

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE  
**RAPTURE**



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By Wallace G. Smith

*Will all Christians be protected from  
the dangerous times to come?  
If so, can we expect a rapture to occur?  
The biblical truth is clear.*

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# Chapter I

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## Setting the Scene

**T**he scene has played out on movie screens, in the pages of popular books, and in the hopeful yearnings of thousands, maybe millions, of imaginations—perhaps including yours.

On a day that seemed as though it would be just like any other, millions of people around the world suddenly vanish into thin air. Chaos instantly ensues as now-pilotless planes plummet to the ground and suddenly driverless cars careen out of control. Families are in disarray as parents and spouses disappear, leaving panicked loved ones to find only clothing left behind where they were once sleeping or standing.

News programming around the world is filled with tales of anarchy, confusion, and despair as those left behind seek to make sense of it all. Meanwhile, global leaders assume new powers, claiming that they will bring a shattered civilization back to peace and order.

For those left behind, the event seems an utter mystery—at least at first. But it dawns on some more quickly than others that those who vanished were all *Christians*. On that fateful day, Jesus Christ had secretly come to collect His faithful followers to take them to Heaven, right before the years of suffering known as the Great Tribulation would begin. And among those world leaders taking power is the Antichrist, ready to

institute a false religion and impose his diabolical will.

Several years later, after the wrath of God has been unleashed on humanity, the visible, public Second Coming of Jesus takes place, as He returns with His followers to destroy the wicked and begin the Kingdom of God.

Millions of people around the world sincerely believe that this event, or something close to it, will take place in the future just ahead of us. Their greatest hope is to be among those Christians who vanish in that moment, in an event often called *the Rapture*.

### **Popular, but Questioned**

The idea of a Rapture event, such as the one described above, is widely believed by many Evangelicals, who expect that Jesus Christ may return at any moment, without any warning at all, to whisk them off to Heaven, where they will be protected from the years of devastating tribulation to follow. This view is so passionately held that, for many, to question any element of it is to question the Bible itself. Even so, in the 200-or-so years since the doctrine first began to spread, many *have* questioned it. Careful observers have pointed out that, while the secret rapture scenario fits *some* of the biblical facts, it seems not to quite fit *all* of them.

Certainly, there are plain verses that tell of Christians meeting Jesus Christ in the clouds at His appearing—and those passages should fill His followers with a profound, life-changing hope! We will later review some of these passages—inspired descriptions of the event the Apostle Paul calls our “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

And there certainly are other passages, found in the book of Revelation, that warn of a nightmarish tribulation coming upon the world under the Antichrist and the Beast. More than one passage in the inspired prophetic record calls that coming time, the Great Tribulation, the most horrific in all of human history, worse than any that has preceded it and any that will ever follow. We will visit those passages later, as well.

But questions remain in the minds of many. While some look to God’s word and see promises of protection during the Great Tribulation, others point to passages suggesting that Christians will go *through* the Great Tribulation. Though the prophesied meeting with Christ in the clouds is undeniable, some question that this meeting

will happen years—rather than days or even moments—before Christ fights the armies of the world.

As a result, multiple versions of “the Rapture” have proliferated since the idea first began to spread widely in the early nineteenth century. This has required believers to give multiple names to different versions of the theory. For instance, those who believe in a secret rapture *before* the Great Tribulation—the scenario depicted at the start of this chapter—often say they believe in a *pre-Tribulation rapture* in which Christians are protected in Heaven during the years of trial and suffering on earth.

On the other hand, those who assert that a rapture will take place *after* the Great Tribulation, at Jesus’ return to rule the world, believe in a *post-Tribulation rapture*—and, consequently, that Christians must endure the trials of the Great Tribulation and face the terror of the Antichrist. Over the years, as ideas have multiplied, so have the monikers, though, for the vast majority today, “the Rapture” means a *secret* rapture.

### **The Truth Matters**

Disagreement over many of these questions has fractured and fragmented congregations and families. Many pages have been written, many sermons have been given, and many angry words have been spoken between friends trying to convince others of the truth of one rapture theory or another.

Yet Jesus Christ certainly does not want His faithful followers to be in confusion, but rather to “speak the same thing,” without division (1 Corinthians 1:10). To be sure, the confusion on this issue is certainly not due to the Father or Christ, for “God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33). Note that “saints” here means *all* true Christians, *everywhere*. God expects all believers to be in peace and unity.

If we want that peace—if we want to speak the same thing, without division—then the Rapture question must be answered. God the Father is not simply looking for sincere believers—He is looking for those devoted to *truth* (John 4:23–24). Truth matters.

So, what is the truth about the Rapture? Is it coming? If so, can it happen at *any* time? Will it happen before the Great Tribulation or after? Will Christians be protected from the dangerous times to come,

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or must some—or all—endure them?

In the chapters that follow, we will first look at how the idea of the Rapture developed. We will then turn our attention to God’s inspired word to understand for ourselves the divine record of just what *will* take place in the end-times, straight from the inerrant words of Scripture. We will strive to follow the Apostle Paul’s inspired instruction to “test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

# Chapter 2

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## Examining the Origins

**O**f all the different theories promoting the idea of a rapture, by far the most popular variant is the pre-Tribulation rapture or *secret* rapture. When you say, “the Rapture,” this is what comes to mind for many—indeed, for most. Surveys over the last decade have indicated that 40 to 50 percent of Evangelical Christians believe in a pre-Tribulation rapture scenario, as do one in three Protestant pastors—around double the number of pastors who believe in a rapture *after* the Tribulation.

The idea behind the secret rapture is that Jesus Christ’s return to gather the Christian faithful will be invisible to those He does not claim, could happen at any moment, and will come with no warning. When it takes place, believers all over the world will vanish instantly as they are caught up in the air, along with the dead faithful who will be made alive again and gathered to meet Christ in the clouds. From there, He will take them all to Heaven to wait out the years of the Great Tribulation, which will wreak havoc on mankind below. At the end of those years of suffering, Jesus will appear to the whole world, visibly and publicly, along with all those resurrected and glorified Christians, to destroy the Antichrist and his evil forces and to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Those who believe this scenario say they see it reflected in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17, perhaps the single most important passage for this teaching. And yet, before the nineteenth century, countless millions read that passage with no belief whatsoever in a secret rapture that



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would “whisk away” the faithful before the Great Tribulation. In fact, there is no clear record of a secret and invisible rapture being taught before that time. While one may find an occasional, isolated comment by a scholar here or there before the nineteenth century that might reflect an aspect of belief touched on by the Rapture theory, often some imagination is required to see the modern doctrine fully reflected in them.

So, before we examine the biblical record—in the end, the only record that matters—a review of the origin of the modern teaching about the Rapture might be helpful.

### Why “Rapture”?

The word *rapture* has a long history, but only in the last 200 years has it been associated with the particular teaching that now goes by that name. It is derived from the Latin word *rapere*, meaning to abduct, rape, or forcibly seize and carry off. The fourth-century Roman Catholic theologian Jerome used the Latin word *rapiemur* to translate the phrase “we... shall be caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in what eventually became the Latin Vulgate translation, which grew out of a commission by Pope Damasus I.

Coming from Medieval Latin into French and then into English, the word *rapture* in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries retained the same meanings of forced or violent seizure, transport, or rape (a word with the same origin). Figuratively, it was applied to states of physical, emotional, or religious excitement or ecstasy—as when one is transported mentally or spiritually to an exalted state or another place.

The earliest attestation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to any application of the word *rapture* to the rising of Christians in the air to meet Christ is found in 1768, by English clergyman Thomas Broughton. Broughton seemed to think his application of the word “rapture” to this rising of Christians was somewhat novel. However, as he saw the event as simply the end of the world and the final judgment, with no events to follow, his use of the word fell far short of what the Rapture doctrine would eventually become.

The modern use of *rapture* to suggest a secret meeting with Jesus Christ—a sudden gathering, years before He returns in glory to commence His reign—would have to wait another 60 years.

## A Revival in Prophetic Interest

By the late 1700s and early 1800s, what passed for “Christianity” almost everywhere was far removed from the Christianity of Jesus Christ and the Bible. A small and mostly hidden remnant remained of the Church that Jesus Christ had founded—a Church neither Roman Catholic, nor Eastern Orthodox, nor Protestant—just as He promised it would (Matthew 16:18). But the vast majority of those bearing the name “Christian” held beliefs having little in common with the biblical faith Christ had preached.

