

David B. Currie

Rapture

The End-Times Error That
Leaves the Bible Behind

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~~This glorious coming does not match the secret rapture that is sometimes read into this verse. There is certainly nothing in the context of this verse that suggests a secret rapture before Christ's glorious return.~~

Parousia in the clouds: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:3

This is a favorite passage of the rapturists. They seem quite certain that this passage clearly teaches their version of the future. But does it?

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. . . . The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. . . . Sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape.

St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians because they were worried about those who died before Christ's return. Many in the ancient world believed that a person simply ceased to exist upon death, as do many modern unbelievers. There seems to have been a rumor in Thessalonica that the dead Christians had lost out on any chance of a physical resurrection. St. Paul assures them that it was not so. In fact, "the dead in Christ will rise first" to meet

Christ, and those still alive at the second coming will immediately follow them. But all will meet Christ at that time.

Rapturists make a point of the fact that we will "meet the Lord in the air" — the Lord who has come "in the clouds." They infer from this that Christ will not actually touch down on *terra firma* and that we will go back to Heaven with Christ for the duration of a seven-year Great Tribulation. If so many people did not accept this explanation, I would dismiss it immediately as silly.

The word St. Paul uses for meeting the Lord "in the air" is *aer*, the Greek word for *atmosphere*. This same word is used to describe Satan as "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). Yet no one would claim that, because of this word, Satan has no influence over people who keep their feet firmly planted on earth. A consistent rapturist reading of this word here would mean that only astronauts, balloonists, pilots, and airplane passengers are influenced by Satan's power.

No, when Christ returns to the earth's atmosphere, He has returned to *earth*. Read the verses again! We will meet Christ, but it will be at His second coming to earth. Any other use of the language stretches credibility.

Rapturists bolster their argument by pointing to the description of Jesus' coming "in the clouds." But this does not mean that Christ cannot return on a clear, cloudless day. Elsewhere, even rapturists do not claim that Jesus must be seated upon a stallion when He returns (Apoc. 19:11). Certain symbols appear in Scripture repeatedly. Clouds indicate that Christ will be coming again in glory as Judge. His Suffering Servant (cf. Isa. 53) days are over, and He is now victorious over His enemies (GR6).

Rapturists, however, do not want to lose this passage for their cause. They sometimes point out that the word Paul uses for coming in verse 15 is the Greek word *parousia*. During my childhood, rapturists were taught that this word always refers to the rapture. Even today rapturists still talk of the *parousia* when referring to the

rapture. We were taught that two other Greek words in the Bible, *epiphaneia* ("appearing") and *apokalupsis* ("revelation") refer exclusively to the second advent of Christ. If this were true, it would be a clear indication of which passages refer to the secret rapture and which refer to the second coming.

Unfortunately for rapturists, however, their own Bible scholars have disproved this assertion. These three Greek words are used interchangeably. This leaves each reader to pick and choose which passages refer to the rapture and which refer to the second coming, based on his own subjective reading. This should be a clue to all of us that perhaps the entire system is a fabrication with no basis in the Bible whatsoever.

There is just no good reason to insert a secret rapture into this passage — unless you come to the text with pre-existing double vision. Look at the passage itself. The coming of Christ is anything but secret and silent. Christ will come with "a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." These are descriptions of loud, public events.

Jesus is not trying to be discreet or secretive in His coming. This passage reflects the Olivet Discourse, when Jesus predicted His coming would be "as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west" (Matt. 24:27). Jesus Himself prophesied that everyone would immediately be aware of His coming. He was specifically contrasting His coming with the false Messiahs who would appear on the scene discreetly. Christ will not be discreet. Yet the rapturist claims that at this point, the rest of the world will not know what happened. The "cry of command," "the archangel's call," and "the trumpet of God" make this impossible.

The phrase "the Lord will come like a thief in the night," must be understood in this context of commands, calls, and trumpets (5:2). In addition, the next verse makes it clear that St. Paul is not speaking of the stealth of the thief, but the unanticipated suddenness with which thieves strike. He calls it "sudden destruction"

(5:3). Notice the destruction comes suddenly on the *unbelievers*. This is the last judgment.

