

Do Catholics believe in “The Rapture”?

By Graham Osborne

Interestingly, the word “rapture”, does not actually occur in Scripture. It comes to us via the Latin Vulgate [the “official” Bible translation of the Catholic Church], where the Latin word, “rapiemur” – to snatch up or carry off – is used in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16. Through a series of Latin transformations, we arrive at the English word, “rapture”.

Strictly speaking, Catholics do believe in a form of rapture: a bodily assumption into Heaven of all the faithful, both living and dead, at Jesus second and final coming and judgement. This will be preceded by the appearance of the Antichrist and an associated period of intense persecution of Christians known as the tribulation.

But there is a new, often very anti-Catholic, form of “rapture” that is now taking many evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant denominations by storm. A form absolutely foreign to the first seventeen centuries of Christianity [Catholic or Protestant], and made especially popular by recent books and movies like the infamous “Left Behind” series.

While this new “rapture” comes in many varieties, it generally involves dividing Biblical history into a series of “dispensations” or periods, and then adding a secret second coming of Jesus [*before* his Final Coming], where he will snatch or “rapture” believers bodily up to heaven, leaving all others behind to endure an intense, seven year tribulation initiated by the Anti-Christ. This will be followed by yet a third return and judgement by Jesus, at which point, he will establish his Kingdom on earth for a period of one thousand years. At the end of this earthly reign, there will be yet another [final] judgement, and then the end of time as we know it.

So let’s take a closer look at the Biblical claims of this troubled teaching.

The Kingdom is Now!

Rapturists claim that God’s Kingdom on earth has not yet begun in any form, basing this on their interpretation of the thousand year reign of Christ [known as The Millennium] described in Revelation 20:4. As mentioned, they believe Jesus will begin this millennial [literally, a thousand years] kingdom reign at his *third* coming, *after* the “rapture”.

But even a cursory reading of Scripture clearly reveals that Jesus already established his kingdom when he was on earth over 2000 years ago. This kingdom is still growing even now, like the mustard seed parable, with Jesus now reigning from Heaven through his Church, the Body of Christ on earth. However, evil, though defeated, still has power to assail this kingdom. The kingdom in its final form has not yet been *fully* established. But when Jesus comes again in glory at his second and final coming, he will not only decisively destroy Satan, evil and death, but he will also bring to fulfilment this Kingdom, establishing a new heaven and earth as well, where God will dwell together with all his people forever [cf Rev 21:1-4, Rev 11:15, CCC 671-681].

Perhaps the clearest evidence that Jesus already established his kingdom at his first coming comes from Luke 17:20-21, where the Pharisees specifically asked Jesus “when the kingdom of God was coming”. He answered: “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed... for behold, the kingdom of God *is in the midst of you.*” In other words, it is here – now! Similarly, in Mat 6:30-33, Jesus tells his followers not to worry about the worldly needs of daily life, but instead to “seek first his *kingdom* and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well”.

And in Mat 16:19, Jesus gives Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven”, promising that whatever he binds “on earth shall be bound in heaven”. Shortly after this, Jesus assures people that, “truly... there are *some standing here who will not taste death* before they see the Son of man coming *in his*

kingdom" [Matthew 16:27]. Jesus is not talking about establishing his kingdom only in Heaven here, as some rapturists try to claim. Jesus' "coming in his kingdom" will happen on earth in some form, and while some of these people he is talking to are still alive! We aren't waiting for a secret return of Jesus at the rapture, followed by yet a third return to inaugurate the beginning of the kingdom. The kingdom is already here!

Thousand year reign?

But what about Jesus' thousand year reign spoken of in Rev 20:4? Rapturists argue that if Jesus really did establish his kingdom on earth when he first came some 2000 years ago, it should be over by now, insisting that this period of time must be a literal thousand years.

The Church would answer that Revelation is a highly symbolic book, and it uses numbers and periods of time symbolically throughout. 666 as the number of the beast in Rev 13:8 is a perfect example of this, as is the 144,000 of Revelation 14:3-5 [think 12 tribes representing the Old Testament, x 12 Apostles representing the New Testament, x 1000]. 1000 is a Biblical number that typically represents large, unspecified amounts or periods of time. Christians usually understand Jesus' thousand year kingdom reign in Rev 20 as a symbolically long period of time happening *now*, instituted by Jesus at his first coming.

One Final Coming of Jesus – and it Will Not Be Secret!

There will only be one final coming of Jesus, not two or three as some rapturists claim. Nowhere in Scripture does it speak about a third coming of Jesus. And his second and final coming certainly won't be secret! In both Luke 17:24 and Matthew 24:27, Jesus states clearly that "as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man." No one will miss it!