In particular, the professing Christian world had watered down old prophetic understandings over the centuries and had begun to interpret virtually *all* Bible prophecy as metaphorical or symbolic. For instance, the thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ mentioned in Revelation 20 was treated as merely symbolic of Christianity’s growing influence as it grew to convert the world—not as a literal reign of Jesus on earth at the end of this age. The Great Tribulation of Matthew 24, the Kingdom of God, and many other prophesied elements of the Bible and the teachings of Christ were perceived only as the stuff of metaphor.

Such “spiritualizing away” of the Bible’s prophecies was the norm for centuries in the major strains of nominal Christianity—such as Roman Catholicism, the Anglican Communion, and the multiplying collection of Protestant denominations. To be sure, there were rare exceptions on the fringe—individuals who believed that some prophecies of the Bible pointed to future, literal events. But such writings were rare and almost universally scorned.

Famous eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon, in his masterwork *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, described this shift away from a literal understanding of the prophesied Kingdom of God and thousand-year reign of Christ: “The doctrine of Christ’s reign upon earth was at first treated as a profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion and was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism.” Indeed, to take the words of God’s prophetic promises as literal descriptions of the future marked one as a heretic and fanatic.

In this plainly unbiblical environment, a few began to push back against such watering down of God’s word. Small groups began to fracture away from the main denominations, seeking worship prac-

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tices and scriptural understandings they believed were closer to the literal words of the Bible, though they inevitably retained many of the mistakes and heresies of their home denominations. These gatherings of sincerely dissatisfied believers formed a natural environment in which the idea of a rapture could take root.

### **The Rapture Theory Is Born**

Into this environment stepped former Church of Ireland clergyman John Nelson Darby—widely, though not universally, credited as the key thinker behind the idea of a secret rapture.

In the early 1800s, Darby was among the many who were dissatisfied with what they found to be unbiblical practices in Anglican and Roman Catholic belief and worship, and who began to form their own fellowships in various locations across England, Scotland, and Ireland. Among their greatest concerns was Bible prophecy, which they believed should be taken seriously—and literally—as Christ’s revelation of future events. Conferences began to spring up in the 1820s and 1830s, in places like Dublin, Ireland, and Albury, England, where believers gathered in hope of understanding the Bible’s prophecies in more detail.

Most accounts credit a series of conferences at Powerscourt House, in County Wicklow, Ireland, from 1831 to 1833, as the origin of Darby’s development of his idea of a secret rapture—the notion that Jesus would make an invisible preliminary return to earth’s atmosphere to rapture true Christians into Heaven before the terrors of the Great Tribulation would begin under the Antichrist. According to this theory, this rapture event could happen at any time, with no warning at all.

Many credit Darby alone with the idea of a secret rapture, though the exact manner in which he came up with his interpretation is unclear. Rather than credit Darby’s study of Scripture and his discussions with fellow believers during the prophetic conferences, others say credit belongs elsewhere. Darby’s friend and earnest defender William Kelly mentioned that Thomas Tweedy—another member of the Plymouth Brethren fellowship—had written to Darby, suggesting that certain passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians hint at a secret rapture. Historian Crawford Gribben of Queens University Belfast says it is entirely possible that Tweedy should be credited with the idea rather than Darby.

Even in Darby's own day, some accused him—and his cohorts—of getting the idea of a secret rapture from the “ecstatic utterances” of charismatics in the congregations of Darby's contemporary and associate Edward Irving, specifically from the “visions” of a teenage girl named Margaret MacDonald. Darby's supporters vehemently deny such a connection, noting that he considered such supposed visions—and the ecstatic, trance-like speaking of strange tongues—to be utterly demonic in nature.

The details are hard to sort out, since the most authoritative sources are primarily competing tracts and letters often filled with accusations and differing accounts, as the Plymouth Brethren experienced their own disagreements, disputes, and splits over various doctrines—including arguments over the Rapture—while fragmenting into a variety of competing sects.

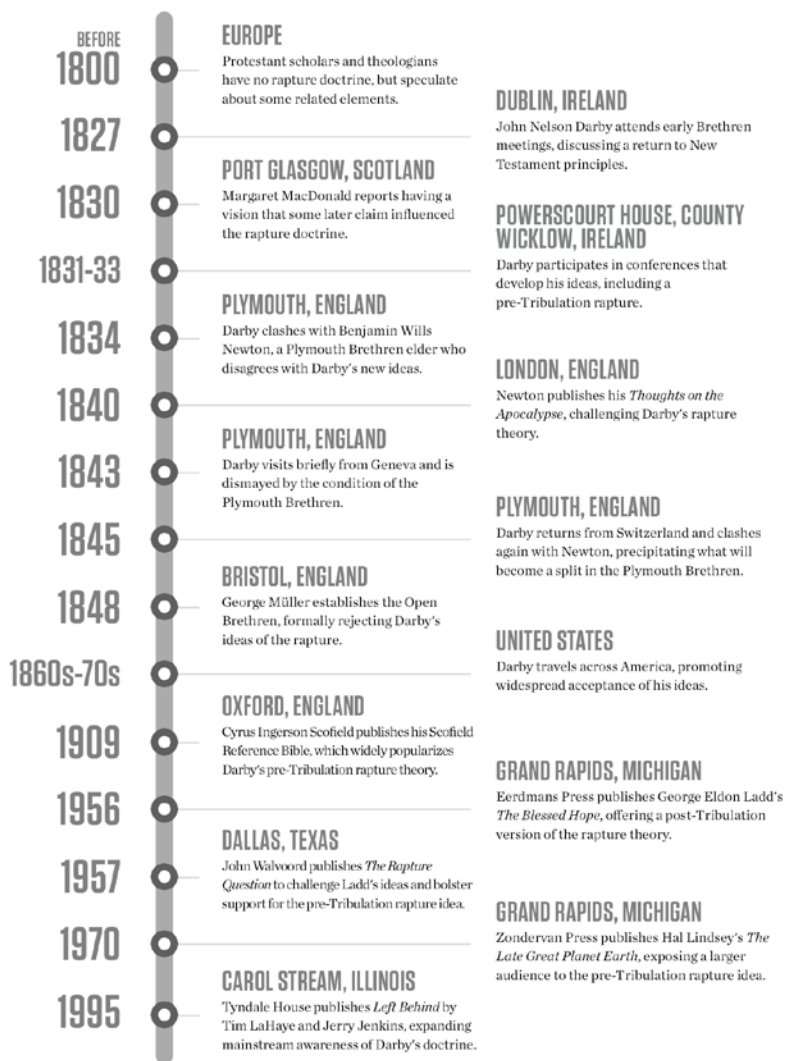
### **Growing Influence and Popularity**

No matter the disputed facts, the details that matter are clear: The idea of a pre-Tribulation secret rapture arose in the early 1800s among the Plymouth Brethren in Great Britain and Ireland. And, whether Darby originated it or adapted ideas he took from others, his energetic work in developing the idea of a pre-Tribulation secret rapture—and spreading it far and wide—is universally acknowledged. Before the 1800s, there is little record of any belief in a secret and invisible rapture at the beginning of the Great Tribulation, and absolutely no record of such a concept being taken seriously. Yet, once conceived, the idea of a secret rapture could not be confined within the British Isles. Darby and others traveled throughout Europe and across the oceans to spread their theories. Darby's travels would take him to Canada, the United States, and Australia, where many received with excitement his proclamation of a secret rapture.

Most significantly, Darby's theology and understanding of prophecy would eventually influence American lawyer and theologian Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, who would weave Darby's ideas into his highly influential Scofield Reference Bible. First published in 1909 and revised in 1917, the Scofield Bible would exert a powerful impact on American Evangelicalism, as the shocking trauma of World War I stirred interest in what the Bible had to say about the end of the world.

# A HISTORY OF THE RAPTURE

Over the centuries, a few Roman Catholic scholars and theologians speculated about the implications of 1 Thessalonians 4, but none envisioned a scenario resembling modern ideas about a rapture. Those ideas have been developed over the last 200 years.



