

Rapture! Really?

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The word “rapture” is derived from the Latin term *raptus* which meant “to snatch or seize.” Birds of prey are called *raptors*, since they snatch up their prey. A person is said to be *rapt* with attention when something has so *seized* his interest that he is *caught up* in it. And we understand Solomon’s meaning when he speaks of a husband being *enraptured* with his wife’s love (**Proverbs 5:19**).

If we were reading **1 Thessalonians 4:17** in the Latin Vulgate (a fourth-century translation of the Bible), we would find a verb form of *raptus* appearing in Paul’s description of how Christians will be “caught up” in the clouds at the Lord’s return. It is this fact that has given rise to the modern use of “rapture” among many Bible believers. And applied in this limited, literal sense, “rapture” is certainly an acceptable way to describe what will be experienced by Christians on the Last Day. The term, however, is generally used in connection with much more.

In his 1998 book, *Rapture: Under Attack*, best-selling author and champion of the “pre-Tribulation” view of “the Rapture,” Tim LaHaye, spells out point-by-point how he believes events will unfold in the final days of the world as we know it. In condensed form, his play-by-play runs as follows:

1. Jesus will descend from heaven, but His appearing will be witnessed by the righteous only: “...anyone who does not participate in the Rapture will not actually see it, for it will occur in the ‘*twinkling of an eye*’” (p. 38).
2. The dead in Christ will then rise (with changed bodies).
3. Those who are alive and remain will also be changed.
4. Both groups will then be caught up (raptured) together to meet the Lord in the air.
5. The Lord will take the raptured to His Father’s house.
6. While in the Father’s house, the raptured will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (but with no threat of being condemned).
7. While the Lord and the raptured are in the Father’s house, the “Great Tribulation” will take place on Earth (during which time those “left behind”—those not raptured—will have opportunity to turn to the Lord).
8. After a number of years has passed on Earth (seven, in LaHaye’s view), the Lord and the raptured will enjoy the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, after which Jesus will descend to earth with the raptured to set up His earthly kingdom.
9. This earthly kingdom will persist for a thousand years (during “the millennium”). At its close, the wicked will then be resurrected and judged.

So goes LaHaye’s understanding of how “the Rapture” and surrounding events will transpire. And so goes the understanding of many of our Bible-believing friends. But is this, in fact, what the Bible teaches? To some extent, yes. But on many points, no.

To begin with, note that this view of the “end times” teaches that the Lord’s return will be a two-stage affair. Jesus will return once to gather the raptured and take them to His Father’s house, then return again to set up His kingdom on earth (a notion, by the way, entirely out of step with the Lord’s teaching, see **John 18:36**). LaHaye attempts to support this dualistic view of Christ’s return by appealing to **Titus 2:13**

where Paul states that Christians should be “*looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*” He contends that “*the blessed hope*” and “*glorious appearing*” are distinct events—the two different comings of Christ. But is that the natural reading of the passage? Would someone without preconceived ideas understand Paul’s statement in that way? Seems highly unlikely. And what’s more, the Scriptures simply do not speak of a second, second coming—a third coming, in other words. “*To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation*” (**Hebrews 9:28**). The Bible speaks of Jesus coming again, not again and again.

And what about the nature of His second coming? LaHaye asserts that only the righteous will see Jesus at His second appearing. But that’s not what the Bible says. John wrote: “*Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him*” (**Revelation 1:7a**). The soldiers who pierced Jesus’ flesh with spear and nails, and the people who moved political mountains to make it possible that day, will have been dead for over nineteen centuries when Jesus returns. Yet they will see Him. And the clear implication is that they will not be among the righteous when they do. Righteous or unrighteous, dead or alive, everyone will see Jesus when He appears. And, it should be noted, everyone will hear Him. There is some disagreement among proponents of “the Rapture” over whether or not the lost will hear the Lord when He returns to gather His own. But the Scriptures leave little doubt:

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (**John 5:28, 29**).

All the wicked dead will hear Him. Shall not the wicked living?

Which brings us to the resurrection. According to LaHaye and others who espouse his view of “the Rapture,” there will actually be two resurrections—one of the righteous at Jesus’ first appearing, then a second of the wicked at the close of “the millennium.” Two resurrections and two judgments, each couplet (resurrection and judgment) for only one category of persons. But the Bible paints a very different picture. Paul said to Felix, “*I have hope in God...that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust*” (**Acts 24:15**). One resurrection involving both categories of people. Jesus, in the aforementioned passage in John, affirmed the same thing: “*...the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth...those who have done good...and those who have done evil...*” (**John 5:28, 29**). Commensurate with Jesus’ single second coming, there will be a single resurrection of all the dead...and a single judgment of all humanity:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats (**Matthew 25:31, 32**).

Jesus is coming back. His return may be sudden, but it will not be secret. It will be visible to all, audible to all, and its accompanying judgment will be final for all. And that finality is why it’s so important to be aware of the errors of the doctrine we’ve been examining. By promising two returns, the doctrine of “the Rapture” promises people a second chance—another seven years, according to LaHaye, another three and a half years, according to others—but a second chance all the same. A second chance to get right with God if the first chance was squandered. But the Bible makes no such promise. When Jesus returns, “*all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him*” (**Revelation 1:7**). Because they’ll have a second chance? No. Because they will have wasted their last chance.

And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming (**1 John 2:28**).