A further problem for rapturists appears when we examine the assumed time line of the passage. St. Paul clearly states that immediately after this event, eternity begins. He writes, "and so we shall always be with the Lord." That is precisely the time line taught by the Church throughout her history. Yet rapturists teach that this coming (the rapture) will be followed by the seven-year Great Tribulation and then a thousand-year earthly Kingdom. Why does St. Paul not at least allude to these events?

But, rapturists respond, the details in this passage are different from those we encounter elsewhere in the New Testament, suggesting two entirely different events. But this is just a symptom of the preconceived conclusions, the deceptive double vision, that they bring to the passage.

Rapturists usually understand that this is a very bad method for handling Scripture. For example, the Bible talks about the Passion of the Lord on several occasions, each time giving us different details about one historical event. But they'd never interpret this to mean that there was more than one Passion. In like manner, various passages provide different details about the second advent. But this doesn't mean they should be sorted into two piles — those about a rapture and those about the second coming. All the passages speak of *one and only one* more advent of Christ.

In this passage, St. Paul related a few new details about the second coming to encourage the Thessalonian church. Since he had founded the church in that city, he had already taught them the basics of the Faith, including the blessed hope of Christ's coming. In this epistle, he clarifies something of which they already had some knowledge.

If there were two stages to the second advent, we would be able to find one passage that speaks of them both together, teaching us in one place of the differences. That we are not able to do so is a

terrible handicap to rapturists. It is evidence of their deceptive double vision. Of course, we have not been able to find a passage that unequivocally teaches about a secret rapture at all, much less a passage that speaks of it side-by-side with the second coming.

Since none of these passages contains details inconsistent with the second advent, why not simply accept the simplest, most consistent understanding? There is only one remaining coming of the Lord, and the Bible uses three Greek words interchangeably to describe that coming. It will occur at the end of history, just before the final judgment and eternity.

Antichrist in the Temple: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10

Here St. Paul is again writing to the Thessalonians, probably shortly before the Jewish-Roman War began in 67 A.D. For this reason, some have tried to understand this passage as being fulfilled in the coming in judgment that we described surrounding the events of 70 A.D. But the passage mentions the “assembling” of Christians to meet Christ. This will occur at the second advent, so the only adequate understanding of this passage is that it speaks of the second advent. In addition, the Church has universally understood this passage as still future even after the destruction of the Temple (CCC, pars. 673-677).

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet Him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind . . . by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. . . . That day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the Temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. . . . For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it

will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of His mouth and destroy him by His appearing and His coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

This paragraph says a lot in a few sentences. We will examine it one piece at a time.

The MIA rapture

Rapturists agree that this passage focuses on the events leading up to Christ’s second advent. They believe the antichrist will appear after the rapture. When Christ comes, He “will slay [the antichrist] with the breath of His mouth.” Early Christians associated this statement with the sword that comes out of Christ’s mouth in The Apocalypse (COA). The “breath” and the “sword” both signify the truth of the gospel. The power of Christ is in the truth that the Word proclaims. Truth will always win the victory, particularly at the final eschaton.

We do disagree over who is on earth when these events take place. Rapturists claim that Christians have been secretly raptured at the very start of the passage — three and a half years before the Temple worship is corrupted, and a full seven years before Christ returns to “destroy [the man of sin] by His appearing.”

Notice deceptive double vision at work. Rapturists place the one event (the rapture) at the very start and apply all the rest of the passage to the second advent. Yet if that is true, why does not St. Paul make it clear that his readers would not be present to see this antichrist “proclaiming himself to be God”? He is writing to encourage a group of Christians who are afraid they had been “left

behind"! Why does he not explicitly speak of the "blessed hope of the rapture" to comfort the worried Thessalonians? Nowhere in this passage is there even a mention of the rapture. This would certainly have been more reassuring than a description of events that would transpire after they were gone! In this passage, the rapture is missing in action.

The reason St. Paul does not mention the rapture as occurring before the appearance of the antichrist and before the second coming is simple: it never entered into his mind that anyone would believe Christ would rapture His Church before the final eschaton. The passage assumes that the Church will be around to witness the man of lawlessness revealed. That will be during the final confrontation between good and evil. In The Apocalypse, that is referred to as the battle with Gog and Magog. Christians will *participate* in that confrontation because there will be no secret rapture before it. Our comfort rests in Him who will emerge from that confrontation as the Victor. That is the reassurance St. Paul offers, not the promise of escape from the Great Tribulation.