In 1970, American Evangelical preacher Hal Lindsey published *The Late Great Planet Earth*, popularizing the idea of a secret pre-Tribulation rapture and helping to establish it as a fixture in Evangelical belief. Then, in 1995, authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins published the first installment of their immensely popular *Left Behind* book series.

LaHaye and Jenkins' first novel, which became a best-seller around the world, used a fictional plot with a mix of intrigue, action, and Bible references to illustrate their idea of a secret pre-Tribulation rapture. For many in the 1990s and early 2000s, the *Left Behind* novels were their first exposure to the idea of a secret rapture and the notion that Jesus Christ could return at any time to invisibly whisk His followers away to Heaven before the reign of the Antichrist begins.

The scenario painted by LaHaye and Jenkins would have been very familiar to Darby and the Plymouth Brethren, matching well the innovative interpretation of Bible prophecy they had introduced almost 200 years before. The idea launched by Darby and his brethren has had such an influence that even those who disagree with it often frame their own ideas in similar terms—such as a *post*-Tribulation rapture rather than a *pre*-Tribulation rapture.

But the secret Rapture has *never* been universally accepted. While the idea seems to fit some important verses in the Bible, it does not seem to fit others, causing many Bible-believers to reject it. Yet the alternative theories offered by most who disagree seem to suffer from their *own* deficiencies. The differences of belief on this point have made enemies of friends and have bitterly divided congregations and families—just as they did in the days of the Plymouth Brethren 200 years ago.

Those divisions boil down to one, single, all-important question: *Is it true?*

Historical origins can shed light and controversies may cast doubt—but they are not the means of determining the *truth or falsehood* of a belief. That test lies only with the *word of God*—and it is to that unerring word we now turn.

# Chapter 3

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## Letting God's Word Lead Us

**W**e've looked at the history of the Rapture theory and seen its origins 200 years ago in the British Isles. Yet, learning of those origins hasn't answered our question: *Is it true?*

It might be disconcerting that an idea so central to the faith of so many has no solid record of being taught seriously before the 1800s—a fact readily admitted by its originators at the time—but is this reason enough to dismiss it? After all, Jesus promised that His words would not pass away (Matthew 24:35), but that does not mean that the right understanding of those words could not be lost for some time. Could it be that Darby and his cohorts rediscovered a meaning that Christ always intended, but that had been lost with other truths in the apostasy and heresies that ravaged professing Christianity over the centuries?

How can we know? As we saw at the end of the last chapter, the only real test of truth is not history. It is not science, or philosophy, or even common sense. The test of truth is the *word of God*.

Praying to His Father on the night before He was crucified, Jesus said, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). That word—the written word of God preserved for us as the Holy Bible—is the standard by which the idea of the Rapture *stands* or *falls*.

### **The Berean Challenge**

So, we are each faced with an important question that each of us can only answer for ourselves: *Am I willing to set aside cherished and long-*

*held beliefs if I see that the Bible teaches something else?* Frankly, for far too many the answer to that question is “No.” When they see that the word of God plainly leads them toward a different conclusion than they prefer—the one they treasure and have long believed—they abandon their quest for truth and stick with their previous idea.

Jesus often presented the religious leaders and faithful listeners of His day with such challenges, showing them that the “traditional” understandings they so passionately believed in—and *thought* reflected God’s word—were only traditions of men, not of God. Sadly, when shown a difference between God’s word and their old understanding, they too often set God’s word aside to hold on to those traditions (Mark 7:6–13).

The challenge we must accept is to be like the ancient Bereans. When faced with new understanding that differed from their previous beliefs, the Bereans *looked into God’s word* to see if the new understanding was true. Contrasting the Bereans to those in Thessalonica, who would not let go of their previous understandings, the Bible says, “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Make no mistake—this is not easy to do, and most will not do it. They will cling to what they believed before God’s word confronted them. Instead of changing their belief to better match God’s word, they will press God’s word into the mold of whatever they already believe, no matter how they must bend, distort, or misshape that word to do so. Yet Paul warns us not to, saying, “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We must put what we believe to the test—looking into God’s word, holding on to our beliefs that match God’s word, and having the courage to cast aside those beliefs that *do not* match God’s word.

If we cannot be like the Bereans—if we cannot possess the rationality to submit our beliefs to the truth of God’s word and change accordingly—there is little point in proceeding in this study of the Rapture idea. But if we *can* be like the Bereans, our course is clear: Let us set our previous beliefs aside—pre-Tribulation rapture, post-Tribulation rapture, no rapture, or any other belief we hold—and let us *allow the Bible to speak for itself*. Once we see clearly the picture painted in Scripture, we can return to our beliefs and understand what to hold fast and what to discard.



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This is how we will proceed for the rest of this booklet. So, if you are ready to discover what the Bible truly says about the blessed hope of true Christians, let's begin.

### **The Witness of 1 Thessalonians 4**

First, let's read one of the plainest statements in God's word concerning what will happen to faithful Christians when Christ returns: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, the same passage we saw earlier in which the Latin Vulgate uses the verb *rapiemur* (from *rapere*)—which, as we noted, is the root of the English word “rapture.”

It is a beautiful passage of Scripture—indeed, an inspiring description of the blessed hope that all true followers of Jesus Christ long to see become reality!

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Surely, no moment in this life will *ever* be able to compare to that coming day! When Paul writes of “the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13), surely it is *this* moment he has in mind.

These words are extremely plain and should be embraced by all who claim to believe in the truth of Scripture. If *anyone* denies the literal events described in this passage—Christ's return from Heaven, the shout of an archangel and blast of the trumpet of God, the dead in Christ rising into the air to meet Him, and the living similarly transformed right after to rise with them—you should dismiss such ones as

either deceived or deceitful. Paul says that these events are as sure as Christ's own resurrection from the grave, and he calls this our source of comfort in times of sorrow and grief. So, believe it!

And, following our plan, we must allow this passage to teach *us*, not lay our own ideas upon *it*. It tells of believers, dead and alive, rising to meet the Lord in the air. But notice that it does *not* tell of this happening *in secret*. Rather, its description of a shout—along with the voice of an archangel and a trumpet blast—seems to suggest the *opposite* of something done quietly and secretly, at least on the surface. We should look to other passages of Scripture to clarify this detail.

Notice, too, that this passage in 1 Thessalonians does not specify the *timing* of the event it describes—though it does provide vital clues that must not be missed. We see that it shows this resurrection, rising, and glorification taking place at the same time as the sound of an angelic trumpet blast. Let's keep this in mind as we turn to a second, parallel description of this exact same event.

### **The Witness of 1 Corinthians 15**

That parallel description is found in a letter Paul wrote to a different congregation of believers—those in Corinth.

Like those in Thessalonica, brethren in Corinth had questions about the hope of true Christians after this life. Grounding their hope for a *future* resurrection in Christ's *past* resurrection (vv. 12–22), just as he did for the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:14), Paul seeks to give the Corinthians a glimpse of the power and glory that awaits in eternal life. It is a passage of hope and power—and it contains elements that should ring dramatically familiar after having read 1 Thessalonians 4. We certainly recommend reading 1 Corinthians 15 in its entirety, but for our present purposes we can focus on verses 50–53.

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. 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. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

Only the willfully blind can fail to see the parallels in these two accounts of this glorious event. *Both* speak of the resurrection of those Christians who have died. *Both* speak of the living as being transformed alongside them, from flesh and blood to incorruptible and immortal spirit (vv. 42–49). *Both* speak of the sounding of a great trumpet. And while one speaks of the coming of Christ, the other speaks of inheriting the Kingdom of God, which other passages connect to His coming (e.g., Matthew 16:28). As John writes, “when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2).

These two passages—in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15—are remarkably consistent with each other. And they are consistent with other passages, such as Matthew 24:30–31, which mentions the angels gathering the righteous “with the great sound of a trumpet.” As Jesus Christ said long ago, “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

Again, only the willfully blind would conclude that these passages in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 are speaking of two different events.

### **A Vitally Important Detail**

In addition to all the points in which the two passages harmonize with each other, 1 Corinthians 15 adds an extremely important detail that allows us to resolve the question of the *timing* of this important event. Look again, focusing on 1 Corinthians 15:51–52: “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.”

