

# The Secret Rapture

By Pastor Doug Baker, D.Min.

© Copyright 2020 by Doug Baker  
All Rights Reserved

## Introduction

The word for *rapture* itself does not appear in the Scriptures, but the concept certainly does. The rapture simply means to be *caught up in the air* and the concept appears explicitly in I Thessalonians 4:16-17. After referring to Jesus coming from heaven, the apostle Paul declares that at that time *the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up [raptured] together with them to meet the Lord in the air.*

The essence of the secret rapture teaching is that Jesus will come secretly to rapture His faithful believers to heaven at some point before He returns in the visible, audible, glorious Second Coming to usher in His millennial reign on the earth. The coming of Jesus to rapture His saints is itself a secret coming, although everyone left behind will wonder what happened to those who suddenly disappeared. This view is reflected in a once-popular bumper sticker which reads, *In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned.* Some refer to these separate comings of Jesus as two stages of the Second Coming, while others use the latter term to apply only to the visible return of Jesus. However, this distinction is only a matter of semantics because all believers in the secret rapture agree that there will be a secret coming followed by a public coming at a later time.

Although there are minor differences among believers in the secret rapture, the most common view is that the Second Coming will occur seven years after the rapture, and that the final tribulation will occupy 3 ½ of those seven years as the Antichrist persecutes the Jews. Thus, faithful Christians will not have to endure this final period of tribulation on the earth since they will be in heaven. However, through the efforts of Jewish converts to Christianity during this time, many Gentiles will also be converted and saved at the visible Second Coming of Jesus. In this way, people who were left behind in the secret rapture will have a second chance to be saved.

This teaching of the secret rapture was unknown before the nineteenth century. But John Nelson Darby, a Christian leader in Britain during that century, made the idea of a secret rapture of the saints before the visible Second Coming of Jesus popular in some circles. Cyrus I. Scofield, an American theologian of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, spread Darby's views in the explanatory notes of his Scofield Reference Bible, which was first published early in the twentieth century in the United States. The idea grew in popularity after the creation of the modern nation of Israel in 1948, until it is now the most popular view among Protestants in general and especially among more conservative evangelical Protestant Christians.

## **In the Air and To the Earth**

One of the fundamental reasons supporters give for their belief in two different comings of Jesus' return to earth is that the New Testament allegedly teaches that He will come and remain in the air and that He will come to the earth to establish His millennial kingdom. Therefore, there must be two different comings or two phases of His one Second Coming.

Specifically, supporters of the secret rapture teach that Jesus' coming *in the air* is taught in I Thessalonians 4 and is in sharp contrast to His later coming *to the earth* in Matthew 24-25. According to this view, Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 19 picture His coming *to the earth* because Matthew 25:31-46 portrays Christ judging the nations, and Revelation 19:11-21 portrays Him leading the armies of heaven in the end-time war against the wicked forces just before the beginning of the millennium. If Jesus returns to establish His millennial kingdom on earth, then His rapturing the saints to meet Him *in the air* must describe a separate, earlier coming.

Of course, this view depends on how one interprets the millennium. Review our paper entitled "The Millennium" for evidence that Jesus will *not* establish His kingdom on the earth during the millennium but only after it. Furthermore, neither the judgment scene in Matthew 25 nor the end-time war scene in Revelation 19 requires the interpretation that Jesus will be literally on the earth, a fact discussed in the next three paragraphs.

### Judgment Scene in Matthew 25

The judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46 immediately follows a series of parables Jesus told in relation to His Second Coming, although there is some doubt whether it should be defined as a parable. Some scholars argue that it is a literal account rather than a parable. Therefore, the statements that Jesus *will sit on the throne of His glory* (v. 31) and that *all nations will be gathered before Him* (v. 32) are viewed as proof that He will be on the earth at that time. However, while it is not a parable in the conventional sense, it is a poetic description because of the following features: (1) *sheep* and *goats* are clearly metaphors (not literal) used to represent the righteous and the wicked respectively (vv. 32-33); and (2) to interpret the conversation Jesus has with each group as literal, one would have to conclude that all the righteous and then all the wicked respond to Jesus in a choral unison (vv. 37-39, 44), which is highly unlikely.

