

Does the Bible Really Teach A “Secret Rapture”?

By Philip Neal

One of the central planks of today’s Protestant Christianity is the so-called “secret rapture” teaching. With minor variations, the rapture teaching essentially asserts that Jesus will return *secretly* to the earth to *rapture* away all “saved” Christians to heaven just *prior to* the appearance of the end-time Antichrist and the beginning of the Great Tribulation. Accordingly, Jesus’ clandestine return could, in theory, take place *any day now*. Importantly, this “secret return” is *not* Jesus’ actual “second coming”—which is still held to occur *after* the Great Tribulation.

This sudden disappearance of millions of “born again” Christians will, of course, lead to mass confusion and chaos around the world. Moreover, the millions of lost souls who were “left behind” will have to endure the horrors of the Great Tribulation.

But what about the “dead in Christ”—are they not also involved in the rapture? Two schools of thought seem to exist on this point: Some teach that the “dead in Christ” indeed rise at the very time of the rapture so that they too participate in this heavenly assembly. Others, however, teach that the rapture only applies to Christians who are *alive*; the “dead in Christ” must wait for the resurrection, which is said to occur after the Great Tribulation at Jesus’ “actual return.”

The rapture teaching is complicated by the issue of the resurrection. In Protestant theology, the resurrection is seldom mentioned. In fact, it’s almost an embarrassment. After all, for the “born again” Christian who ascends to heaven immediately upon death, *what point is there to a resurrection?* You are already in heaven enjoying your eternal reward. Why would you want to leave heaven, come back to the earth, and somehow be reunited with your body? The Protestant answer is that the

departed Christian—who has ostensibly been lounging in heaven for perhaps many, many years—must at some point be given a “spiritual body.”

Hence, the resurrection. But wait—would this not mean that those in heaven had been only *disembodied* souls all that time? You can see the confusion that results from attempting to reconcile “going to heaven” with the biblical resurrection.¹

At any rate, what about the so-called “secret rapture”? Is it true? Is it based on sound biblical interpretation? Or is it a bogus theory espoused by evangelical preachers aiming only to *pacify* their followers concerning the anticipated dreadfulness of the Great Tribulation? After all, escapism is only natural. But as we will see, the Bible nowhere promises that Christians will be *collectively* exempt from *all* suffering during the final days of this age. To the contrary, we are told that at least *some* Christians will endure suffering—even martyrdom—just prior to Christ’s return.

This paper will demonstrate from the Bible that the so-called “secret rapture” idea is a spurious teaching that, frankly, gives end-time Christians nothing but false hope!

Origin of the Rapture Teaching

The “secret rapture” teaching can be traced to John Nelson Darby, a 19th-century British preacher. Darby developed and promoted the teaching in the 1830s. Decades later, American lawyer and minister C. I. Scofield—author of the noted *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909)—refined the teaching and popularized it among evangelicals in the United States.

In modern times, prophecy buff Hal Lindsey brought the rapture idea into the mainstream with his highly-read *The Late Great*

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Planet Earth (1970). Most recently, Tim LaHaye’s popular series of *Left Behind* prophecy novels have made the “rapture” a household word among “born again” Christians.

Today, the rapture teaching is largely the centerpiece of Protestant eschatology. In fact, for “born again” Christians, the “secret rapture” is *the* key end-time event. And as noted, it could come *at any time* with little or no warning—a complete surprise. Hence the popular bumper sticker, “Warning: In the Rapture this car will suddenly be without out a driver!”

It is important to note that the term “rapture” is nowhere used in the Bible. As a noun, the “Rapture” is an *invented* theological term—having now taken its place among such terms as the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, the *Parousia* (visible return of Christ), etc.

As this paper will show, the “secret rapture” teaching breaks several key rules of biblical exegesis: 1) The teaching is a classic example of cherry-picking biblical passages in an attempt to support a preconceived idea; 2) The teaching utilizes a number of biblical passages *out of context* and abuses their obvious meaning; and 3) The teaching fails to incorporate all of the passages relevant to the discussion.

