

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT

# The Rapture

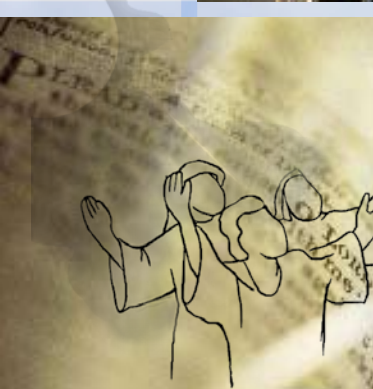
You may have seen movies about “the Rapture.” Typically, a passenger jet is cruising above the clouds when the pilot and several passengers suddenly disappear. A passenger, still in the aircraft, looks at the empty seat beside him. The seat belt is still buckled, and a book lays open on the seat. It’s a Bible, and the words of First Thessalonians 4:16-17 are highlighted:

For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Or you have, assuredly, seen the bumper sticker: Warning! In case of Rapture this car will be abandoned! Who hasn’t come across the Left Behind series of books—so popular that at their peak they were as likely to be found in grocery, drug, and greeting card stores as in bookstores? The theme of this series is the fate of those humans who are not born-again Christians at the moment the Lord Jesus Christ “first” returns to our planet. When all true believers are safely removed to heaven the rest of humanity is left behind to face seven years of God’s terrifying judgment.

Believers in the Rapture say Jesus will appear in the sky, high above the earth, and call to himself all who have accepted Christ as their personal savior, whether they are alive at the time or have died. They will then be led into heaven.

And, to be sure, Christians of all times have lived in the faith-filled hope and expectation of Jesus’ return, a return that will bring to fulfillment all the promises of the reign of God. The Rapture, however, adds the notion that Jesus, in initiating the second coming, will come and take away his Church before his final return. The Rapture, in other words, signals the end of God’s patient offering of grace to the whole world and inaugurates a period of intense judgment against all humanity before the second coming.





According to many who believe in the Rapture, only those who possess a personal relationship with Jesus Christ will experience the Rapture. Many Rapture believers assume that Catholics are missing this relationship. Of course, there is nothing more Catholic than the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died for our salvation. This is the belief of all Christians—Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants.

The Rapture, however, is not a belief of all Christians. It is a new doctrine—one never taught or believed before the nineteenth century—that requires a particular understanding of God’s action in history. It is an understanding that overemphasizes a kind of divine retribution and underemphasizes God’s mercy, and one that ignores the human history and culture in which the inspired word of God was written.



### But what if it's in the Bible?

The ability to find any biblical basis for the Rapture depends largely on how you read the Bible. A Catholic and a fundamentalist will both read a biblical text with faith in its divine inspiration. However, a Catholic is far more likely to also seek understanding about the human authors of biblical texts, the literary styles and traditions they employed in writing, and the concerns they were facing. As Catholics, we profess, in the words of the Nicene Creed, that Jesus Christ “will come again to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.” We believe that is also the clear and explicit teaching of Sacred Scripture. We also hold, however, that it is a serious misinterpretation of Sacred Scripture to claim that Christians will be rescued by God in a Rapture that removes them from the earth either before or during a period of earthly tribulation.



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