Therefore, as a poetic description, the safest way to interpret this judgment scene is to only draw definite conclusions from the clear spiritual points it presents (which is the same principle applicable to parables). Those spiritual points are (1) that at the Second Coming of Jesus there will be two classes of people who will be separated, or distinguished, at that time; and (2) the basis for this separation-judgment will be whether or not individuals took advantage of their opportunities to do good works in helping others. The clear statement in I Thessalonians 5:2-3 that the wicked will experience *sudden destruction* at the return of Jesus and the implication that

the wicked will be destroyed *by the brightness of His [the Lord's] coming* (II Thessalonians 2:8) both implicitly mean that there is no time available at this event for a literal judgment upon the earth first. If the Antichrist is destroyed by the brightness of Christ's coming (II Thessalonians 2:8), then it seems reasonable to infer that *all* the wicked will be destroyed by this means at the same time also. Furthermore, Matthew 24:36-44 and Luke 17:26-37 also imply that there is no time at the Second Coming for a literal judgment scenario on the earth before the wicked are destroyed. Our conclusion, therefore, is that Matthew 25 cannot be properly used to teach that Christ actually touches the ground when He returns at His Second Coming.

### Second Coming War Scene

Revelation 19:11-21 is a poetic description of the destruction of the wicked at the Second Coming of Jesus. This is made clear by the following several metaphors used in this account: (1) Jesus' *eyes were like a flame of fire* (v. 12); (2) *He [Christ] was clothed with a robe dipped in blood* (v. 13); (3) a single sword is said to destroy all the wicked (vv. 15 & 21); (4) a shepherd's rod is also pictured as the instrument of the destruction (v. 15); and (5) a further imagery for the destruction of the wicked is that Jesus *treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God* (v. 15). This use of poetic imagery means that the only clear inference that can be safely drawn is that at the Second Coming of Jesus the wicked will be destroyed. Compare the imagery of the destruction of the wicked (and the gathering of the righteous) at the Second Coming in Revelation 14:14-20, where Jesus is portrayed as sitting on a cloud, thus indicating that He Himself is *not* literally on the earth.

### Matthew 24 and I Thessalonians 4

Advocates of the secret rapture doctrine allege that Matthew 24 refers to Jesus' coming to the earth and I Thessalonians 4 refers to His coming in the air at the time of the rapture. A comparison of Matthew 24:30-31 and I Thessalonians 4:16-17 suggests that they are both describing the same specific event. Please note the key parallel words or concepts below:

#### Matthew 24:30-31

*Son of Man...appear in heaven*

*the clouds*

*trumpet*

*gather together His elect...from one end of heaven to the other*

#### I Thessalonians 4:16-17

*Lord...from heaven*

*the clouds*

*trumpet*

*we...caught up together...in the air*

The natural way to read these two passages is to conclude that they are both describing the same precise event—the audible, visible Second Coming of Jesus. Both passages declare that Jesus Himself will come from heaven in association with clouds and the sound of a trumpet. On this occasion, His people are said to be gathered *from one end of heaven to the other* or caught up together...in the air.

Furthermore, the reference to a heavenly trumpet is an association with the resurrection of the saints. Immediately after I Thessalonians 4:16 refers to *the trumpet of God*, it declares *that the dead in Christ will rise first*. A comparison with I Corinthians 15:52 confirms this association by stating that *the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised*. According to verses 22-24 of that chapter, this resurrection will occur at Jesus' coming. Therefore, when Matthew 24:31 refers to *a great sound of a trumpet* accompanying the angels, who then gather the saints, that also implies a resurrection there. Thus, the coming of Christ in Matthew 24-25 is the same coming of Christ described in I Thessalonians 4. Furthermore, Paul's passage in I Thessalonians 4:16-17 uses three words describing loud noise—*shout*, *voice* of an archangel, and *trumpet*. How can that therefore be speaking of a quiet, secret event?

### **More Evidence of a Single Second Coming**

The best Greek texts of the New Testament provide additional evidence supporting the concept of a single Second Coming of Jesus rather than a two-stage return. For example, please note the three main Greek words used in the New Testament to describe the return of Jesus below:

- *Parousia*—it means an *arrival* and a *resulting presence*
- *Epiphaneia*—it means an *appearance* or a *shining forth*
- *Apokalupsis*—it means a *revelation* or *unveiling*

These three Greek words occur a total of 41 times in the New Testament in connection with the return of Jesus. *Parousia* is used 16 times in this connection; *epiphaneia* is used 14 times; and *apokalupsis* is used 11 times. In Matthew 24, *epiphaneia* appears two times (in vv. 27 and 30), and *parousia* appears 4 times (in vv. 3, 27, 37-39). And it is obvious that the entire chapter is referring to the same event. Furthermore, Luke 17:22-37 parallels part of Matthew 24, as the following list shows:

- Matthew 24:23-26 and Luke 17:22-23—Both warn against looking for Jesus here and there.
- Matthew 24:27 and Luke 17:24—Both compare Jesus' return to lightning flashing or shining.