Before we debunk the “secret rapture,” let us look again at the teaching, point by point:

1) The rapture takes place when Jesus suddenly and *secretly* comes to the earth to gather all “born again” Christians to heaven. Importantly, this occurs *without warning* or sign—and could literally happen *any day now*.

2) According to most proponents, the rapture includes both *living* Christians and those “dead in Christ.” A minority view holds that the rapture is only for those Christians *alive* in the last days.

3) The rapture occurs *before* the onset of the Great Tribulation—hence, it is often called the *pre-Tribulation* rapture. Thus, Christians are spared the horrors of the Great Tribulation. This

seems to be the *motive* behind the teaching—that Christians will *not* suffer during this time.

4) Depending on the particular school of thought, the Great Tribulation—described as a time of unprecedented trouble on the *entire world*—lasts either three and one-half years *or* seven years.²

5) *After* the Great Tribulation, Jesus will “officially” and visibly return to the earth to fight against His enemies in the great Battle of Armageddon. Thus, Protestants speak of the “rapture” as distinct from the *Parousia*.

Getting the Correct Timeline

Rapture theorists like to begin with the apostle Paul—particularly I Thessalonians 4. But this is a mistake. The best place to begin is with Jesus—with what *He* said about His own return. Only then can we get an accurate *timeline* of end-time events.

In Matthew 24:3, Jesus’ disciples asked for a *sign* that would herald the end of the age and signal His *coming*—or *parousia* (literally *appearing* or *presence*). Jesus gave them numerous indicators of the end time—increased wars, famines, natural disasters, false prophets, etc. But in verse 15, Jesus gave His disciples a concrete *sign*: the “abomination of desolation” foretold by the prophet Daniel. In verse 21, Jesus links the appearance of this “abomination” with the start of the “Great Tribulation.” “Therefore, **when you see the abomination** of desolation, which was spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place ... **then** shall there be great tribulation...” (Matt. 24:15, 21).

Daniel gives the same scenario. In chapter 11, he describes a war-making political entity known as the “king of the north” who invades Palestine and occupies Jerusalem “at the time of the end” (verses 40-45). This Antichrist-king, or more likely a religious figure allied with him, is the final “abomination.” Daniel 12 picks up the story: “And at that very time [of the invasion by the king of the north] ... there shall begin a time of great trouble [on Israel]...” (verse 1; author’s

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paraphrase). Thus, the presence of this “abomination” where he “should not be” (Mark 13:14) is a sort of *trigger event* for the Great Tribulation.

Back in Matthew 24, Jesus then warns His disciples concerning those who would falsely claim that His return could occur unannounced—even *secretly* (verses 23-26). *This point alone clearly debunks the rapture theory.*

On the contrary, He then emphasizes that His return will be dramatically visible: “For as the light of day, which comes forth from *the* east and shines as far as *the* west, **so also shall the coming [parousia] of the Son of man be**” (verse 27). Jesus calls His coming—His *Parousia*—a *single*, highly visible event as unmistakable as the sun moving across the sky. It is important to realize that Jesus never describes His return as a two-stage event. There simply is no “drive-by” “return” followed by a public second coming. There is only *one Parousia*. This fact disproves the idea of a *clandestine* return.

Jesus’ next statement is key. He says, “But **immediately after the tribulation** of those days, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken” (verse 29). Pairing this verse with Revelation 6:12-17, we can see that this is the *sixth seal*—the heavenly signs that herald the beginning of the year-long Day of the Lord. At this precise time Jesus’ return is evident to all mankind—for “then shall all the tribes of the earth ... **see the Son of man coming** upon the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30).

What else takes place *after* the Great Tribulation? The resurrection of the saints! Notice what Jesus says occurs at His *Parousia*: “And He shall send His angels with a **great sound of a trumpet**; and they shall **gather together His elect** from the four winds, from one end of heaven to *the* other” (Matt. 24:31). Daniel 12 has the same timing: verse 1 announces the Great Tribulation, which is followed in verse 2 by the resurrection!

