

MISTAKE 37

DON'T CONFUSE THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH WITH THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

One common mistake that people often make is confusing the rapture of the church with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It is clear from Scripture that they are different events. Paul wrote:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come (2 Thessalonians 2:1 ESV).

The “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” and “our being gathered together to him” are two different events. We will briefly explain the differences.

WHAT IS THE RAPTURE?

One of the major prophetic events that the Bible speaks of is known as the “rapture of the church.” It is also referred to as the “translation of the church.” What is the rapture? What does the Bible tell us about this coming event?

The doctrine of the rapture of the church can be simply stated as follows. At some future time, the *genuine* believers in Jesus Christ (not merely people who have a church membership or affiliation) will be caught up to meet Him in the air when He descends from heaven.

Those Christians who are alive will be instantaneously changed from their mortal bodies into immortal bodies, from corruptible bodies to incorruptible bodies. Immediately before this happens, the believers who have died “in Christ” will be raised from the graves into their new bodies where they too will be with the Lord. This is the “blessed hope” of the true believers in Jesus.

UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS RAPTURE, TRANSLATION, AND SECOND COMING

It is important that we understand the different terms used for the coming of the Lord; rapture, translation, and Second Coming. The terms rapture and translation are used for the coming of Jesus Christ *for* His church. In this coming, Jesus meets the believers *in the air*. The term Second Coming is consistently used as a reference to Jesus’ coming back *to the earth* with the believers to establish His kingdom.

While the words rapture and translation refer to the same event they are not identical. The rapture refers to the doctrine that the believers in Christ are “caught up” from the earth to meet the Lord in the air. The term translation emphasizes that those who are snatched up are immediately transformed. The physical bodies of those who are raptured are instantly changed from natural, corruptible, mortal bodies to spiritual, incorruptible, immortal bodies. For simplicity sake, we will use the two terms, rapture and translation, interchangeably.

WHERE DO WE GET THE TERM RAPTURE?

The English term rapture is derived from the Latin Vulgate translation of the New Testament. The Latin verb *rapere* is a translation of the Greek word *harpadzō* which has the meaning of being “caught up.” It is the word used in one of main passages describing this event, 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The believers are “caught up” to be with the Lord (Greek *harpadzō*, Latin *rapere*). Hence, the English word “rapture” comes to us by way of the Greek and the Latin.

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We should note that while *raper* is a verb meaning “to catch away” this catching away of believers has been turned into a noun, “the rapture.” Thus, “the rapture” has become the popular way to portray this predicted catching away of believers.

We can make the following general observations about the doctrine of the rapture of the church.

1. THE BELIEVERS WILL BE CAUGHT UP

The Scripture speaks of this great catching away of the true believers in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and stated it in this manner:

I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed--in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:50-52 NIV).

When Paul speaks of “sleep” in this context he is referring to physical death. Not everyone will die! Millions of believers in Jesus Christ will be changed in the twinkling of an eye. This change will involve receiving a new body which is immortal and incorruptible. Those who have died in Christ will be raised with their new incorruptible bodies.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica something similar. He wrote to them of a time when the Lord Jesus would personally return for the believers and snatch them away to meet Him in the air. He put it this way:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 NIV).

This passage emphasizes that the dead in Christ will rise first and then the living believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air.

2. JESUS SPOKE OF COMING FOR HIS OWN

Another passage which speaks of this event comes from the words of the Lord Jesus Himself. On the night of His betrayal, Christ told His disciples that He would come back for them:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:1-3 NIV).

These verses speak of Jesus “coming again” to take the believers to Himself, the rapture.

3. IT IS THE BLESSED HOPE OF BELIEVERS

When the Apostle Paul wrote to Titus, he spoke of this event as the “blessed hope” of the church:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope--the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

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who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:11-14 NIV)

While believers are presently fighting a spiritual battle in this world we are waiting for that “blessed hope;” the time Jesus Christ comes back for all of us.

In the same manner Paul wrote to the Philippians of this hope. He stated it in this manner:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV).

This is the hope of the believer. Our frail sinful bodies will be transformed by Jesus at the time of the rapture.

4. ENOCH AND ELIJAH ILLUSTRATE THE RAPTURE

The rapture of the church, the “catching away” of living believers who will not experience death, is not without a biblical precedent. Indeed, there are two Old Testament examples of people who did not suffer physical death: Enoch and Elijah. We read the following about Enoch:

Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away (Genesis 5:24 NIV).

God “took” Enoch to Himself. This faithful man of God did not have to experience physical death. The New Testament uses Enoch as an example of the rapture of the church. We read in Hebrews:

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.” For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God (Hebrews 11:5 NIV).

The general rule is that every human being will die. The Bible makes this clear:

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27 NIV).

Enoch was an exception. He was “caught up” to meet the Lord. Like Enoch, the prophet Elijah did not experience death:

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11 NIV).

Elijah, while he was still alive, was taken up in a whirlwind to meet the Lord.

As Enoch and Elijah did not suffer physical death, at some unknown time in the future, there will be millions of Christians who will have the same experience.

5. JESUS' ASCENSION INTO HEAVEN IS SOMETIMES USED AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE RAPTURE

Another event which is compared to the rapture of the church is the ascension of Jesus into heaven:

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has

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been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

This is sometimes used as another illustration of what will occur to believers at the rapture of the church. However, there are differences. For one thing, Jesus' ascension took place *after* His death. Yet the catching up of living believers upon the earth will occur *before* they have died. Also, Jesus' ascension was in full view of His disciples while the gathering up of believers will seemingly not be seen by those remaining upon the earth. The Christians will simply disappear with nothing “left behind.”

This briefly sums up the doctrine of the rapture of the church; the catching up of living believers into the presence of the Lord as well as the dead in Christ being simultaneously raised to meet Him. At that time both the dead and the living will be clothed with incorruptible immortal bodies. What a wonderful event this will be! Indeed, it is the “blessed hope” of the Christian.

THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS CHRIST

While the rapture of the church involves only believers, the Second Coming is the return of the Lord Jesus to the earth. When He comes back, every eye will see Him:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen (Revelation 1:7 ESV).

The Bible records His return as follows:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.” And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh (Revelation 19:11-21 ESV).

He is indeed coming again!

In sum, Scripture has predicted two great events for those living upon the earth: the rapture of the church, and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Let us not confuse the two. In the words of the Apostle John ...

Even so, come, Lord Jesus (Revelation 22:20 KJV).