- Matthew 24:37-39 and Luke 17:26-27—Both compare the conditions and result of Noah’s day at the time of the Flood to the return of Jesus.
- Matthew 24:17 and Luke 17:31—Both warn not to return to your house in a tribulation period.
- Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-36—Both refer to two people, one taken and the other left.
- Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37—Both mention the carcass (or body) and eagles (vultures are meant here).

In Luke 17:30, the word translated as *revealed* to describe the return of Jesus comes from the verb form of the Greek word *apokalupsis*. Therefore, by the parallels between Matthew 24 and Luke 17, it is clear that all three Greek words used in the New Testament in connection with the return of Jesus are used interchangeably to refer to the same Second Coming event. This evidence means that there must be only *one* Second Coming of Jesus, not two.

This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that 25 of the 27 times that those three Greek words appear in connection with the return of Jesus in the noun form, the definite article *the* is present. And in the two exceptions, I Peter 1:7 and 13, the definite article is implied. In other words, Jesus’ return is *the* return of Jesus, meaning that there is *only one* Second Coming of Jesus, not two.

### **Secret Event?**

Scholars of the secret rapture view use one particular text (in addition to I Thessalonians 4:16-17, which we already discussed) to directly teach that there will be a secret, quiet, and invisible event involved with one of the comings of Jesus. Then the more popular culture of this perspective refers to two other New Testament passages or groups of passages, with the scholars divided as to their use in defending this doctrine. We will examine all three of these passages in this section.

#### I Corinthians 15:51-52

This is one of the two passages that the scholars employ to defend their view that there is a secret, quiet, invisible coming of Jesus. In I Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul discusses the resurrection of the body. Then he writes the following in verses 51-52:

Behold, I tell you a mystery: 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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

The word *mystery* here means a truth which is hidden to most, although it has been revealed to Christian believers. The Greek word for *moment* comes from our English word *atom* and means that which cannot be further divided. Supporters of the secret rapture teaching believe that the event described in verse 52 will happen so quickly that no one will see it happen. They interpret the event, on the basis of the reference to the last trumpet, to be the change of location of the believers from the earth to the Lord's presence. Jewish tradition teaches that whenever the seventh, or last, trumpet was blown during the Israelites' journeying in the wilderness, that it was the signal for the people to move out from their current location. Therefore, their interpretation is that the reference to *the last trumpet* must signal the instantaneous change of location of the believers from the earth to the presence of Jesus in the air to begin their journey to heaven. And when that event happens, the mystery to the unbelievers will be the sudden, unexplained disappearance of so many people from the earth. Thus, it is a secret rapture.

But is that what the passage says? It certainly describes a change which will occur at the return of Jesus because verses 20-23 of the same chapter predict a resurrection of Jesus' people *at His coming*. However, verses 53-55 clearly explain the change as the transformation of our bodies from corruptible and mortal to incorruptible and immortal:

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'

There is no specific reference to the rapture of God's people to heaven in the entire chapter, although we know that it will occur at the return of Jesus because of I Thessalonians 4:15-17. As for *the last trumpet*, the Old Testament uses the imagery of blowing trumpets in a variety of ways in connection with the end-time, as illustrated below:

- It announces the end of Babylon (Jeremiah 51:27).
- It announces the judgment day of the Lord (Joel 2:1).
- It announces the coming of the Lord (Zechariah 9:14).

In a similar way, *the last trumpet* is sounded in I Corinthians 15:52 in connection with the resurrection at the coming of the Lord at the end-time. Therefore, it is *not* proper to conclude that it signals the time for Christians to suddenly move out from earth to the air to begin their journey to heaven.

In other words, I Corinthians 15:51-52 does *not* describe the sudden and instantaneous change of the Christians' *location*. Instead, it describes the sudden and instantaneous change of the *nature*

of faithful Christians from corruptible and mortal to incorruptible and immortal. And the mystery, or hidden truth, is that the apostle Paul had revealed this truth to Christians—a truth which non-Christians did not know. Therefore, this passage of Scripture does *not* teach a secret rapture at all.