So, we see that the resurrection and transformation of the righteous and their gathering to Jesus Christ will happen not just at *any* trumpet, but “at the *last* trumpet.” This reveals that there will be a *sequence of trumpets* and that faithful Christians’ raising, resurrection, and rising into the air must occur at the *end* of this sequence—at the *last* of these trumpets.

Remember, we are seeking to understand the prophesied end-time events according to their description in God’s word. So, this God-inspired detail compels us to ask: *Does any passage of Scripture*

*describe a series of trumpets in the last days?* If we can find in prophecy such a sequence of angelic trumpets, we will have located the *precise moment* when this resurrection and transformation of faithful Christians will take place.

So, is there such a passage? *Yes, there is.* The Bible *does* describe a sequence of end-time trumpets—just as Paul's words would cause us to expect. We will turn our attention to those trumpets next.

# Chapter 4

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## A Sequence of Trumpets

**W**e have seen that the raising of the faithful dead, along with the transformation of true Christians as they rise in the air to meet Jesus Christ, will take place *at the last trumpet*—meaning that the end-times will be shaken by a *sequence of trumpets*. Let’s discover Scripture’s *own* description of these end-time events, exploring the topic unhindered by our own ideas or expectations.

If we locate that sequence of end-time angelic trumpets, we will find the moment when faithful Christians meet the Lord in the clouds—the blessed hope. And we *do* find that sequence of end-of-the-age trumpets described in the book of Revelation.

### **Revealed to Be Understood**

Although many dismiss the book of Revelation as an “optional” book of the Bible that is simply too hard to understand, such sentiment flies in the face of Jesus Christ’s own intentions. Notice what He inspired to be written in its very first verses:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep

those things which are written in it; for the time is near (Revelation 1:1–3).

Notice that those who read and keep the words of Revelation will experience God’s *blessing*. Also, notice that Jesus gave John his visions “to show His servants” events that are *just ahead* of them.

Indeed, from its letters to the seven congregations in chapters 2 and 3, on through to its very last chapter, the book of Revelation does *exactly* what John says it does. Revelation gives a prophetic description of the progress of history from John’s own time in the first century all the way to the end-times and the establishment of the eternal Kingdom of God. You can read about this in far more detail in our free resource *Revelation: The Mystery Unveiled*—a copy is available at any of the Regional Offices listed at the back of this booklet, or you can read it online (or claim your own printed copy) at *TomorrowsWorld.org*.

In chapter 6 of Revelation, John details the unveiling of seven prophetic seals, which are key to understanding faithful Christians’ meeting in the air with their Savior. In a vision, John has seen a scroll, sealed with seven seals, handed to the Lamb—Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy to open them (Revelation 5). As the Savior opens the seals, one after another, a sequence of end-time events is revealed. The first four seals represent the famous Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—symbolizing a global false Christianity, worldwide warfare, devastating famine, and the scourge of disease (Revelation 6:1–8).

These horsemen represent end-time extremes, bringing to a climax the exact same four difficulties Jesus mentions in Matthew 24:4–7—even described in the exact same order. We read of these destructive, symbolic horsemen that “power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth” (Revelation 6:8).

### **The Great Tribulation and Heavenly Signs**

The prophetic sequence continues with the fifth seal, describing a martyrdom of true Christians (Revelation 6:9–11). Jesus elsewhere describes this as a time when “there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21). This will be a time so horrifying that none before or after can compare. The Old Testament also mentions

this time, calling it “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7)—a reference not just to Israel, but specifically to the modern peoples of the United States and Great Britain. (For more on identifying these nations in prophecy, you can read our free booklet *The United States and Great Britain in Prophecy*.)

Consider the ramifications of Jesus’ words. Think of the horror of Cambodia’s “killing fields.” The Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi people. The Nanking Massacre. The Armenian genocide. The Ukrainian Famine. The Holocaust. Jesus is telling us that the coming Great Tribulation will be a time so devastating that none of those horrors will compare—such that, were God not to intervene, “no flesh would be saved” (Matthew 24:22). There would come a total and utter end of life on earth.

But, thankfully, God *will* intervene. In fact, as if on cue, the very next seals of Revelation 7 depict that intervention. But first, let’s be certain that we understand the symbolism used in the fifth seal. During this coming time of tribulation, many true Christians will be murdered, depicted in John’s vision as souls under the altar (Revelation 6:9). Will the souls of the dead literally live under an altar in Heaven? No—the symbolism here is clear to those familiar with the sacrifices of the altar, as Christians of the first century would have been. The base of the sacrificial altar in God’s temple is where the blood of the sin offering was poured (Leviticus 4:7, 18, et al.). And, in John’s vision, the pooled blood of the martyrs, poured out in their sacrifice, cries out for vengeance (Revelation 6:10), just as the blood of righteous Abel did (Genesis 4:10).

We will examine this in more detail later, but for now we can note that several passages explain how, from beginning to end, this time of persecution and suffering will last for three-and-a-half years—“a time, times, and half a time,” or 42 months (e.g., Daniel 7:25; Revelation 13:5–7).

At a certain point during those years of suffering, the sixth seal will be opened and the Heavenly Signs will take place: a great earthquake, a darkening of the sun, the Moon becoming as red as blood, stars (meteors) falling from the sky, and every mountain and island on earth being shaken out of its place (Revelation 6:12–17).

These miraculous and cataclysmic signs will announce that the Father and Jesus Christ are about to intervene dramatically and personally in world affairs! The Heavenly Signs of the sixth seal represent a transition from the wrath of man and the Devil being wrought

upon the earth to a time called the *Day of the Lord*—when the Father and the Lamb unleash *their* wrath.

Many confuse the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord, but Scripture is clear that the Day of the Lord *follows* the Great Tribulation, separated by the Heavenly Signs (Joel 2:30–31; Matthew 24:21, 29). Taking place during the *final year* of the prophesied three-and-a-half years (Isaiah 34:8; 63:4), the Day of the Lord is a time long-awaited by the Father and the Son. And it is no wonder that its arrival will be announced to all of mankind through astonishing, miraculous signs in Heaven and on planet Earth—as all the creation is shaken.

### **At the Seventh Seal—a Sequence of Trumpets!**

The Day of the Lord will be heralded by Christ’s opening of the seventh and final seal of Revelation. We read, “When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given *seven trumpets*” (Revelation 8:1–2).

Note this carefully! Paul told us that the resurrection and glorification of Christians—the day when they will meet their Savior in the clouds—would occur at the last of a sequence of trumpets. Therefore, we have been looking for a sequence of end-time angelic trumpets—and *here it is!* Let God be true, but every man a liar (Romans 3:4)!

If we want to locate the resurrection and glorification of Christians and their rising to meet Jesus Christ in the air—described in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15—we now know where to find it. Paul’s inspired words tell us that it will take place at the “last trumpet” of this sequence of seven trumpets described by John, sounding during the year-long Day of the Lord.

Before the seventh trumpet sounds, the first six trumpet blasts will be devastating. You can read about them in Revelation 8 and 9. Over the course of the year-long Day of the Lord, a third of the earth’s vegetation will be burned up, a third of the seas will become blood, a third of ships and marine life will be destroyed, a third of the planet’s waters will become bitter, and a third of the Sun, Moon, and stars will cease to shine. Then, as a result of the most destructive military exchange in history, a third of mankind will be obliterated.

The Day of the Lord is called “great and very terrible” (Joel 2:11) for a reason. Scripture tells us, “The noise of the day of the LORD is



bitter... a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation... a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and alarm” (Zephaniah 1:14–16).

This year-long series of catastrophes represents God’s wrath unleashed on unrepentant mankind. Yet these terrors are only the first six of the seven trumpets.

### The Last Trumpet Sounds

We then read of the *seventh and last trumpet*: “Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!’” (Revelation 11:15).

Here we see *the Kingdom of God* declared to the world. Every other authority on earth—the satanic Antichrist and Beast of Revelation, in particular—will be declared *invalid* as the reins of the world are handed to the Lamb of God, the Savior of mankind.