Ironically, many of the key Scripture verses used to argue for a secret rapture actually clearly contradict such a concept. For example, 1 Corinthians 15:51-55 is an often-quoted rapture verse: "the *trumpet will sound*, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable". Note the reference to a trumpet sounding! Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 is another favourite "secret rapture" verse: "the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of *the trumpet of God*." "A cry of command... the trumpet of God"?! There will be nothing secret about Jesus' second coming...

The Tribulation Comes *Before* the Rapture!

Another true novelty of rapturism is the idea that believers will be brought bodily into Heaven – raptured – *before* the great tribulation, thereby escaping it. And there is much disagreement on this particular point, even within the various rapture camps. Baptist Scripture scholar Dale Moody puts this succinctly: "Belief in a pre-tribulational rapture . . . contradicts all three chapters in the New Testament that mention the tribulation and the rapture together (Mark 13:24–27; Matt. 24:26–31; 2 Thess. 2:1–12). . . . The theory is so biblically bankrupt that the usual defense is made using three passages that *do not even mention a tribulation* (John 14:3; 1 Thess. 4:17; 1 Cor. 15:52).

Moody is bang on. There is not a word of Scripture that testifies to a pre-Tribulation rapture, and the 3 verses most used to try to establish a secret rapture have not a single word to say about the tribulation or its timing.

But there are several places that clearly teach that the tribulation will come *before* Jesus raptures his "elect". For example, in Mark 13:24, Jesus teaches that "in those days, *AFTER* that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in

clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” It just doesn’t get any clearer than this! And Matthew 24 says virtually the same thing!

Revelation 6:9-11 also testifies that witnesses for Christ will not be spared from the final Tribulation: “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne... they were each given a white robe and told to rest... until the number of their fellow servants... should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been”.

Similarly, Rev 7:9-13 speaks of “a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation... standing before... the Lamb... clothed in white robes”. We find that they also “have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” They experienced the tribulation, so the rapture must come afterwards.

And finally, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 says that “concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ... Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion *comes first*, and the man of lawlessness [the antichrist] is revealed”.

It is the antichrist who unleashes the great persecutions of the Tribulation. So again, St Paul is making it very clear here that Jesus’ coming will happen *after* the tribulation. And contrary to popular rapturist opinion, this verse is talking about Jesus’ *final* coming at the end of time, and not some secret coming with an associated rapture. The rapture is not even mentioned here!

Additionally, 2 Thessalonians 2:8 says that, “Jesus will destroy him [the antichrist] by his appearing and his coming”. This must mean that 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is referring to Jesus’ coming at the end of time, and not some pre-Tribulation rapture, because if the antichrist is destroyed by Jesus here, there can’t possibly be a Tribulation afterwards, because it is the antichrist, now destroyed, who will initiate the Tribulation.

The Rapture Verses – A Closer Look

There are several verse that typically get used to “prove” the “secret” rapture. The best known of these is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17: “the Lord himself will descend from heaven with... with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are *left*, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air”.

But here is the problem. Catholics *do* believe in a bodily rapture at the final coming and that’s exactly what 1 Thes 4:15-17 is talking about. It says *nothing* about a secret pre-tribulation rapture, a millennial reign of Christ, or any of the other doctrinal novelties associated with “rapturism”.

But ironically, it presents the Catholic teaching on the rapture perfectly! St Paul is simply reassuring the Thessalonians that those who have died already will not be at a disadvantage to those still alive at the second and final coming of Jesus. In fact the dead will actually “rise first” into Heaven, St Paul confirms. “We would not have you... grieve as others do who have no hope... therefore comfort one another with these words”, he concludes.

1 Corinthians 15:51-55 is another popular rapture “proof text”: “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, *at the last trumpet*. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable... then shall come to pass the saying...: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory?”

But again, this verse says nothing against the traditional Christian teaching of how those believers, dead and alive, will be taken up into heaven at the Final Coming. But it is actually quite problematic for the rapturists. A key thing to note is that this all happens at “the *LAST* trumpet” [1 Cor 15:52]. So this verse is not talking about some secret coming of Jesus in the midst of time, but his *final* coming.

Additionally, this verse adds that at this point, “Death is swallowed up in victory” [1 Cor 15:54]. Death is destroyed forever only at Jesus’ Final Coming and judgement, *not* before. So again, this cannot be talking about a pre-Tribulation rapture followed by a thousand year reign of Christ, as rapturists try to claim it does. How they can miss these clear indications I cannot understand. But miss them they do...