### A Thief in the Night

Another argument sometimes used to support the notion of a secret rapture is that the Bible sometimes refers to Jesus' return as being like a thief in the night. The idea is that since a thief attempts to enter and exit a house or business without getting caught (secretly), the statements that Jesus will return like a thief in the night must mean that His return is secret. The two passages that use this phraseology are I Thessalonians 5:2 and II Peter 3:10: *A...the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night* (I Thessalonians 5:2) *and but the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night* (II Peter 3:10).

However, these texts do not teach a secret rapture because of the words which immediately follow them: *For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them* (I Thessalonians 5:3) *and in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up* (II Peter 3:10). There is nothing secret about *destruction, great noise, or the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up*. The verses which follow I Thessalonians 5:2-3 emphasize the fact that believers must be spiritually awake and watching *so that this Day should [not] overtake you as a thief* (I Thessalonians 5:4; cf. vv. 5-6). Here Paul echoes the same point that Jesus made in Matthew 24:42-44 and Luke 12:39-40 about being ready at all times for the Second Coming of Jesus so that His coming is not an unexpected surprise in the same manner that one would stay alert waiting for a thief (if he knew a thief were coming) so that the thief's coming would not take him by surprise.

### One Taken and One Left

Finally, the most popular texts used to support a secret rapture are the ones referring to two people in the same vicinity when Jesus returns, and the one is taken while the other one is left. Please read those statements in Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-36:

Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left (Matthew 24:40-41).

I tell you, in that night there will be two men [*men* is supplied by the translators] in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the

field: the one will be taken and the other left (Luke 17:34-36).

The assumption is made by advocates of the secret rapture that the one taken will be taken up in the air to be with Jesus, while the one left is left behind, wondering where the other person went to after suddenly disappearing. In fairness, some scholars who teach a secret rapture deny that these passages teach that doctrine. But others do use them in this way; in fact, they are the very basis for the title of the popular *Left Behind* series of books. The first book in the series was published in 1995, but several others have been written since, and some movies made from them.

Nevertheless, these Bible texts do not teach the secret rapture at all, for at least the following three reasons:

- These statements are in the context of a discussion of a very visible and audible return of Jesus (Matthew 24:27, 30-31 & Luke 17:24) and of the global Flood and destruction of Sodom (Matthew 24:37-39 & Luke 17:26-29). Therefore, they cannot possibly refer to a secret coming of Jesus because those other events were definitely not secret.
- As the above verses indicate, the context in both gospels is on the destruction of the wicked at Jesus' return, so that one group is destroyed and the other is saved. But the secret rapture teaching says that one group is left behind to wonder what happened to the others, which means that both groups survive, one being taken to heaven and the other by remaining alive on the earth.
- Those *taken* in the above verses are the ones taken in destruction, while the ones *left* are left surviving. Note especially Luke 17:37, in which Jesus answers His apostles' question of *Where, Lord?* with an illustration that points to birds (*vultures* is the best translation of the Greek there) who eat dead flesh. Certainly, the disciples knew where the ones left were—in bed, at the mill, or in the field. Thus, Jesus' answer must direct them to those who are *taken*, literally taken in destruction.

### **Escape from the Final Tribulation?**

As stated earlier, the most popular view of the rapture theory is that the rapture will occur before the final tribulation so that Christians will not be on the earth to endure that time of trouble (including going through the mark of the beast issue). This is called the pre-tribulation rapture. Three New Testament passages are used to defend this view:

*even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come* (I Thessalonians 1:10).

*For God did not appoint us to wrath* (I Thessalonians 5:9).

*Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth (Revelation 3:10).*

The context of the first text above reveals that *the wrath to come* which Jesus delivers Christians from is God's wrath against sin and sinners: *For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to 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, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (I Thessalonians 1:9-10).* The complete text of I Thessalonians 5:9 speaks of the same context: *For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

It is axiomatic that faithful Christians will escape the wrath of God. Therefore, the statements in I Thessalonians quoted above are irrelevant to the issue of whether any Christians will be removed from this planet in order to escape going through the final tribulation. On the other hand, what about Satan's wrath, which Revelation 12:12 refers to? In Genesis 3:15, God foretold that Satan (the serpent in Eden, according to Revelation 12:9) would have hostility toward mankind. And both Biblical and post-Biblical history illustrates all too well how Satan has brought tribulation on God's faithful people in all ages. The point here is that if Christians are promised a complete escape from Satan's last period of tribulation (or wrath), then this would represent a radical departure from how God has operated in all previous generations.

