

# Secret Rapture?

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*This article is presented to refute the belief that the Rapture takes place secretly before a supposed seven-year period of tribulation.*

PRE-TRIBULATIONISTS HAVE PROPAGATED the notion of a “secret rapture” of the church based on a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and for theological purposes relating to their position. Before examining the Corinthian text to ascertain its meaning, we must first deal with the theological connection of the secret rapture teaching to the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church.

While not a central teaching of the pre-tribulation doctrine, the secret rapture teaching is viewed to some degree as a logical corollary to this position. The reason such a teaching is so important to the pre-tribulation doctrine is because the Scripture is clear that the next appearance of the Lord on earth will be at the second coming (Matthew 24:23-31; Acts 1:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:8; Revelation 1:7), which is to take place at the end of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week (tribulation period). Pre-tribulationists, who maintain that Christ will return for His church seven years before His second coming, must explain how Christ can descend from heaven in return for His bride *before* the second coming, without physically returning to the earth and without being seen (1 Thessalonians 4:16). They find the solution with the teaching of the secret rapture. At the rapture of the church, it is believed that Christ will descend from heaven in the clouds (but not visible to the earth-dwellers) while the saints are translated through the atmosphere in “a blink of an eye” to meet the Lord in the air, to immediately return to heaven with the Lord for the duration of the seven year tribulation.

Having examined the theological and logical necessity of the position, let us now examine the biblical basis for a secret rapture. First Corinthians 15:51-52 is cited as evidence for the teaching, but the pre-tribulationists’ interpretation of the passage is problematic for several reasons. The passage reads as follows:

Behold, I show 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this

mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

All verse divisions have been purposely omitted so the passage can be read as it would have appeared to the original readers. This is necessary because the verse division between verse 51 and 52 causes many to view verse 52 as the start of a new thought, in contradistinction to the subject of verse 51 (“we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”). Such is not the case. Verse 52 is a continuation of the sentence in verse 51 (“we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”). Most English translations blur this continuation due to the fact that a comma or hyphen is inserted after the word “changed.” When reading the passage without the verse divisions, or without the comma, we find Paul to be teaching that we shall all be *changed* in a moment. No mention is made of being raptured in a moment.

It is usually assumed that Paul’s topic of discussion here is the rapture, but the word “rapture” is never found in the passage, nor is the concept of a rapture indicated. The context makes clear that Paul’s subject is the resurrection of the body, not the translation of the body to heaven. The context of 1 Corinthians 15 is consumed with the idea of the resurrection of the dead, and the nature of the resurrected body. Paul spoke of believers being “changed” at the resurrection, which is a reference to our future glorified bodies, not the event or speed of the rapture.

Some would contend that the rapture and the resurrection are to be thought of as one event seeing that they will happen at the same time. While both events will occur nearly simultaneous to one another, to infer that the two events are conceptually one, and can thus be interchanged, is to confuse two conceptually different, although related events. Paul’s reference to “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...” is a reference to the speed of our glorification (the change from mortality to immortality, from corruption to incorruption), not the speed of the rapture. We will be changed from our natural, mortal, corruptible body to a spiritual, immortal, and incorruptible body in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Paul does speak of our rapture into the air to meet the Lord, elsewhere, but not in this context (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Seeing that 1 Corinthians 15:51-54 is not referring to the rapture of the church, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is the only true rapture passage. In this passage we do not find any indication of the speed of the rapture. Paul merely noted that “we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep,” and, “the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and

remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds...” (4:15-17). Here we are only given a rapture-order; no rapture-speed is indicated.

Not only is there no Scripture supporting the notion of a secret rapture, but an examination of other Scriptures gives precedent for a visible, publicized rapture of the Church. The rapture of the Church is not the only rapture mentioned in Scripture. Enoch, Elijah, Jesus, and the Two Witnesses have also/will also experience(d) a rapture. None of these raptures were entirely secret, nor do those raptured simply disappear in a twinkling of an eye. Elijah’s rapture was witnessed by Elisha (2 Kings 2:9-12). Jesus’ rapture was witnessed by the apostles (Acts 1:9-11). The rapture of the Two Witnesses is said to be witnessed by their enemies (Revelation 11:3-12). If we could develop any biblical precedent for the speed of the church’s rapture, it would appear that it will be slow enough for others to witness it.

Some argue for a secret rapture based on the Greek word *harpazo* (“catching away”), noting that it means to “seize suddenly.” Texts cited include John 6:15 where the crowd was going to “take him [Jesus] by force,” and Jude 23 where Jude spoke of saving some by “pulling them out of the fire.” The word does carry the meaning of “take,” and often a taking by force. When one seizes something by force, it is argued, they seize it quickly. I disagree that seizing something by force necessarily implies seizing it quickly. Even if we agree that the seizing is of a quick nature, being quick, and being secret are two entirely different things. Whether the rapture will take place in a few seconds or a few minutes cannot be known, but the biblical precedent for raptures would indicate that the rapture of the church will be witnessed by the earth-dwellers.

It is interesting to note that if a lightning-speed rapture were true, why would it be necessary for Paul to note that the dead in Christ would rise first? No human being would be able to distinguish the difference of time-order between the dead and living saints. The statement that the dead will rise before those who yet remain alive would only make sense if there was enough time to truly distinguish between who would go first and who would go next. A secret, or lightning-speed, rapture makes these statements virtually meaningless, for only God would be able to tell any difference in the rising order of the believers.

We must conclude that there is no Biblical foundation to teach a secret rapture of the Church. While this in itself does not dismantle the pre-tribulational position, it does create problems for the doctrine, which problems are not experienced in the post-tribulational view of the rapture. The post-tribulational rapture maintains that the rapture will occur at the second coming, which will be visible to earth-dwellers, and thus there is no need to postulate a secret coming of Christ or a secret rapture of the saints. The saints will rise to meet the Lord in the air, and

immediately return with Christ to the earth to establish His Millennial Reign, all of which will be witnessed by the unbelieving world.

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