But here is a stunner. A closer look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and 1 Cor 15:51-55 against the context of all of Scripture reveals one indisputable piece of evidence that proves beyond a doubt that these verses are talking about Jesus’ final coming at the end of time, and not a secret rapture in the midst of history.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, not only are the living “raptured”, but those already dead are raised as well, [“the Lord himself will descend from heaven... And the dead in Christ will rise first”]? When are those already dead actually supposed to be raised? Is at a rapture in the midst of history, or at the end of time when Jesus comes to judge the whole world? Over and over again, Jesus teaches that the dead will be raised up on “*the last day*” – when Jesus comes *at the end of time*.

For example, in John 6:40, 44, Jesus says: “this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and *I will raise him up at the last day*... No one can come to me unless the Father... draws him; and *I will raise him up at the last day*.” Similarly, in John 11:24, Martha says to Jesus “I know that he (Lazarus) will *rise again in the resurrection at the last day*.” And to remove all doubt, in John 5:28-29, Jesus tells us clearly that those already dead will be raised at Jesus’ coming *at the last judgement*: “the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs 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 judgment” [John 5:28-29].

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and 1 Cor 15:51-55 are both talking about when the “dead will be raised” [1 Cor 15:52]. According to Jesus, the dead will be raised on the LAST day – at His final coming at the end of time – not at a “rapture” in the midst of human history. There is no getting around this. These verses absolutely cannot possibly attest to a secret mid-history rapture!

John 14:3 is another favourite rapturist verse: “And when 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.” But again, it teaches nothing other than traditional Christian teaching on the end times – Jesus coming at the end of time to bring the faithful to Heaven. It is absolutely silent concerning rapturist doctrines.

Left Behind? Not Quite...

And finally, let’s consider Luke 17:34-37, and it’s parallel in Matthew 24:2-42. Here Jesus reflects both on his final coming at the end of time, as well as his coming in judgement against the Jews who have rejected him, resulting in part in a coming great tribulation and the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70AD by the Roman army. Again, the tribulation he speaks of here comes *prior* to his coming in glory: “Immediately *after* the tribulation... they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” [Matthew 24:30].

But carrying on, Jesus adds that, “so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. There will be two women grinding together; one will be taken and the other left”. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming [Matthew 24:38-42].

At first glance, this does seem to sound like it might support a pre-tribulation rapture. But in the parallel of this passage in Luke 17:34-37, the Apostles actually ask Jesus *where* the ones taken will actually be taken: “‘Where, Lord?’ He said to them, ‘Where the body is, there also the vultures will gather.’” A dead body with vultures? That’s not Heaven!

Where Have Rapturists Gone Wrong?

So how is it that those believing in a pre-Tribulation rapture could have gone so far afield? Mostly through misinterpretation of Scripture, particularly the books of Revelation, Daniel and Ezekiel.

Neglecting the constant teaching of the Christian Church, and the writings of the Early Church Fathers, they have missed the fact that both these books had primary fulfillments centuries ago, in the days shortly after they were written. They miss the fact that the very first line of Revelation confirms that this book shows “what must *soon* take place”. This does not mean that these books could have future fulfillments as well. In fact the Church certainly teaches this about the Book of Revelation in particular

They miss the destruction of the Temple in 70AD as a prophetic coming of Jesus in power and glory in judgement of the Jewish people, mistakenly associating Jesus’ words about this event with some future coming of his. Recall that Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, *this generation will not pass away* before all these things take place” (Mark 13:30). He was talking about things that would happen soon – in the lifetime of the people he was talking to. In particular, he was talking about the destruction of the Jewish Temple and Jesus coming in judgement on those who rejected him. But this “coming of the son of man” in judgement would take the form of the Roman army at the temple gates in 70 AD.

They also miss the “tribulation” of the Christian Church in the first few centuries via the double persecution by pagan Rome [the Beast of Revelation] and the Jews [the woman or harlot of Revelation]. For example, the early Church Fathers testified that Rev 13:8 “the number of the beast... is six hundred and sixty-six”, referred to Caesar Nero [in Roman numerals, his name adds up to exactly 666!].

And what about the rebuilding of the temple, often, a key part of the rapturist puzzle? Christians do not look to a rebuilding of the Old Covenant temple in Jerusalem. Jesus has clearly revealed that his body is the new temple of the New Covenant: “destroy this temple and I will raise I up on the third day” [John 2:19].

And every Christian understands that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit [1 Corinthians 6:19-20], by virtue of our Baptism. There is a New Covenant and a new temple. The Old Covenant temple is done...

This just scratches the surface of some of the Biblical anomalies that rapturists have tried to advance, but it gives a good sense of where the various rapture theories have floundered on the rocks. But unfortunately, these misguided teachings can have serious consequences for the faith and actions of those who succumb to them.

Hebrews 9:25-28 But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.