Revelation 3:10 is the most commonly used text to support the very idea that God will remove His faithful Christians from the earth in order to prevent them from having to experience the final tribulation caused by Satan through his Antichrist. But a careful look at this text does not support such a conclusion. The key word is *keep*, which represents a Greek word meaning *to watch over, preserve, keep, watch*. It is the same Greek verb used in John 17:15, where Jesus prayed that His Father would *not...take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.*

Therefore, particularly in the context of Biblical history, it is clear that what Revelation 3:10 promises is protection during the final tribulation, not escape from it. Just as Jesus protected Daniel's three friends from being burned in the Babylonian fiery furnace by His very presence (Daniel 3, especially vv. 24-25), and He preserved Daniel through the lions' den (Daniel 6), so the same Lord can preserve His last-day followers from Satan's final tribulation. And given that the book of Daniel contains prophecies relating to the last days, the examples of how the Lord preserved His people through their various tribulations in that book take on even greater significance. Furthermore, the Lord has promised in I Corinthians 10:13 that *God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.* Note that the definition of *escape* in this text is the supernatural ability *to bear it*, that is, to endure it successfully.

While there admittedly is a certain appeal in the notion that God will remove His faithful followers from the earth so that they do not have to experience the final tribulation, we must be faithful to the Biblical evidence. In the absence of any Biblical evidence that God will do this contrary to all His previous dealings with His people, we are compelled to reject the pre-tribulation rapture of the Church. Instead, we must believe that God will do what He has always done in history—preserve His people by giving them supernatural ability to endure, even through the final great tribulation, as they trust in Him.

## **Second Chance Theology**

Some argue that it really does not make any difference what you believe about the rapture because the questions of its timing and its secret or open nature will be answered when it happens. Naturally, it is true that these questions will indeed be answered when it happens. However, if the most popular version of the rapture as occurring before the final tribulation is not Biblically correct, then potentially millions of people will be lost. For if there is no second chance after the rapture of God's faithful Christians to heaven, then multitudes of unbelievers may put off the decision to accept Jesus' gift of salvation until it is too late. Also, millions of Christians may be deceived by the real Antichrist because they are wrongly certain that this power will not arise until after they have been raptured to heaven first. Thus, the questions about the secret rapture and its alleged pre-tribulation timetable are indeed questions that make all the difference in the world for one's eternal destiny.

In fact, not only do the Scriptures teach that the rapture of God's saints will neither be secret nor pre-tribulation in its timing, but they just as clearly teach that there is no second chance for salvation for anyone after Jesus returns. Since the rapture of the saints occurs at the one and only one Second Coming of Jesus, it marks the end of human probation, beyond which no one can be saved. This is the reason why Jesus brings His reward with Him at that event *to give to every one according to his work* (Revelation 22:12). Thus, at that time the righteous and the wicked are separated, and the wicked will then *go away into everlasting punishment* (Matthew 25:46).

This, then, is the reason that the Bible pleads with every generation not to put off making the decision for its eternal destiny. Note that the primary lesson Jesus taught in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus was that *If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead* (Luke 16:31). In other words, we all have the Scriptures to help lead us to salvation. But if we ignore them indefinitely, no amount of tribulation or supernatural phenomena will convince people to accept the gospel and be saved. Therefore, *Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts* (Hebrews 4:7; Psalms 95:7-8), and *Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation* (II Corinthians 6:2).

## **Final Conclusions**

The popular view today among many sincere Bible-believing Christians is that Jesus will come in a secret, invisible manner to remove faithful Christians from the earth just before the final great tribulation begins. Despite the sincerity of those who believe this teaching, we cannot find any support for a secret rapture in the Scriptures, as reflected in a brief summary below:

- The New Testament teaches that there is only one Second Coming of Jesus. That coming is in the air to rapture His saints to heaven, where they will remain until the end of the millennium.
- There is nothing secret, declared or implied, in any New Testament passage regarding the Second Coming of Jesus.
- God's faithful Christians will go through the final tribulation but will be preserved by God in order to successfully endure it—which is exactly how God has always operated with His people in history.
- Belief in the pre-tribulation rapture of the Church may cause millions of Christians to be deceived by the Antichrist because they do not recognize it and millions of unbelievers to put off making a decision for Jesus until it is too late, wrongly thinking they will have a second chance for salvation.