while at the second coming, believers remain on the earth (Matt. 25:34).
6. At the rapture, there is no mention of Christ's kingdom on earth, while at the second coming, Christ's kingdom on earth is established (Matt. 25:31, 34).
7. At the rapture, believers will receive glorified bodies (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51–57), while at the second coming, no one who is alive receives glorified bodies.
8. At the rapture, Christ returns for His bride, while at the second coming, He returns with His bride (Rev. 19:6–14).
9. The rapture occurs prior to the day of wrath, whereas the second coming of Christ happens after.

There are major differences which point to the fact that the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ are not referring to the same events. Rather, they are two distinct events, which are separated by the seven-year tribulation period.

Application

1. Pursue holy living (1 John 3:3; Tit. 2:11–14).
2. Be comforted by this doctrine (John 14:1–3; 1 Thess. 4:18).