

The 'rapture'

Introduction.

My purpose here is to begin to answer three questions:

- What is 'the rapture' and where does the idea come from
- Why is it mistaken
- What are its implications for us as Christians and for God's world.

I emphasize 'begin to answer' since time won't permit a full treatment. In any case it's much better for you to tease out the detail yourselves. I am not an academic theologian; I try to be a theologian in the normal Christian sense: that is, of seeking to understand more deeply each day what it is that God has done for His good creation, including, amazingly, me.

I'm aware that what I shall say may challenge deeply held views; some of you may believe me to be entirely mistaken, even heretical. That is your prerogative; I would merely ask that you make sure you understand what I am saying and that you examine the evidence for yourselves, to be sure that the 'foot isn't in the other boot', so to speak.

A great deal has been written about this subject in recent times and many Christians are deeply interested in being 'ready for the rapture'. But, what is meant by 'rapture', and where does the idea come from?

What does it mean?

Although the roots are earlier the modern ideas began to be formulated around the early 19th century. John Nelson Darby, who is regarded as a 'father' of 'dispensationalism', was an early supporter and his beliefs were formalised and popularised in the early 20th century by Cyrus I. Scofield in his reference Bible. Many Christians will have come into contact with the 'rapture' through the popular 'left behind' fiction of Tim LaHay and Jerry B. Jenkins. The first 'left behind' book deals with the event called the 'rapture' and its immediate aftermath. Of a sudden, in a moment in time, there is a worldwide phenomenon of people disappearing. Drivers disappear from their cars causing mayhem on the highway: pilots disappear from their seats in the airplane cockpit; men return home to find their wives and children gone, all children under the age of 12 disappear, their clothes left lying where they had been. This is the 'rapture': the taking up into heaven of the living righteous so that they will escape the tribulation, which will shortly follow with the seven-year reign of the Antichrist which culminates in the final appearance of Christ, the battle of Armageddon and the beginning of the 1000 year reign of Christ on the earth.

There are variations but substantially this is the view held by a significant number of US Christians and it has many adherents in the United Kingdom.

What are its biblical foundations?

Its proponents link Thessalonians, Revelation, Matthew, Ezekiel and Daniel as the basis for this scheme. They believe that much old Testament prophecy remains to be fulfilled, that Revelation paints a picture of what we can expect at the end of time and that the 'end times' predicted in e.g. Daniel, Ezekiel and Matthew are upon us: we are living close to the end and Christians need to be ready. Only Bible-believing, Jesus-trusting Christians will be rescued from the disaster and destruction of the tribulation.

So, in broad terms: the 'rapture' is understood as Jesus coming to take up the righteous believers into heaven so that they will escape the rule of Antichrist, the great tribulation and the final showdown on the plain of Megiddo, the battle of Armageddon.

So, why do I think it mistaken?

Let me say at the start that there is one thing about this theology with which I can agree. It encourages Christians to be ready for Jesus' return; that should be good. It is, after all, following

what Jesus himself said.¹ But ready in what way? I shall come to that later.

The origin of the word 'rapture' is in the Latin *raptiemur*, which translates the Greek word *arpagesoumetha*, found in Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonika (4:17), with the meaning 'caught up' or 'taken'. The word actually means to capture, to seize, take by force, to snatch; not an entirely comfortable thought. Here it is necessary to say something about context. Any treatment of scripture must be contextual. Texts must not be taken out of context and, where a text presents difficulties, the text must defer to the wider scriptural story. It is worth pointing out immediately that the notion of 'rapture' as described above, falls even before the first hurdle. It is presumed that the point of the 'rapture' is to remove the saints from the tribulation.² It has to be asked then, why are "*the dead in Christ (to) rise first*" (1Thess. 4:16). Since they are in the Paradise of God waiting for the New Creation they are surely immune from the tribulation?

But it is really the next phrase which helps us determine the meaning; "*to meet the Lord in the air*". The word translated 'to meet' is the Greek *apantesis* which has the simple meaning of 'to meet' or encounter. In normal use, if I go to meet someone I have a coffee and chat and we return to our respective homes. Or I may meet my daughter at the railway station but I don't get on the train and go back with her. In the passage 1Thess. 4:15-18 Jesus is descending from heaven & we who are left, together with 'the dead in Christ' are caught up to meet him in the air. There is no suggestion that Jesus then turns round and takes us back up, and nowhere else in scripture is there a suggestion that the 'dead in Christ' are doing anything other than awaiting the Final Judgement and the Resurrection from the dead. The most straightforward reading is that we meet Jesus and accompany him back here to begin his reign. This also happens to be its natural contemporary usage. This language was used in this way of city dignitaries going out to meet an honoured guest and bringing him back into the city: and it was used for the Roman 'Triumphs', the return of victorious generals and emperors. This reading is reinforced when we read the parable of the 10 bridesmaids; five wise and five foolish³. In verse 6 Matthew uses the same word, *apantesis*, in the phrase "*come out to meet (the bridegroom)*". The bridesmaids/virgins go to meet him in order to bring him in, not to go away with him.

