

What is the rapture and when will it occur?

"Rapture" is a term used by Christians to explain an event described by the Apostle Paul who wrote: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. **Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds** to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, emphasis added).

The Greek term meaning "caught up" is *harpazo*, which means to seize suddenly or snatch. In Latin the word is *rapio*, which means to seize and carry away; it is from this Latin word that the term "rapture" comes.

Paul teaches that Christ will come at some future point in time for those who belong to Him. Those who are the "dead in Christ" will experience their resurrection first and be gifted with glorified bodies when He comes. Those believers in Christ who are alive at that time will then be instantly transformed from their earthly state to their eternal state, and will not experience death. Instead, they will be caught up to be with all those who have previously gone on to be with the Lord and be transferred to heaven. Paul speaks about this generation of believers who will not taste death when he says, "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51).

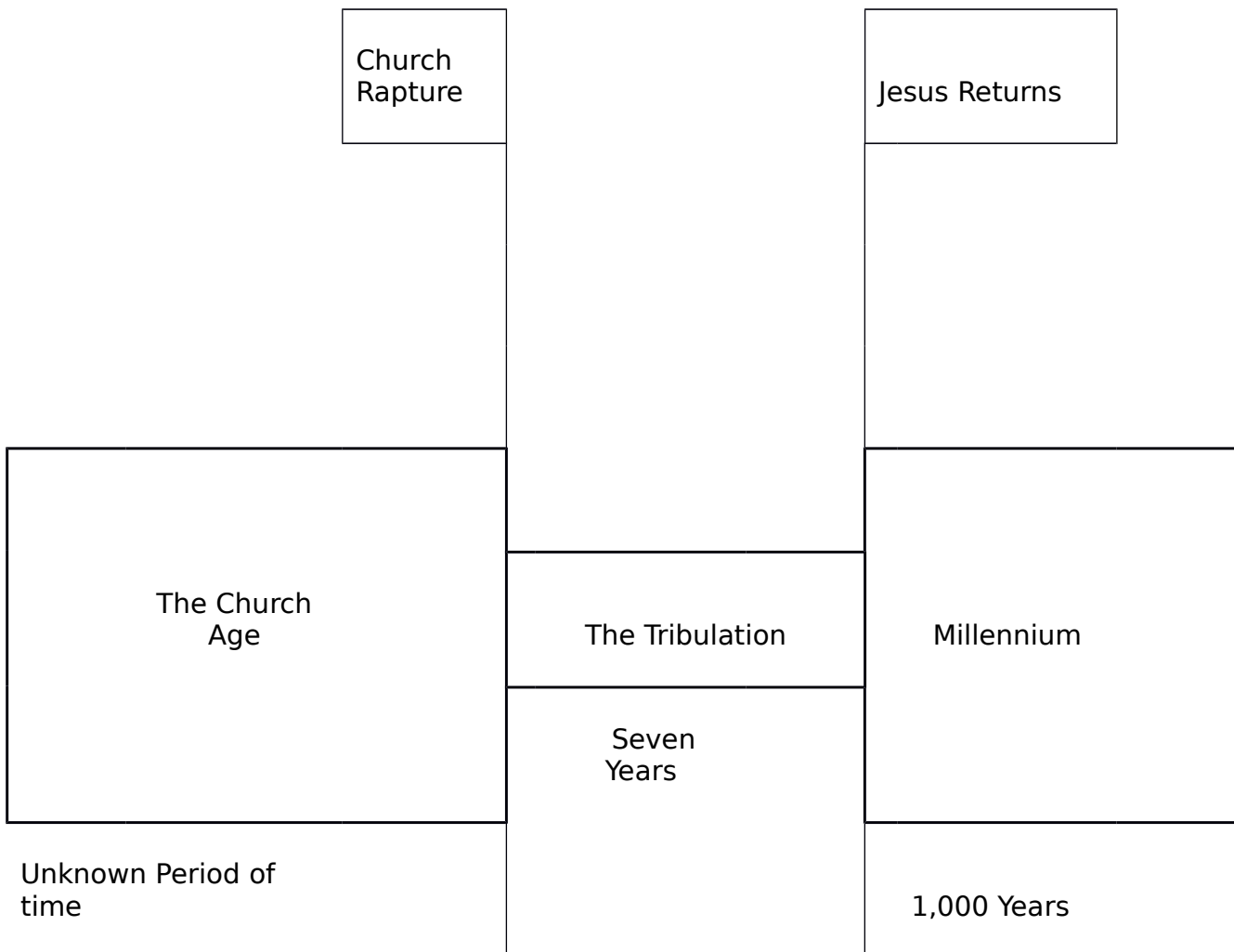
There is no debate among Bible scholars as to whether there will be a rapture, but much discussion has occurred over when the rapture will occur. There have been five main theories put forward as to the timing of the rapture and they all surround what is known in prophetic biblical teaching as the "tribulation" period, which is mentioned by Christ in Matthew 24 and described in great detail in Revelation 4–19.