Revelation is undeniably plain that the Kingdom of God will be announced to the world at the last of the seven angelic trumpets. And Paul says that the last trumpet blast is the moment when Christians will be resurrected and transformed to meet their Savior in the air. The undeniable testimony of God’s word is that these events are *one and the same*. Unless we are prepared to deny the testimony of Scripture that these events will both occur at the last trumpet, we cannot say that the moment of the resurrection and meeting with Christ in the air is *not* the same as the moment—at the end of the Day of the Lord—when the Kingdom will be proclaimed.

It is no wonder that Paul wrote of our inheritance of the Kingdom of God when he was describing the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:50). It is at this time, the last trumpet, when the Kingdom will be inaugurated and the resurrected Christian faithful will inherit it, ready to begin their reign with Jesus Christ!

Once this happens, little remains in the end-time prophetic scenario but the final seven plagues by which “the wrath of God is complete” (Revelation 15:1), ending with Jesus Christ and His glorified Bride, His Church, riding from the skies on white horses and destroying the armies that dared to gather in defiance of the King of Kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19). Reading of those final seven plagues—the entirety of earth’s waters turned to blood, the death

of all sea life, flesh-scorching heat, and constant, tongue-gnawing pain (Revelation 16)—makes it absolutely plain that the earth and its inhabitants will only be able to endure them for a few days, not the months or years required of a pre-Tribulation Rapture scenario. If these plagues were to last more than a few days, *all* of humanity would be extinguished.

### What We've Seen in the Bible

Before we move on, we ought to pause and summarize what we've seen so far in Scripture. And we should remind ourselves that this is the testimony of the words of the Bible, not the words of preachers or theologians. These are facts from God's word. They may not yet give us the *whole* picture—but, whatever the whole picture is, it *must match these inspired facts*.

Christians—the dead and those alive at Christ's coming—will rise into the air to meet Him at the *very last* of a sequence of angelic trumpets. The sequence of trumpets, leading up to Christ's return, is described in the book of Revelation and in Jesus' description of events that must take place in the end-times before He returns. And, as we've seen together, God's word reveals this order:

- The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse will ride, bringing—in sequence—a global false Christianity, devastating warfare, and overwhelming famine and disease.
- Christians will face severe martyrdom during the Great Tribulation, a time of unprecedented suffering.
- Near the end of the two-and-a-half years of the Great Tribulation, dramatic and miraculous signs in the heavens and on earth will announce the arrival of the year-long Day of the Lord.
- Seven angels will blow seven trumpets over the course of that year, announcing various punishments on the unrepentant of mankind and other end-time developments.
- The seventh—and last—trumpet will announce the inauguration of the Kingdom of God and the reign of Jesus Christ as He appears in the clouds and His followers, dead and alive, are raised and glorified, meeting Him in the sky.

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- God’s wrath will be completed in final plagues too devastating to last for more than a relatively few days.
- Then Jesus Christ and His glorified, resurrected faithful will ride from Heaven on white horses to vanquish the gathered armies of the False Prophet and the Beast—taking rulership of the world and beginning the long-awaited Millennium.

This order of events—plainly revealed in the book of Revelation—is consistent not only with Paul’s description of Christians rising to meet their Savior in the resurrection, but also with Jesus’ own descriptions elsewhere. For instance, look in Matthew 24 at Jesus’ famous Olivet Prophecy. There, Jesus, the same divine Son of God who inspired John’s vision in the book of Revelation, laid out the *exact same sequence of events*:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days [the Great Tribulation (v. 21)] the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (Matthew 24:29–31).

Jesus’ sequence matches Revelation’s and Paul’s details *exactly*: tribulation, then heavenly signs, *then* the appearance of the Son of Man in power at the sound of a trumpet as He gathers His people in the air.

If we reject this sequence of events, we reject the plain testimony of God’s word.

### **Honest Conclusions and...**

Having looked at the Bible’s own picture of the end-times and having examined the sequence of events as God’s word lays it out, we must draw certain conclusions—even as we see that important questions remain.

First, there *is coming* a time when the righteous dead and the righteous living will be glorified and will meet their Savior in the clouds. Multiple passages of Scripture attest to this glorious truth, which deserves our complete and utter faith. We should let *no one* take this conclusion away from us. Paul looked to that resurrection as “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13) and took comfort in knowing that “there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

Second, this event—the rising into the air and glorification of faithful Christians—will be quite the *opposite* of secret. It will be *dramatic* and *public*. It will come after the most traumatic time the world has ever seen—the worst that an enraged Satan can dish out to and through mankind, followed by a year of God’s dramatic intervention in world affairs, culminating in the sign of the Son of Man in Heaven, causing the unrepentant of the world to mourn and cry out in anger and despair.

Paul squarely places the meeting with Christ in the air at the last trumpet of the seven. John in Revelation makes plain that this will be no secret, hidden event.

Finally, it is plain that believers will not spend years in Heaven before Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. The time between being caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord at the last trumpet and then returning with Him as His glorified Bride to vanquish His foes can be, at *most*, mere days—not months or years. Were those final plagues to last any longer, there would be *no people left alive* for Christ to rule.

So, *portions* of the secret rapture theory—such as meeting the Lord in the air and returning with Him to deliver God’s judgment—are true and consistent with Scripture, but other details clearly *do not* match what the Bible tells us. Christians will *not* be caught up in the air to meet Christ *before* the Great Tribulation; they will meet Him in the air *after* the Great Tribulation and at the *end* of the Day of the Lord, right before the commencement of the Millennium.

### ... Unanswered Questions

Does this mean that belief in a *post*-Tribulation rapture is correct? Will all Christians alive when the Great Tribulation begins face the

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wrath of the Antichrist and the persecuting forces of the Beast of Revelation? Certainly, as we've seen, many prophecies—in Revelation and elsewhere—tell us of martyrs during this time. But will *no* followers of Jesus Christ be protected during this terrible period?

After all, doesn't Jesus Christ encourage His followers to *pray* that they might not experience the horrors of these end-time events?

Yes, He *does*. And He does so in the very same Olivet Prophecy mentioned earlier:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. *Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man* (Luke 21:34–36).

We have seen that the faithful will be caught up into the sky *after* the events of the Great Tribulation, yet many of Christ's followers will be martyred *before* He comes for His people. So, what and where is the promised protection? And why does Jesus also say that we should pray that we might be counted worthy to *escape* these very events?

These points *can* be reconciled, but how? Let us continue our quest to “test all things” using the Bible, unadorned by preconceived ideas, to understand the end-times scenario, and let us discover together the encouragement—and the warning—God's word has for us.

# Chapter 5

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## Protection... For Some

**S**o far, we have seen that end-time Christians being “caught up” to meet Jesus Christ in the air is truly a plain fact of Scripture. But we have also seen very clearly that this will not happen until the last of seven end-time trumpets sounds—years *after* the beginning of the Great Tribulation and the widespread martyrdom of faithful Christians.

This might seem, on the surface, to favor the post-Tribulation view that allows for no protection of Christians during those terrible years. But it is not the whole story, for we’ve also seen that Jesus Christ tells His followers to “watch therefore, and pray always that you may be *counted worthy to escape all these things* that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36).

So, since believers will meet Christ in the air *after* the Tribulation, how can there be any protection *during* the Tribulation? And, since Christ says that *escape* is possible, why will some *still* be persecuted and martyred during the Tribulation?

We must continue to examine the picture painted by Scripture *itself*. In doing so, we will find that God reserves many details to Himself, which is certainly His divine prerogative (Deuteronomy 29:29). However, we will also see that He *does* make some fundamental parts of His plan *very* plain.

### **Promises of Protection—with Conditions**

First, we should notice that Jesus’ comment concerning protection during the wrathful, end-time difficulties ahead is hinted at and dis-

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cussed throughout the Scriptures. For instance, we are urged to “seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’s anger” (Zephaniah 2:3). And we read:

Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourself, as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation is past. For behold, the LORD comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth will also disclose her blood, and will no more cover her slain (Isaiah 26:20–21).

Just as the Eternal protected righteous Noah’s family within the ark when He visited the wicked of the earth with a flood, and just as He protected the families of Israel during the final plagues visited upon the Egyptians, God will protect many Christians during the coming wrath.

But notice that His offers of protection are *conditional*—each example mentions actions that those desiring protection must take. “Enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you,” the prophet says. “Seek the LORD,” Zephaniah admonishes. “Seek righteousness, seek humility.”