But we've not finished with the problems in Thessalonians yet: what question is Paul dealing with? Here in chapter 4 verse 13 he addresses himself to a specific pastoral issue clearly of concern to the believers. In the early Church some Christians expected Jesus to return within their lifetime, but what was the fate of the faithful who had already died? The Thessalonika Christians dilemma could be put like this: 'we were expecting Jesus to return and rescue us from death. But some have already died; what will happen to them?'. What is the fate of those who die before Jesus' return? Paul reassures them as he does us: we don't "grieve as others do who have no hope"⁴. He points out that it is Jesus' own resurrection that confirms for them that they too will rise; but also that they will not precede those who have already died "in Christ"⁵. At the sound of the trumpet they will rise and, together with the living faithful, will meet Jesus "in the air". We must note two things: first, Paul is responding to a pastoral need, not elucidating a doctrine of the last days; second, the sounding of the trumpet is linked contextually to the "coming of the Lord" in verse 15. Apart from *Revelation* which deserves a separate treatment, the sound of the trumpet in the New Testament is usually associated with the final judgement. This is also the case with the phrase "*the coming of the Lord*" which, apart from here, occurs in Acts chapter 2 at the beginning of Peter's first 'evangelical sermon' and twice in the letter of James⁶.

The passage in Acts requires more detailed consideration than we have space here. Briefly; Peter responds to the sneers by claiming, "*this is what Joel talked about*". He quotes the familiar prophecy, but with an unexpected conclusion. Forced by the epoch changing event of the resurrection Peter has come to realise that the restoration foretold in Joel 2:31 & 3:14 has begun but it will be worked out in a way unanticipated by 1st century Judaism. The Messiah has come but

1 Matthew 24:36-51.

2 We note that there are different schemes with some having a mid-tribulation rapture.

3 Matthew 25.

4 1 Thess. 4:13.

5 1 Thess. 4:16

6 James 5: 7,8

God's purpose for the Jewish Messiah is not limited to nationality or geography, it is cosmic! We look back to the Genesis promises and forward to the complete renewal which is anticipated in Ezekiel but redefined in Revelation.⁷ It is this that Paul speaks about in Romans 8 "... *the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom and the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves....*".

We are not here looking at a brief, 'secret' trip to 'rescue a remnant', with the much later, post/mid tribulation conversion of the Jews, possibly forced⁸. Simply, the "coming of the Lord", as the trumpets show, denotes the Day when Jesus, the 'Word made flesh', the Lord of creation and Jewish Messiah, will come again to judge, redeem and renew. There is no place here for a lengthy excursion somewhere in the sky, while the unbelievers on earth suffer tribulation, it simply is not biblical.

This is confirmed when we look at Paul's next letter to the same church. The believers in Thessalonika had become unsettled by reports that "*the day of the Lord has already come*"⁹ Even a text might be too late to inform us of that event, when He comes all will know!

Belief in 'the Rapture' is linked in many people's minds with being 'left behind'; if we are not 'raptured' we will be left behind to face tribulation. This is based on Matthew 24: 36-44, but misreads the text. First, we should read through to the end of the chapter, but second, look closely at the text. The reference to 'the days of Noah' provides a clue. The whole chapter is Jesus speaking of his second coming (not his third!), and the people who are left are the faithful.

I hope I have made the point sufficiently strongly to encourage you to check your Bibles. I urge you not to follow the 'route maps' provided by 'rapturists', or any one else for that matter, which take you through the Bible without proper regard to context. Rather take the time to go deep into the text. Use more than one translation and use commentaries to assist you, but stick with the text.

To summarize, 'rapture' in the popular sense is not found in scripture. One should always be wary of constructing a doctrine on a single text but in this case the text in question points in quite the opposite direction. The texts provided in support by the principal Bible Commentary used by proponents (Scofield) can do so only by leaps of imagination that cannot bear scrutiny.

What are its implications for Christians and for God's world.

The practical implications of belief in the 'rapture' may not be immediately apparent. Were it simply a matter of personal faith, with subsequent devotion to a life and acts of righteousness, we might pass it off as a minor aberration. Such is not the case. Belief that the 'end times' have begun in our generation and that the 'rapture' is in the immediate future has led to the development of at least two quite contra-biblical themes.

First, with regard to Creation; we may not be, but scripture is clear: the world God made is good and he loves it. Pre-millennial dispensationalists make much of Revelation's wars and plagues, looking forward to the destruction of Armageddon. Listen, then, to this from Revelation ch.11

*"Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and **for destroying those who destroy the earth.**" (16-18)*

⁷ Ezekiel 40- (40-42)-48; cf Revelation 21,22. The Temple dimensions in Ezekiel are massive whilst in Revelation there is no longer need of a temple but the dimensions of the city are, humanly speaking, impossible; it is Babel revisited (Genesis 11). Of course it is 'Babel' with a difference. Acts 2 typologically begins to reverse Genesis 11; where human language became confused, we now have Godly language: a discussion about which is out of place here.

