

Was There a First-Century Rapture?

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The second coming of Christ and all related events were predicted to occur within the first century. Along with Christ's return, the resurrection of the dead, and the judgment, Paul predicted a so-called *rapture*:

¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷Then *we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*, and so we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thess. 4:16-17, NASB throughout.)

The Greek for "caught up" is ἀρπάζω (*harpazo*). In the Vulgate (c. A.D. 400), Jerome rendered it in Latin as *rapiemur* (*raptus*) from which we get the familiar term *rapture*.

What were the living Christians promised?

The first-century *living* Christians were predicted to have at least three startling experiences within their earthly lifetime:

1. They would *see* Jesus at his return:

Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they *see the Son of Man coming* in His kingdom. (Matt. 16:28)

2. As they rose into the air to meet Jesus in the clouds, their physical bodies would be instantly transformed to be like Christ's glorious body:

²⁰For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹who will *transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory...* (Phil. 3:20-21)

We know that when He appears, *we will be like Him*, because *we will see Him just as He is*. (1 John 3:2b)

⁵⁰Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Behold, I tell you a mystery; *we will not all sleep*, but *we will all be changed*, ⁵²in 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 will be changed*. ⁵³For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on

immortality. (1 Cor. 15:50-53)

3. They would be the bride at a wedding ceremony in heaven to take place immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem:

²"In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³"If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:2-3)¹

⁷...the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire.

⁸Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready..." (Matt. 22:7-8)

Notice also, the wedding in Matthew 25 immediately follows the destruction of Jerusalem in chapter 24. We see the same thing in Revelation 19: the destruction of the harlot (Jerusalem) in verses 1-6; the marriage of the lamb in verses 7-10.

If we believe Jesus and Paul, we must believe that the first-century Christians experienced everything they were promised. Some preterists maintain there was no literal rapture; all this is simply "cloud imagery" commonly associated with visitations from God in the Old Testament. They claim that the living Christians simply lived out their normal life spans, and *then*, entered heaven. This scenario implies the failure of every promise listed above:

1. The living Christians did not actually see Christ;
2. Their bodies were not transformed;
3. They were absent for their own wedding, i.e., the bridegroom returned, but failed to pick up his bride.

At Christ's ascension, *he* rose into a literal cloud and disappeared into the spirit realm. He was predicted to return "in just the same way" (Acts 1:11). This requires literally seeing Jesus in literal clouds.

Futurist author, Charles E. Hill, calls the first-

¹ This is first-century wedding imagery. A groom would purchase a bride, return to his father's house to build an addition for himself and his bride, then, return to the bride's house at midnight to take her back to their new dwelling.

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century-rapture belief “bizarre.”² Of course, it is bizarre; the Bible is filled with bizarre events; like the creation of Adam from dirt, the parting of the Red Sea, Elisha’s floating axe head, and Christ’s resurrection, just to name a few. How is the rapture any different? People of faith believe these things, bizarre or not.

Some have protested, “But there’s no proof a rapture took place.” That depends on what one considers proof. For some, the fact Jesus, the apostles, and scripture predicted events to take place in the first century is proof enough they occurred. There are certainly valid and somewhat puzzling questions regarding the circumstances surrounding the rapture; however, they should not affect our acceptance of its occurrence.

Conclusion

Christ returned out of literal clouds, and the living Christians with glorified bodies rose into the air to meet him and the previously resurrected saints. Then, they all proceeded to heaven for the wedding feast.

Objections

Objection: I don’t believe in *any* rapture, past or future. Jesus prayed to the Father, “I do not ask You to take them out of the world” (John 17:15).

Answer: This prayer was offered just before Christ’s crucifixion. The church was in its infancy having decades of work ahead preaching the gospel to the world before the end would come (Matt. 24:14). Once that assignment was complete (as early as A.D. 57), the church was ready to be taken out of the world. (Support for A.D. 57 is found in our article *Was the Gospel Preached to the Whole World?*)

Objection: Why is there nothing in the historical record regarding people disappearing? Surely, someone would have written about this.