After all, even Noah’s family had to walk onto the ark, to say nothing of Noah’s having to *build* it—and the Israelites were spared the last plague in Egypt *only* if they followed God’s instructions regarding the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:6–7, 12).

Notice, too, that Jesus’ words to His followers declare that escape from the terrible days to come is possible—but *conditional*. He says that those who desire protection must be *counted worthy* (Luke 21:36). This tells us that *some* followers may be counted worthy of protection in those times, while others may not.

So, we need to understand what it means to be “counted worthy” in the end-times and understand more details about that protection. Of all the passages that point to this coming time of protection and refuge, two stand out as particularly helpful for our purposes—both in the book of Revelation. The first is near the end of the famous seven letters to the seven churches, recorded in Revelation 2 and 3.

## Latter Days and Lax Attitudes

Many misunderstand these seven crucial letters. While they are, indeed, seven letters written to seven first-century Christian congregations that existed along a mail route, they are so much more than that.

Remember that the first verse of Revelation tells us that Jesus Christ was revealing to His servants “things which must shortly take place.” And the book of Revelation does just that, revealing to John, in vision, things that would begin to happen in his own day and would continue to the return of Christ, about two thousand years in John’s future. The seven letters recorded in Revelation 2 and 3 are tied to what those congregations experienced, yet they *also* include elements that *were never fulfilled in the first century*. That is because those seven letters were also *prophetic* in nature, revealing seven successive eras of the small and beleaguered Church that Jesus founded, from its beginning in the first century all the way to the years immediately preceding Jesus Christ’s dramatic return.

Such understanding illuminates the 2,000-year history of the Church of God—and the prophetic letters do, indeed, perfectly track across the centuries the eras of Christ’s true flock. If you would like more details, request our free booklet *God’s Church Through the Ages*, available from your nearest Regional Office, listed at the end of this booklet, or read it online at [TomorrowsWorld.org](http://TomorrowsWorld.org).

With that understanding in place, the situation of God’s end-time Church is made plain in Revelation 3. During the second-to-last era of the Church, a vibrant, zealous body of Christians would be dominant, symbolized by the congregation in Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7). That Church, small but bold, would preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, going through the doors Christ held open for it and holding on to the precious truths God had revealed to it (v. 8).

However, in the next era of the Church—the *last* era, leading up to Jesus Christ’s return—the numbers of those exhibiting the zealous Philadelphian spirit would become smaller in influence and less prominent in the Body of Christ. The largest group of the faithful at the end of days is pictured not by the zealous congregation in Philadelphia, but the congregation in Laodicea (v. 14). Rather than passionately pursuing the Work of preaching Christ’s message to the world and refusing to compromise the faith, Scripture describes Laodicean Christians as *lukewarm*—not cold to God’s truths and Christ’s commission, but not passionate about them, either.



### Some Protected, Others Persecuted

Admonishing those Christians with a Laodicean attitude in the last days, Jesus warns, “I will vomit you out of My mouth” (v. 16). He castigates them as foolishly confident in their spiritual condition—when, in reality, they are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (v. 17). Consequently, He explains (v. 18) that they must be refined by fire—a biblical symbol of tribulation and persecution—that they may obtain spiritual wealth and be clothed with righteous actions and behaviors (“white garments,” cf. Revelation 19:8).

After their suffering, the Laodiceans will be able to see themselves rightly, as if having had their eyes anointed with salve (v. 18), and they will repent of their lukewarm attitude. As harsh as persecution in the Tribulation may sound, God reassures us that He is motivated by His love for them, seeking to help them discover the zeal they have been missing (v. 19). We read, “You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives’” (Hebrews 12:4–6; cf. Proverbs 3:11–12).

While Scripture shows that the Laodicean attitude will dominate in the last days, a smaller flock of Philadelphians is prophesied to exist at that time—and to be *protected* from the fiery, global trial that the Laodiceans must endure: “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. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown” (Revelation 3:10–11).

This prophecy was *not* fulfilled in the first century. The “hour of trial which shall come upon *the whole world*, to test those who dwell on the earth” is the soon-coming, global trial of the Great Tribulation, during which those of Philadelphian zeal—those who, in Christ’s words of Luke 21, are “counted worthy to escape all these things”—will be granted protection from this great hour of testing.

Understanding these two starkly different attitudes among God’s end-time people helps us to understand another passage in the book of Revelation—and to answer the important question of *where* this place of protection will be located. We read of the end-time Church

symbolized by a woman, persecuted by the Devil, who is symbolized by a dragon-like serpent. And, just as we saw promised to Philadelphian Christians, we see this woman, the Church, given protection from the hour of trial and the persecution:

Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child [Jesus Christ, the “firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29)]. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time [three-and-a-half years], from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth (Revelation 12:13–16).

The Bible uses such waters to symbolize vast numbers of people and armies (e.g., Revelation 17:15; Isaiah 8:7; Isaiah 59:19), and Jesus makes it plain that these armies will be supernaturally foiled as God allows His people to escape “into the wilderness to her place.”

Yet the passage does not end there. Just as the prophecies of Philadelphia and Laodicea reveal that one zealous group of Christians will be protected from the Great Tribulation while the larger, lukewarm group of Christians must endure it, Revelation 12 tells the same tale. When the woman escapes the pursuing armies, verse 17 tells us that “the dragon [Satan] was enraged” and then turns “to make war with the rest of her offspring who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Revelation 12 matches Revelation 3 perfectly: Part of the Church will be protected from the “hour of trial,” while another part of the Church must endure it. Some claim the woman of Revelation 12 is physical Israel, but this is unscriptural. Physical Israel does not “have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ is “the firstborn of many brethren”—that is, *Christians* (Romans 8:29). And *all* Christians are to keep the commandments (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Yes, there *will* be members of God’s true Church—possessing the testimony of Jesus and keeping the commandments, however lukewarmly—who experience the force of the Devil’s wrath against them, facing the persecution of the Antichrist and the Beast of Revelation (Revelation 13:7). The Great Tribulation will become their opportunity to “buy” from God “gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed” (Revelation 3:18).

### **Where Will Christians Be Protected?**

So, while the Rapture idea gets details wrong, there *will* be end-time Christians whom God protects from the Tribulation to come—those who are zealous, obedient, and passionate in doing the Work of God.

But where will they be protected? And how? The rapture theory claims that this protection will occur in Heaven, yet we have already seen the plain testimony of Scripture that faithful Christians will not rise to meet Christ until well *after* the Tribulation begins.

The answer is in Revelation 12 for those who will read God’s word *carefully*.

Note again the inspired description of *where* the woman will be protected: “But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent” (v. 14).

Some might consider the “wings of a great eagle” to hint at some sort of flight through the air, but this cannot be taken for granted. God says that the ancient Israelites, too, left “on eagles’ wings” (Exodus 19:4), yet they most assuredly *walked* from the land of Egypt at the time of the Exodus.

In fact, the vital detail is there in the *location* of the woman’s protection: “the *wilderness*.”

You can search your entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and you will *never* see the term “wilderness” used to describe Heaven. If you need to confirm this for yourself, take the time *right now* to look. God *never* calls Heaven a “wilderness.”

Quite the contrary, the inspired Greek word translated “wilderness” here—*erēmos*—means a waste, a desolate, solitary, and often uninhabited place. It is used of the deserted places where the Devil tempted Jesus after 40 days of fasting (Matthew 4:1) and the desert

in which the first generation of Israelites died while wandering for 40 years (Hebrews 3:17). And when Jesus laments over Jerusalem because of its sins, saying, “See! Your house is left to you *desolate*” (Matthew 23:38), the word He uses here is the same: *erēmos*.

This word is simply *never* used to indicate the glorious realm of Heaven, where God and the angels dwell in splendor. Rather, Heaven is compared to a *paradise* (2 Corinthians 12:4)—the very *opposite* of the desolate and barren wilderness. And when we consider that the human armies chasing after the fleeing faithful will be swallowed up by the earth (Revelation 12:16), doesn’t a place of protection on the earth make far more sense?

End-time faithful and zealous Christians will *not* be protected in Heaven. But they *will be* protected. And the location of that place of safety will be a place of desolate wilderness *here on earth*.