Yet rapture theorists insist that the rapture—and thus the resurrection—occurs *before* the Tribulation. As we will see, it is the *timing of the resurrection* that proves fatal to the rapture theory.

So here is Jesus’ key timeline:

- 1) The sign of the “abomination of desolation” takes place
- 2) The Great Tribulation begins
- 3) “Immediately after” the Tribulation are heavenly signs
- 4) Jesus’ *Parousia* occurs—His visible return
- 5) The resurrection of the saints takes place, in conjunction with a trumpet sound

But does Paul’s teaching square with Jesus’ timeline?

Paul’s Precise Timeline

Paul and Jesus are in complete harmony. In II Thessalonians 2, Paul makes it clear that the “gathering together” of the saints to Jesus will not occur until the end-time “man of sin” has come on the scene. This wicked individual—clearly identified as Daniel’s “king of the north” or the Antichrist—will be destroyed by the brightness of Jesus’ *Parousia*. Thus, Paul is unequivocally saying that the resurrection cannot take place until the Antichrist has come and the Great Tribulation has run its course. This is precisely what Jesus said.

Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul showed that there is an “order” to how God raises people from the dead. All shall be made alive, “each in his own order: Christ *the* firstfruit [which has already occurred]; then, **those who are Christ’s at His coming [parousia]**” (I Cor. 15:23). Note that those who belong to Christ—both the living and those in the grave—are given eternal life *at His Parousia*, His singular, visible appearing in glory.

Clearly, Paul leaves no room for a secret, unannounced *Parousia*.

He continues in verses 51-52: “Behold, I show you a mystery: we shall not all fall asleep

[a picture of death], but we shall all be changed, in an instant, in *the* twinkling of an eye, **at the last trumpet; for *the* trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised** incorruptible, and [then] **we shall be changed.**” Paul is saying that not every Christian will be dead, in the grave, when Jesus returns. These living saints will be changed into immortal spirit beings at the *last trumpet*. But just before that, the “dead in Christ”—those saints who have “fallen asleep”—will be resurrected to immortal spirit life.

This all takes place at the sound of a *great trumpet blast*—just as Jesus said in Matthew 24:31. Paul specifically says it is the *last trumpet* to sound. This means there must be *preceding* trumpet blasts. We see from Revelation 8 that “seven trumpets” sound in sequence as part of the countdown to Jesus’ *Parousia*. Indeed, the plagues of the Day of the Lord are organized around seven “trumpets.” The 7th trumpet—the *last trumpet*—sounds in Revelation 11. Here, in verses 15-18, we see Jesus described as taking His right to rule the world. In verse 18, we also see that the “time of the dead” has come—the time to reward God’s servants and saints!

This can only be the *resurrection* of the “dead in Christ”—at Jesus’ *Parousia*—precisely as Paul said, at the *last trumpet*!

Paul Debunks the Rapture!

Now let’s look at I Thessalonians 4—which is the key passage used by rapture theorists. Paul states up front that he desires for his disciples to *be informed* concerning the future of the dead in Christ (verse 13). In verse 14, Paul reassures the brethren of the *reality* of the resurrection through Christ. Then he makes a critical point in saying that “we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall in no wise precede those who have fallen asleep” (verse 15).

Echoing Matthew and Revelation, he then says that Jesus’ highly visible *Parousia* will be accompanied by a great trumpet blast—in which the dead in Christ *rise first* (verse 16). Finally, in verse 17, he writes that those saints

who are “alive and remain” will be “caught up together with them”—those in the resurrection—“in *the* clouds for *the* meeting with the Lord in *the* air; and so shall we always be with *the* Lord.”

