Does the Bible Really Teach A “Secret Rapture”?  

By Philip Neal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Origin of the Rapture Teaching

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

In modern times, prophecy buff Hal Lindsey brought the rapture idea into the mainstream with his highly-read The Late Great
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Planet Earth (1970). Most recently, Tim LaHaye’s popular series of Left Behind prophecy novels have made the “rapture” a household word among “born again” Christians.

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

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

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

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

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

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

3) The rapture occurs before the onset of the Great Tribulation—hence, it is often called the pre-Tribulation rapture. Thus, Christians are spared the horrors of the Great Tribulation. This seems to be the motive behind the teaching—that Christians will not suffer during this time.

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

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

Getting the Correct Timeline

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

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

Daniel gives the same scenario. In chapter 11, he describes a war-making political entity known as the “king of the north” who invades Palestine and occupies Jerusalem “at the time of the end” (verses 40-45). This Antichrist-king, or more likely a religious figure allied with him, is the final “abomination.” Daniel 12 picks up the story: “And at that very time [of the invasion by the king of the north] … there shall begin a time of great trouble [on Israel]…” (verse 1; author’s
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Yet rapture theorists insist that the rapture—and thus the resurrection—occurs before the Tribulation. As we will see, it is the timing of the resurrection that proves fatal to the rapture theory.

So here is Jesus’ key timeline:

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

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

Paul’s Precise Timeline

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

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

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

He continues in verses 51-52: “Behold, I show you a mystery: we shall not all fall asleep
[a picture of death], but we shall all be changed, in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and [then] we shall be changed.” Paul is saying that not every Christian will be dead, in the grave, when Jesus returns. These living saints will be changed into immortal spirit beings at the last trumpet. But just before that, the “dead in Christ”—those saints who have “fallen asleep”—will be resurrected to immortal spirit life.

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

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

Paul Debunks the Rapture!

Now let’s look at 1 Thessalonians 4—which is the key passage used by rapture theorists. Paul states up front that he desires for his disciples to be informed concerning the future of the dead in Christ (verse 13). In verse 14, Paul reassures the brethren of the reality of the resurrection through Christ. Then he makes a critical point in saying that “we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall in no wise precede those who have fallen asleep” (verse 15).

Echoing Matthew and Revelation, he then says that Jesus’ highly visible Parousia will be accompanied by a great trumpet blast—in which the dead in Christ rise first (verse 16). Finally, in verse 17, he writes that those saints who are “alive and remain” will be “caught up together with them”—those in the resurrection—“in the clouds for the meeting with the Lord in the air; and so shall we always be with the Lord.”

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

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

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

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

1) Jesus’ second coming will not happen “any day now” without warning. While it is true that Jesus’ return will, like Noah’s flood, catch many in the world by surprise (Matt. 24:37), the New Testament gives Christians numerous signs that indicate that His Parousia is near. The key sign to watch for is the appearing of the “abomination of desolation” or Antichrist (Matt. 24:15). The Great Tribulation follows (verse 21), for three and one-half years (not seven)—then the heavenly signs (verse 29). At that point, Jesus’ Parousia will be imminent.
2) There is only one Parousia—not two. It will be quite visible and spectacular—no one on earth will miss it (Matt. 24:30). Revelation 1:7 says every eye will see Him at His return. In fact, Jesus specifically warns His disciples concerning those who would falsely claim that His return might occur secretly (verse 26). This point alone clearly debunks the rapture theory.

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

Will God Protect Christians From the Great Tribulation?

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

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

But remember also the warnings Jesus gave concerning end-time conditions: “Then shall they deliver you up to affliction, and shall kill you; and you shall be hated by all nations for My name’s sake…. But the one who endures to the end, that one shall be saved” (Matt. 24:9, 13). Also, “And you shall be hated by all men for My name’s sake; but the one who endures to the end, that one shall be saved” (Mark 13:13).

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

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

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

End Notes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If, as Paul demonstrates, the resurrection is genuinely a resurrection from the dead—of one being brought to life—how can it also be the conferring of a “spiritual body” on an already living departed person? Would this really even be a resurrection at all in terms of Hebrew thought?

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

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

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

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