### **A Place of Safety**

We have seen that, while the Rapture theory is correct in acknowledging that God will offer protection from the Great Tribulation, it misses the mark regarding those who will receive protection—those “counted worthy”—as well as the location of that protection.

So, we naturally wonder: Where will that “wilderness” be? Remember, we are looking to the Bible for truth, not to man’s speculations. It is clear that God has, for now, reserved that detail to Himself—though, to be sure, speculation abounds. Some consider the ancient city of Petra, in southwest Jordan, to be a likely location for that future protection, though none of the passages used to pin this site down quite suffice—and, perhaps, for good cause! Think of how many would be tempted to move near to such a location today, seeking to be only a hop, a skip, and a jump away from where they expect to be protected. Yet, in fact, God’s word makes it plain that proximity will *not* be a factor when God decides who will be protected and who must go through the Great Tribulation.

Rather, the Son of God makes plain to each of us what *should* be our focus: *being counted worthy*.

When the moment comes, God will be able to warn the zealous and faithful members of His Church to flee to a place of safety—and He will be able to tell them where it is and how to get there. The real question is whether we will be among the zealous and faithful who are protected. *That* is the concern that should demand our attention.

# Chapter 6

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## Be Counted Worthy

**B**y now, it should be clear that the Rapture question is not just some academic or theoretical problem—something for theologians to debate or believers to argue about. In the end, it all boils down to an unavoidable fact and a choice we must face as Jesus Christ’s return draws near.

We’ve seen—according to the sequence of events clearly revealed in Scripture—that when the Great Tribulation arrives, Christians will *still* be on the earth, not up in Heaven. When those years of persecution and suffering begin, the rising in the air to meet Christ will still be three-and-a-half years away, at the seventh trumpet, and even the first trumpet will still be two-and-a-half years away, to be sounded at the beginning of the year-long Day of the Lord.

And we’ve seen that God will require *some* Christians to go through that time of persecution and suffering, which will purge them and perfect them for their role in His future Kingdom. Yet other Christians will have been “counted worthy” by their Savior and granted a means of escape to a place of safety. So, the vital question is this: *How can we be counted worthy?*

We’ve looked at that question already and answered it very broadly: *Be zealous, don’t compromise, support the Work of Christ in preaching the Gospel.*

But this is far too important a question to leave to generalities. And the Bible does give us the details we need to know if we sincerely desire to be counted worthy.

## White Garments of Righteousness

Jesus describes those of a faithful Philadelphian spirit as those who “have kept My word, and have not denied My name” (Revelation 3:8). But what does this mean?

In Matthew 24:5, Jesus describes deceivers as coming “in My name,” so simply bearing Christ’s name and calling oneself “Christian” isn’t enough. And keeping His word is far more than simply storing it up in one’s memory. Let’s see the distinction the Savior Himself makes:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Matthew 7:21–23).

Note that Jesus speaks here of those who not only claim His name, but even do wonders in His name. Yet He rejects these people, saying He “never knew” them. Why? He calls them “you who practice lawlessness”—or, as *The New Living Translation* renders it, “you who break God’s laws.”

Christ isn’t casting them away because of speeding tickets or unpaid library fines—they claim His own name but *ignore and disobey the commandments of God*.

Many other passages make the same point, such as John’s statement: “He who says, ‘I know Him [that is, Jesus Christ],’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). And Paul, too, says that those who profess to know God with their words can still deny Him in their works—the things they actually *do* (Titus 1:16).

We *cannot* routinely and willfully disobey God’s commandments and believe we will be taken to a place of safety to be protected from the coming Great Tribulation.

In Revelation 19, those who will charge back down to earth in glory with Jesus Christ are described as being “clothed in fine linen, white and clean” (v. 14). This is the clothing of the Bride, who “has made herself ready” (v. 7). But what do these clean, white garments

represent? The passage says plainly, “The fine linen is *the righteous acts of the saints*” (v. 8).

And what is biblical righteousness? While the topic is a rich one—too rich to summarize in this brief discussion—one key element is made plain in King David’s proclamation to God that “all Your commandments are righteousness” (Psalm 119:172).

The ideas that grace and law fundamentally have nothing to do with each other and that we do not play a role in responding to the salvation God offers us are *lies* proclaimed by a counterfeit “Christianity.” If you are interested in understanding more, please request our free booklet *Law or Grace: Which Is It?* The truth of the matter is far more beautiful than those on either side of the question ever realize.

The world around today’s Christians is increasingly pressing them to compromise their faith with a counterfeit and corrupted form of Christianity that pays lip service to the commands of God, but actually waters them down or undermines them. And there is a price for that compromise. Only those who persevere in their obedience to the Ten Commandments and the laws of God will be kept from the “hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world” (Revelation 3:10).

### **Preaching the Gospel**

Another characteristic of those who will be protected is illustrated by the description of the Philadelphian Christians in Revelation 3—they are devoted to Jesus Christ’s commission to preach the Gospel of His Kingdom to the world.

Jesus describes these most faithful Christians as being given an “open door” (v. 8). In the New Testament, such doors—opened by God Himself—symbolize opportunities for His Church to preach Christ’s message to the unconverted world (e.g., 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). Jesus commands that His Church preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God *to the world* (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:46–47; John 20:21). And those of a Philadelphian spirit take this command just as seriously as they take the rest of God’s commands.

When Christ’s disciples were focusing too much on the time of His return, He reminded them of their higher priority: preaching His

message “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:6–8). And He prophesied that the end-times would not be fulfilled before “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations” (Matthew 24:14).

Those who will be protected in a place of safety will be those who have made Christ’s mission their own—not in a spirit of lukewarm apathy, but in a zealous spirit of determination. The early first-century Church modeled this zealous commitment when, in the face of persecution, they asked God for courage and strength to speak all the more boldly (Acts 4:29).

This zealous spirit is so important to God—this spirit of wanting every nook and cranny of this world to hear Jesus Christ’s message of repentance from sin and preparation for His coming Kingdom—that His messenger to the prophet Daniel described those who will be glorified at Christ’s return as “those who turn many to righteousness” (Daniel 12:3).

This applies not only to those ordained to spread the message of God’s coming Kingdom, but also to those who *support* those so ordained—those who pray to God for them, financially provide for them, and otherwise serve as co-workers, or “fellow workers,” in Christ’s effort (e.g., Romans 16:3; Philippians 4:3; Colossians 4:11). Paul praised those who supported him as his fellow workers, for without their support he could not effectively preach the Gospel. By their support, they too were turning many to righteousness and participating in the Work of God.

### **Watchfulness and Prayer**

Finally, let’s not overlook the obvious. In the very passage where He tells us that protection is available, Jesus also says, “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36).

Here we see two pieces of guidance from our Lord: *watch* and *pray always*.

Concerning the first, what does He mean by “watch”? To an extent, He is encouraging us to watch world conditions in anticipation of His return. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of His day who could not “discern the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3), and we



should not fall into that same category. We should be like the Thessalonians to whom Paul writes, “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day [the end-time return of Christ] should overtake you as a thief” (1 Thessalonians 5:4).

Indeed, we *should* be familiar with the signs around us indicating that Christ’s return is near—seeing such conditions should press us to ensure that we are ready. But Jesus’ admonition to “watch” involves more than watching the world around us. It’s also about watching *ourselves*. Immediately before He talks of being worthy of escape, Jesus says, “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly” (Luke 21:34).

Yes, the “cares of this life” can be deadly! In His parable of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13), Jesus describes those who start out excited about the word of God and about the Gospel of His Kingdom, but whose entanglements in the “cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word” until they become “unfruitful.”

If we long to be counted worthy, we must seek to be fruitful (John 15:8; Galatians 5:22–23) and to watch ourselves to ensure that the cares of this life do not weigh us down and distract us.

And we must “pray always.” The faith God the Father is seeking in His Son’s followers is more than a mere checklist of commandments or regular tithing to a ministry. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day focused only on such matters (however poorly they did so), yet Jesus said that their righteousness was far less than what God desires (Matthew 5:20).

Rather, the Father is looking for those who long for a *relationship* with Him and His Son. Jesus said plainly, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). As we have noted, we cannot have such a relationship if we are unwilling to obey His commandments (1 John 2:3). Yet we must be grounded in more than that, as well.