According to rapture proponents, the rapture must occur *before* the Great Tribulation—so the saints can be in heaven for three and one-half (or seven) years. But they cannot get around the simple fact that the resurrection of the saints is directly linked to Jesus’ very public *Parousia* and that both take place *after* the Great Tribulation—*not before*.

As noted earlier, some rapture theorists hold that only *living* Christians are “taken” in the rapture. For them, this means the resurrection *can* take place *after* the Tribulation—at Jesus’ “second” *Parousia*. But Paul makes this an impossibility. He clearly states that those saints who are *alive* at Jesus’ coming *will not precede* those who are dead. In fact, the “dead in Christ” actually *rise first*. Thus, there is no way for living Christians to be whisked away to heaven while the “dead in Christ” remain in their graves for three and one-half (or seven) years.

The fact is, those who espouse the rapture theory *read into* Paul’s writings a “secret coming” of Christ three and one-half (or seven) years before His prophesied *Parousia*—in spite of the fact that nothing in the New Testament supports the idea of Jesus having *two returns*.

In summary, here are the key points in *refuting* the rapture theory:

1) Jesus’ second coming will *not* happen “any day now” without warning. While it is true that Jesus’ return will, like Noah’s flood, catch many *in the world* by surprise (Matt. 24:37), the New Testament gives *Christians* numerous signs that indicate that His *Parousia* is near. The key *sign* to watch for is the appearing of the “abomination of desolation” or Antichrist (Matt. 24:15). The Great Tribulation follows (verse 21), for three and one-half years (not seven)—then the heavenly signs (verse 29). At that point, Jesus’ *Parousia* will be imminent.

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2) There is only one *Parousia*—not two. It will be quite visible and spectacular—no one on earth will miss it (Matt. 24:30). Revelation 1:7 says *every eye* will see Him at His return. In fact, Jesus specifically warns His disciples concerning those who would falsely claim that His return might occur *secretly* (verse 26). This point alone clearly debunks the rapture theory.

3) Jesus’ *Parousia* will lead immediately to the resurrection of the “dead in Christ” and the changing of living Christians into spirit (Matt. 24:31; I Thess. 4:16-17). Moreover, both the *Parousia* and the resurrection clearly occur *after* the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:29). Thus, there is no room for a pre-Tribulation rapture.

In I Thessalonians 4, Paul is clear that Jesus’ *Parousia* is a singular event in which the resurrected (or changed) saints of all ages *go out to meet Jesus* “in the air” and ultimately accompany Him to His final destination in Jerusalem to establish the Kingdom of God.

Will God Protect Christians From the Great Tribulation?

If there is no pre-Tribulation “secret rapture” of saints to heaven, does this mean that Christians must endure the horrors of the Great Tribulation? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this question. While some speculate on the possibility that God will protect the entire Church in a physical “place of safety,” the Bible is quite vague on the idea. Ultimately, such teachings are strictly speculative and should not be held as dogma.

To be sure, God *can* protect those who belong to Him—any where, any time (Psa. 91:1-8). And Jesus gave this promising admonition: “Watch therefore, *and* pray at all times that you may be **accounted worthy to escape all these things** that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man” (Luke 21:36). Indeed, God is more than willing to protect us—if we are found worthy.

But remember also the warnings Jesus gave concerning end-time conditions: “Then

shall they deliver you up to affliction, and shall kill you; and you shall be hated by all nations for My name’s sake.... But **the one who endures to the end, that one shall be saved**” (Matt. 24:9, 13). Also, “And you shall be hated by all *men* for My name’s sake; but **the one who endures to the end, that one shall be saved**” (Mark 13:13).

These passages do not at all suggest *universal protection* for the Church in the latter days.

Consider also that there is yet to come a *martyrdom* of saints. “And when He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had [long ago] been slain for the Word of God, and for the testimony that they held. And they [figuratively] cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, do You not judge and avenge our blood on those [evil ones] who dwell on the earth?’ And white robes were given to each of them [picturing the certainty of their yet future resurrection to eternal life]; and they were told that they should rest [in the grave] a short time yet, until *it* be fulfilled *that* both **their fellow servants and their brethren also would be killed, just as they had been**” (Rev. 6:9-11).