The five hypotheses are:

1. Post-tribulation – believers are raptured at the end of the tribulation period, when Christ returns in judgment (cf. Revelation 19).
2. Pre-wrath – believers are caught up somewhere between the sixth and seventh seals described in Revelation.
3. Mid-tribulation – living believers are taken in the middle of the tribulation period.
4. Partial rapture – only faithful believers are taken to be with Christ at the beginning of the tribulation, with unfaithful Christians being left to endure it.
5. Pre-tribulation – believers are caught up to be with Christ before the tribulation begins.

Before any arguments are given to support one of these positions, it should first be understood that sincere and learned believers can be found holding to each one of these theories. However, when Scripture is examined as a whole, the pre-tribulation rapture position appears to have the most biblical evidence in its favor.

The pre-tribulation view states that, at present, all believers are living in the Church age, which has no specified time period given to it in Scripture. At some point in the future, Christ will return for His Bride, the Church, and evacuate believers from earth before the start of a seven-year period in which God will pour out His wrath on an unbelieving world. The tribulation will climax with the bodily return of Christ, after which He will establish a perfect reign that lasts 1,000 years. Once that reign has concluded and one final rebellion crushed, God creates a new heaven and earth and the eternal state begins.



The pre-tribulation rapture position holds that just as Jesus had two aspects to His first coming - suffering and glory - there will be two aspects to His second coming: love and judgment. But what biblical evidence is there to support such a position?

First, the tribulation period described in Scripture is a time specifically set aside by God to once again deal with Israel in particular, and as such, it does not concern the Church. Of it, the prophet Jeremiah said: "Alas! That day is so great there is none like it; it is a time of **distress for Jacob**; yet he shall be saved out of it" (Jeremiah 30:7, emphasis added). Daniel, who was given the prophetic timetable of the end times, records the vision given him this way: "Seventy weeks are decreed **about your people and your holy city**, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place" (Daniel 9:24, emphasis added).

These two Old Testament statements match up perfectly with the revelation given to John the Apostle. In chapters 1—3 of Revelation, the Church is named or referred to 19 times; however, in chapter 4, John is told: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (Revelation 4:1). From chapter 4 to chapter 19, which covers in detail the future tribulation period, the Church is never referenced. Commencing with Christ's return in chapter 19 and ending with chapter 22, the Church is once again mentioned 7 more times, and it is only in reference with the Church returning with Christ, not being caught up to be with Him. Paul confirms this when he writes about the rapture: "so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, **at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints** [those who have already died]" (1 Thessalonians 3:13, emphasis added).

This makes sense as the Church is referred to in Scripture as the Bride of Christ – those who He has rescued and saved from wrath and punishment. In fact, about this, Paul says: "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus **who delivers us from the wrath to come**" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, emphasis added). Later in 1 Thessalonians, Paul says: "**For God has not destined us [the Church] for wrath**, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9, emphasis added).