Answer: There are at least three reasons why there is no record of Christians disappearing:

1. Although the church had spread across the Roman Empire, chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation

² Charles E. Hill, “Eschatology in the Wake of Jerusalem’s Fall” in *When Shall These Things Be?* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 92.

indicate Jesus was not pleased with a significant number of his people. To the church at Sardis he said, “Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and *you will not know at what hour I will come to you*” (Rev. 3:3). The warnings contained in these chapters indicate the number of people raptured may have been smaller than we might have thought. Many who assumed they were good Christians on solid ground were likely unaware they had totally missed the event. In the second century, we find Christians still predicting a return of Christ even though the deadline for the event had long passed. We find no evidence any Christian writers considered the second coming to have already taken place. This is a major problem for preterists who suggest the truly converted Christians lived beyond A.D. 70. The complete absence of early commentary on fulfilled eschatological events is explained only by the literal-rapture view.³

2. Jesus said he would return as “a thief in the night” (Matt. 24:43; 1 Thess. 5:2; Rev. 3:3). In Matthew 25, he portrayed himself as a bridegroom returning at midnight (as was the custom). Christians don’t seem to envision the rapture taking place in the middle of the night. Most modern depictions have it occurring in broad daylight. However, given the allusions to a nighttime return, we are inclined to suspect the rapture occurred under cover of darkness, in which case it is well within the realm of possibility it was not witnessed by anyone.
3. The lack of historical evidence begins to make more sense when we remember that the Roman Empire was in a state of utter chaos during the years leading up to the second coming. Jesus

³ In *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the writer, aware the deadline had passed, struggles to reconcile the perceived lack of fulfillment by suggesting that Jesus didn’t return on schedule because the church wasn’t ready. This document was highly regarded by Christians for 200 years. It was accepted as scripture by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and others, and was included in the fourth-century manuscript Codex Sinaiticus on which our modern New Testaments are largely based.

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was taking vengeance, not only upon the Jews, but the whole world, i.e., the Roman Empire. After the death of Nero in June of A.D. 68, the empire degenerated into civil war. The year 69 saw four emperors. Galba was butchered, Otho committed suicide, and Vitellius was beheaded. Barbarians pressed in against the frontier, and Rome's legions battled one another in the city streets and throughout the empire. Jews were being slaughtered by the thousands all over the empire. During such a chaotic time as this, when disappearances would have been commonplace, it is not difficult to imagine how the rapture might have gone virtually unnoticed, especially, as we have said, if it occurred in the middle of the night. If it was noticed at all, it is doubtful the disappearance of some "heretic" Christians, many of whom would have been in hiding, would have made it into the historical record. Please read *Timeline: The Great Tribulation*.

Objection: Since all the true Christians were gone, how did the church emerge after A.D. 70?

Answer: This is not difficult to fathom. Once the truly converted Christians had been raptured off the earth, and the Roman civil wars had settled down, the church could have begun growing out of the existing situation. Since the number raptured may have been relatively small compared to the total claiming Christ as their Savior, there may have been thousands of nominal Christians still meeting together, reproducing the gospels and other New Testament documents, and spreading the gospel by various means. This occurs today. A pastor once admitted he had preached for years, but never really been converted until a certain event in his life brought him to true salvation. There would have been some who had heard the message of salvation, not reacted, but later, heard it again and responded. There were those who would have come to the knowledge of salvation by simply reading the scriptures which had been copied over and over. There are all sorts of possibilities. Those nominal Christians continuing past the rapture completely unaware of its occurrence likely had no idea what had happened to anyone who might have gone missing. They would not have suspected the rapture because, after all, *they* expected

to be participants, and missing out on it would have been unthinkable to them. Remember Christ's sobering warning: "you will not know at what hour I will come to you!" This is how the world ended up with a post-A.D. 70 church oblivious to the rapture event, still looking for Christ's return into the second and third centuries and beyond.

Of course, the preceding is somewhat speculative, but serves to demonstrate that a literal rapture does not preclude the church continuing after A.D. 70.

Objection: How could such blindness have persisted for almost 2,000 years?

Answer: This sad delusion continues simply because long-held, deep-seated traditions are almost impossible to change. The sheep follow their shepherds, i.e., Christians generally believe whatever their pastors tell them. They assume they're being told the truth. However, in most cases, a pastor attempting to explain the truth regarding the rapture and fulfillment of other eschatological events would be immediately fired. Few have the courage to even consider a view that threatens their incomes. It seems unlikely the church will ever understand this subject to any degree. Only those willing to do their own study and *believe* the promises of Jesus, his apostles, and scripture — proof or no proof — will be able to break free from the mainstream deception.

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