Even Jesus Christ, whose obedience was perfect and complete, often sought His Father in prayer. He asked His Father to bless His food and sustenance (Matthew 14:19), He involved His Father in His important decisions (Luke 6:12–13), He thanked His Father for listening to Him and answering His prayers (John 11:41–42), and He took His woes and heartaches to Him (Matthew 26:36–44). His relation-

ship with His Father was such that His disciples were moved to ask Him to teach them to pray as He did (Luke 11:1). (If you, also, long to seek God more completely in prayer, please consider requesting our free booklet *Twelve Keys to Answered Prayer*, which you can also read online at *TomorrowsWorld.org*.)

Jesus saw the Almighty as far more than a God whose rules must be obeyed. He also saw Him as His Father, and He regularly invested in His relationship with that Father—seeking Him and His will in prayer and in Scripture, and then walking accordingly.

Those whom God protects in a place of safety during the trials to come will be those who have built a relationship with Him, learned to obey Him in love, helped in His Work of taking Christ’s message to the world, and sought His Kingdom above all that this world offers (Matthew 6:31–33). These qualities will characterize those “counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.” And Christians *must* develop those qualities. Those followers of Christ who do not learn them in the end-times before the Great Tribulation will be asked by their Father to learn them *during* the Great Tribulation.

# Chapter 7

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## Embrace the Truth

**W**hen we began our investigation, we said we would put to the test the various ideas about the Rapture, following Paul’s admonition to “test all things” and “hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21)—and our means of testing those ideas would be to let the Bible tell us, in its own words, the truth about end-time events and their sequence.

Having done so, we *must* hold fast to the truth that all true Christians—those dead and those still alive at Christ’s coming—*will* meet Him in the clouds. This coming event is more certain than the rising of the sun tomorrow. Yet we must cast aside the unbiblical idea that it will happen before the Great Tribulation. Rather, it will happen at the last trumpet, as we have seen that the Tribulation will begin before even the first angelic trumpet is sounded.

And we must hold on to the truth that God *will* offer His most faithful people His protection during the Tribulation—though others will have to endure that terrible trial. Yet we must cast aside the idea that this protection will take place in Heaven. It will, rather, occur somewhere here on earth.

By simply letting the Bible speak for itself, the truth becomes unavoidably clear. And that truth is not found in the theory of the Rapture—in *any* of its variations.

So, we might reasonably ask: Since God’s word so clearly paints a scenario that contradicts essential elements of this theory, why do so many believe that the Bible teaches a secret rapture?

One important answer is that God must open our minds to understand His truth (Luke 24:32, 45). The truth of God is not accessible to human reasoning alone, without the aid of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). People cannot come to Christ in this life unless God the Father calls them and draws them to Him (John 6:44), and He is not calling and opening the minds of everyone in this age (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). As for those He does not call in this life, He reveals that the Scriptures *will* be opened to them later—after the Millennium, when all the dead, small and great, will be raised again to mortal life and the books of the Bible will finally be opened to them (Revelation 20:12). This magnificent period at the end of God's plan of salvation is discussed in our free resource *Is This the Only Day of Salvation?* This study guide is available at *TomorrowsWorld.org* and from any of the Regional Offices listed at the back of this booklet.

### **Removing the “Rapture Filter”**

Another reason so many believe that Scripture teaches the Rapture is because they *already presume* that the Rapture is true. This creates a sort of *filter*, much like the filters photographers use in front of camera lenses. A Bible-reader who already believes in a secret rapture, then reads a passage of Scripture *while looking through that filter*, can readily “see” a secret, pre-Tribulation rapture reflected in the passage—even when the words of the passage, themselves, are best understood differently.

To see this for yourself, here is a simple test. Read the passage in Matthew 24 that says, “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” (vv. 40–41).

Now, ask yourself, *Does anything in this passage prove the Rapture theory to be true? Is the Rapture even mentioned in this passage?*

This passage cannot *prove* the Rapture theory to be true, because we've already seen that a secret, pre-Tribulation rapture does not match the clearly described biblical sequence of events. Christians' transformation and rising to meet Christ in the air will happen *after* the Great Tribulation—and Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35).

Embracing that truth—the Bible's own sequence of events—allows us to take the “Rapture filter” off our eyes and look anew at the passage. Then we can see that it doesn't mention a secret rapture at all. Rather, we must read a rapture *into* the passage to see it there.

This lets us be open to other understandings of the passage. For instance, notice how it is surrounded by passages in which Jesus Christ is focused on the *punishment* of heedless people, not on their being *protected*. In fact, He describes people being “taken away”—but not in a good way. Rather, he describes how the great flood of Noah’s day came upon the unrepentant and “took them all away” (Matthew 24:39). Being “taken away” then was *not* a blessing.

And earlier in the same prophecy, Jesus tells His followers to *physically flee* to safety as the Tribulation begins, not to expect a mysterious vanishing (vv. 15–21). This is made plain in the parallel account in Luke 17: “In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife. Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it” (vv. 31–33).

This is a far cry from being passively “whisked away” in the Spirit. Rather, this is an *active flight* to some earthly place—and an *active choosing* to leave one’s worldly goods behind and *physically flee*.

When we embrace the biblical sequence of events and remove the “Rapture filter,” we begin to see these and other verses differently. And we see that none truly require anyone to believe in the Rapture to understand them. Quite the contrary—they are perfectly consistent with the biblical sequence of events.

### **Let’s Call It What the Bible Calls It**

Finally, we should ask: If the origin of the term *rapture* began with a well-meaning but ultimately unbiblical idea promoted 200 years ago, and if the truth of Scripture doesn’t fit any of the various ideas that have branched off from that idea through many disputes over those 200 years... why use the word *rapture* at all?

The Bible already has a name for the event that will take place at the last trumpet—we read, “This is the *first resurrection*. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:5–6).

There is no need to rename an event that the Almighty God’s inspired words name clearly. The event faithful Christians are awaiting is the *first resurrection*. Paul declared his hope to be in the *resurrec-*

tion (Acts 23:6; 24:15, 21). He taught that Christians should look to the hope of the *resurrection* as their comfort (1 Thessalonians 4:16–18). Jesus Christ declared Himself to be “the *resurrection* and the life” (John 11:25).

No writer or speaker in the entirety of the New Testament pointed *anyone* to an event that they called “the Rapture.” Yet talk of the *resurrection* is found throughout the New Testament, and its authors use the term *resurrection* consistently—as does the Lord Himself.

Perhaps it is time to retire the name “Rapture” from our vocabulary and welcome the name God’s own word gives to this magnificent future event: *the first resurrection*.

### **Our Blessed Hope**

Truly, the resurrection and glorification of the faithful at Jesus Christ’s return *is* the hope of His followers in every age. Paul, recounting how he had cast behind him all he had gained in his old, pre-Christian life, said that, in faith, he sought to “know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may *attain to the resurrection from the dead*” (Philippians 3:10–11).

And that day *will come*. At the seventh angel’s trumpet blast, angels of Heaven will scatter to the four winds to escort the elect of God to their meeting with the Son of God, their *Savior*.

Faithful Christians who have died throughout history will be resurrected and given a new, incorruptible body and taken into the clouds to be with the returning Christ. Immediately after the dead are raised, Christians still alive will be transformed as well. Every ache and pain they have ever felt will forever become a thing of the past, as corruption puts on incorruption and mortal puts on immortality.

For those born of God in this first resurrection, death will have been swallowed up, forever, in victory (1 Corinthians 15:54).

Waiting for them, at the end of their journey through the skies, will be the glorified Jesus Christ—ready to welcome His Bride and to see her, face to face, for the first time. And as these resurrected Christians see Him, they will see what they have now become—each having been transformed into His own image (2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2).

From there, Jesus and His Bride will begin eternity together—never to part. Together, the newly expanded Family of God will usher

## The Truth About the Rapture

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in the reign of the Kingdom of God and the long-awaited restoration of all things (Acts 3:21).

*This* is the blessed hope of all true Christians. May God bring that day soon.

And may God help you embrace the truth of these promises and attain to the first resurrection yourself—alongside all those who have loved His appearing (2 Timothy 4:8).

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