Clearly, at least *some* Christians will yet face martyrdom. Thus, there is no guarantee of physical protection for the *entire* Body of Christ. Perhaps the best one can hope for is, as Jesus said, to be found *worthy to escape* the horrors of the final days of this age.

End Notes:

1. In mainstream Protestant thought, the “departed soul” has gone immediately to heaven at the moment of death; thus, the whole idea of a resurrection at a later time is quite unnecessary. But the resurrection of the righteous at Jesus’ return is a major New Testament theme—so Protestants *must* somehow deal with it. As noted, their standard answer is that even “departed souls” at some point need to be united with their new “spiritual body” via the resurrection.

But for what purpose? It is as if the *body* alone is waiting in the grave for the resurrection

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at Jesus’ return; the *person*, still conscious as some “disembodied spirit,” has long gone to heaven. Indeed, what kind of body do you need for life in heaven? And how would this new “spirit body” be an improvement over their present “spirit existence”?

The fact is, this resurrection of the *body*—as opposed to the *person*—is Protestantism’s attempt to retain some significance for a resurrection so clearly taught in the Bible. But it is only a resurrection of *bodies*—not actual people!

In I Corinthians 15, Paul upends this spurious idea very quickly. He shows that eternal *life*—described as being incorruptible or immortal—is granted only via the resurrection at Jesus’ return. Indeed, we are to be “made alive ... at His coming” (verses 22-23).

In other words, one cannot possess *life* (of any description) beyond the grave except *through the resurrection*. According to Paul, this is via the resurrection that mortality is exchanged for immortality, corruptibility exchanged for incorruptibility, and death itself is exchanged for life (verses 52-54). He writes that “this corruptible being must put on incorruption, and this mortal person must put on immortality”—*put on* via the resurrection. This makes no sense if the departed person *already* has immortality and incorruption in heaven.

In verse 42, Paul says the dead are “sown in corruption”—buried in the ground. Then, in the resurrection, they are “raised in incorruption”—given *life*.

Clearly, it is the resurrection alone that confers immortality. How then can Paul’s words be reconciled with the popular notion that the departed dead are *already* in possession of immortality—of eternal life—in heaven?

If, as Paul demonstrates, the resurrection is genuinely a resurrection from the dead—of

one being *brought to life*—how can it also be the conferring of a “spiritual body” on an *already living* departed person? Would this really even be a resurrection at all in terms of Hebrew thought?

Throughout the Bible, death is described as *sleep*. The dead in Christ are always pictured as having “fallen asleep” and as *remaining* asleep until the resurrection. Not surprisingly, the New Testament *verb* describing the act of resurrecting the dead is the ordinary word for *awakening* one from sleep. What possible sense can be made of waking a person who is *already* fully conscious in heaven?

In no way can the biblical texts be construed to mean that the resurrection reunites an already conscious, living “soul” with its body. Indeed, we are faced with an irreconcilable contradiction if the dead in Christ have already been made alive *before* the resurrection.

The problem, of course, is that *heaven* is not at all the reward of the “saved”—and there is no “soul” that lives beyond death. For a detailed study on this subject, please request a copy of *What Happens to the Dead?* and *Are Enoch and Elijah in Heaven?*

2. The idea of a seven-year Tribulation comes from a particular view of Daniel’s 70-week prophecy. However, a number of passages demonstrate that this period, also known as “Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7), actually lasts three and one-half years. The Antichrist’s rule is 42 months (3 and 1/2 years) (Rev. 13:5), which correlates to the “times of the Gentiles”—their domination over Israel (Rev. 11:2; Luke 21:24). Likewise, Daniel’s “time of trouble” (Dan. 12:1) on the “holy people” (Israel) is three and one-half years (verse 7; also see Dan. 7:25).