The imagery of the Jewish wedding ritual is on full display in the end times and rapture event, when Christ comes to claim His Bride. Jewish marriage contracts were binding, with the parents usually arranging the marriage (choosing the bride) and the Father or the groom paying a bridal price or dowry for the bride, which also included various gifts. The betrothal then occurred, where the bride and groom both gave gifts to each other. This wedding imagery portrays what Christ has done for us. The Father has selected/chosen (elected) a Bride for His Son. The Son has paid the ultimate price for His Bride and has secured her forever. He has also given gifts to His Bride (spiritual gifts) and is now preparing for the wedding.

After the betrothal, the groom would return to his father's house to prepare a house and wedding chamber for his bride. He would return for his bride at an unexpected moment, so the bride had to be ready constantly. When he returned, he would take his bride back to his father's house to the chamber he had prepared. He and his wife would then stay there for seven days. When they emerged, a great wedding feast would occur. Jesus alludes to this series of events when He told His disciples, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3).

This imagery dovetails perfectly with the events described by the prophet Daniel. The Bride of Christ will be taken away for seven years (the 70th week of Daniel, which corresponds to the tribulation period), and after that Christ and His Bride will return to earth so that Christ may set up His kingdom amidst a great celebration.

The New Testament never portrays the Bride of Christ (the Church) ever experiencing the wrath of God. Instead, Jesus tells His followers to escape what is to come: "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who **dwell on the face of the whole earth**. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength **to escape all these things that are going to take place**, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36, emphasis added).

In the book of Revelation, Christ tells the faithful church at Philadelphia that "Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, **I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world**, to try those who dwell on the earth" (Revelation 3:10, emphasis added). The Greek words translated "keep from," *tereo* and *ek* mean to "guard out of." The faithful church of Philadelphia is a type of the faithful, true believing Church which will be present during the days before the Tribulation and be removed before it begins. Clearly one cannot be "kept from" something that they are called upon to endure.

Believers are not only Christ's Bride, but also God's ambassadors here on earth. Paul confirms this fact when he says: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). In biblical times (and currently today as well), ambassadors were recalled when it was time to make war upon an enemy.

The absence of the Church after the rapture leads to the breakout of lawlessness and the unveiling of the Antichrist. Paul discusses this truth when he writes: "Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? **And you know what is restraining him now** so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. **Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way**" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-7, emphasis added). When all the possibilities are examined, only the absence of the Church adequately explains the "he" who is taken out of the way so that lawlessness may be given full reign upon the earth.

One last piece of biblical evidence that supports a pre-tribulation rapture is the sheep and goats judgment, which occurs immediately after Christ's return, described by Jesus: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (Matthew 25:31-34). If all Christians were raptured when Christ descended in judgment (cf. Revelation 19), there would be no "sheep" left on the earth to separate from the goats. But there would be believers on the earth if a rapture had occurred 7+ years beforehand.

Some have tried to say that a pre-tribulation rapture is a relatively new teaching of the Church, and therefore should be dismissed. However, such is not the case. A sermon that has survived from Ephraem the Syrian (306-373 AD), fully describes a pre-tribulation rapture: "All the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins."

So in conclusion, there is no debate of whether or not a rapture will occur; the Bible is clear on that question. As to when the rapture will take place, no one knows the exact timing of the event. Jesus confirms this in Luke when He says, "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Luke 12:40).

This simple statement also validates the pre-tribulation rapture position. If Christ came at any time for His Church other than before the tribulation, the Church would obviously expect His coming. The events recorded in Christ's Olivet discourse (Matthew 24) and in the book of Revelation would be hard to miss. The presence of the Antichrist, the tribulation, and all the global celestial occurrences prophesied to occur would signal to all believers alive at that time that Christ's return was near.

But instead, Jesus says He'll come at a time when no one thinks He will. This concept of imminence sends a message to the Church to keep herself ready at all times, living in a way that glorifies God. Further, this truth produces thankfulness and comfort for all believers, which is how Paul ends his remarks concerning the rapture: "Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

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