⁸ In some systems; in others acknowledgement of 'Jesus Christ as Lord' is deemed not necessary for Jews.

⁹ 2 Thessalonians 2:2.

Environmentalism is very much in the news. It may surprise you to hear that many of those who believe in 'rapture' theology and dispensationalism see no point in working to save the planet: after all, why bother if Jesus is coming soon to wipe it all out: of course, if they are right, they have a point. But here, in Revelation itself, the misunderstood 'apocalypse', we find that God will judge and destroy *"those who destroy the earth"*. Whatever else, that should give us pause for thought. And in the final chapters of John's book we see the incarnational, post-Messianic, revised version of Ezekiel's vision. The river which flowed from the temple in Ezekiel now flows from the "throne of God" Rev. 22:1. As in Ezekiel's vision there are trees on each side of the river and they produce fruit each month; but where in Ezekiel "Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing", (47:12), this is extended in John's vision where "the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations" (22:2). Since creation God's world has been "in bondage to decay" and even now "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God", so that it can "be set free ... and....obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God"¹⁰. If God loves his creation, shouldn't we?

When Christians appear to encourage conflict and war, when we speak words of hate for our enemies, when we ignore the pleas for justice of those oppressed by governments and factions and international conglomerates, we are in very real danger of finding ourselves in conflict with God. Worse, we will have aligned ourselves with the work of Satan, with the 'lawless one', the deceiver. Our disregard for the environment on which we all depend is at odds with God's inherent creativity. We must remind ourselves that the resurrection, for which as Christians we hope, will be a bodily resurrection just as it was with Jesus; and we will populate the new heaven and new earth where God will dwell with us¹¹.

Second, in parallel with having little regard for the environment there is an urge to 'hasten the end'. Since everything is going to end in war and destruction we should not seek peace. It seems futile to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" whilst spending billions on armaments aimed at destroying the Middle East. When US Christian leaders urge a nuclear attack on Iran shouldn't we be concerned. It is God's business how he plans to bring about the beautiful vision of Revelation (see chapters 21 & 22). Our part is to do what Jesus told us, 'tell people the good news'. What is at stake here is nothing less than the Gospel. Scripture makes clear that we have work to do, and God has only ever asked his people to cooperate with him in the work of redemption, not of destruction. When, instead of speaking peace, we speak words of hatred and war, when we stereotype people of other faiths, (and even our own), we are in denial. Our faith in Christ has been replaced by faith in human institutions and our own effort and strength.

As people the world over suffer the effects of the 'Christian' West's experiments with financial instruments, with ecology and the environment: where half the world experiences fuel poverty, water deprivation, food shortages and preventable illnesses, when 'democratic' countries bow to the demands of oppressive regimes on the basis of 'self-interest', we who call ourselves 'Christian' had better wake up. We need to be ready; not for a 'rapture' to take us away but for a righteous Judge who will ask "did you do this for the least of my brethren". When the bridegroom comes will we be found sneaking off to find a corner shop to buy batteries or shall we be tapped on the shoulder where we are bending in the dirt to lift up a beggar? I know which I'd rather be.

For romantic ideas based spuriously on unrelated and/ or illogical texts we have allowed the oppression of Palestinians in the Holy Land, including Palestinian Christians whose attachment to the land goes back hundreds of years. By our attachment to material good, for consumerism, we have colluded in the enslavement of children on the Indian sub-continent. Because of our dependence upon oil and other commodities we have used economic might and military muscle to deprive the poor of their daily bread in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. If Jesus is to be believed it will not matter how loudly we cry 'Lord, Lord', nor how exciting and stirring our songs of praise; we will find ourselves outcasts of the kingdom.

But if we will only address ourselves to the real gospel, including the one we find in Revelation there is hope. What Revelation describes is the common history of mankind. There have always

¹⁰ Romans 8: 19-23

¹¹ Revelation 21:3

been wars, earthquakes, plague, famine. Antichrist has been around as long as history, since idolatry is antichrist. The horrors that Jesus warns about began soon after his ascension. Within 40 years the words of Matthew 24 had been fulfilled. We have lived in the 'end times' ever since. We are, of course, nearer the end now than we were, but that is nothing more than a function of time, it doesn't go backwards, yet! But Revelation is much more than a litany of destruction: if it is that. Of its 330 verses, 110 are given over to worship and praise, which makes it, Psalms apart, one of the most 'praise-rich' books in the whole Bible. That's not something we often hear¹².

The gospel of hope is still 'good news' and is still to be proclaimed, not as a threat but as an invitation. Jesus invites us:

"It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." (Revelation 22: 16 – 21).

12 Note: in order to check whether I'm right you will need to read the whole book through & **listen** to it, Enjoy!