Restraint of the antichrist

The passage also describes a "restraining" force that prevents the antichrist's power from taking full effect right now. Various alternative interpretations have been proposed. Rapturists claim the restraining force is the Holy Spirit within the Church. Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome and Augustine all understood the restrainer as the rule of law as enforced by the state (APO, 32; CAT, XVII:12; EPJ; COG, XX:19).

Most important, we need to notice that this restraining force is active at the same time that Satan is "bound" in The Apocalypse. We are getting a little ahead of ourselves, but the restraint is taken out of the way at the same time that Satan is "loosed" just before the final battle with Gog and Magog (Apoc. 20:1-7). This does not happen twice, as rapturists assert, but once.

The antichrist in the Temple

"Wait a minute," rapturists might interject. "You are ignoring that St. Paul teaches here that the final antichrist will set himself up in the Temple: 'The son of perdition . . . takes his seat in the Temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.'"

Because this passage predicts an attack on the Temple, in which the antichrist forcibly subverts its worship of the true God, rapturists believe that the Jerusalem Temple must be rebuilt before the antichrist can be revealed. How can the man of sin, the antichrist, proclaim something from a Temple that has not been rebuilt?

But unfortunately for rapturists, this is a poor proof text for their beliefs. The Greek word for *temple* in this verse is *naos*. Although *naos* is sometimes used to designate the physical Temple of the Jews in Jerusalem, it is used in the New Testament to designate other temples. But even more to the point, St. Paul, the author of 2 Thessalonians, *never once* uses this Greek word to designate the Jerusalem Temple of the Jews — always preferring to use the more common New Testament word for Temple, *hieron* (1 Cor. 9:13). Whenever St. Paul uses the word *naos*, he is referring to New Covenant temples. These include either the Church or the individual Christian, both of which are New Covenant temples indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21).

St. Paul understood the word *temple* to have different senses (Appendix Five discusses some of them), but he always uses the word *naos* in a New Covenant context (GR3).

St. Paul was not alone in this understanding of the New Testament Church as the new Temple. The Fathers of the Church adopted his perspective. We encounter this in the Epistle of Barnabas (Appendix One). Clement of Alexandria also refers to the Church as the Temple of God (STO, VI, 14:114).

This makes eminent sense. St. Paul, along with all first-century Christians, believed that Christ had predicted the destruction of

the Jerusalem Temple within their generation. But they never believed that this destruction would leave the world without any Temple. The new Temple was God's spiritual Temple, the Church, for which Paul always used *naos*.

So if not in the rebuilt Jerusalem Temple, where will the man of lawlessness set himself up "to be God"? Although it may be difficult to ascertain in advance, as is true of most biblical prophecy, it will likely be very evident at the time. The crucial element is that he will claim to be God. This goes even further than what Antiochus Epiphanes did when he defiled God's Old Covenant Temple with sacrifices to Zeus (Dan. 8:24; 11:36-38). It goes beyond what Pompey did when he defiled the inner Temple with his visit. It goes beyond what the Romans did in 70 A.D. when they introduced pagan worship in the Temple. It is reminiscent of Caligula's intention of being worshiped within the old Temple in 40 A.D., although he died before he could implement his plan. Each of these events points to the final antichrist (GR3).

A clue to our understanding of the final antichrist is his title, the "son of perdition." In His prayer for the infant Church, Jesus gives this very title to Judas Iscariot (John 17:12). Does this mean that St. Paul believed the antichrist would be someone who had been privileged to know the entire truth about Christ and had purposefully rejected it? Or perhaps, like Judas, the man of perdition would attempt to bring in the fullness of God's Kingdom through his own machinations. Perhaps the antichrist will thrust upon the world a hope for a secular Millennium, as was attempted in the century just past. We do not know for sure, but it can make for interesting discussion (CCC, pars. 675-677).

My belief is that the man of sin will somehow try to insert himself or his symbols into the worship of the Church, the new Temple. Perhaps it will even involve the Mass in some way. The word *naos* can be translated as "sanctuary," which is a place within every Catholic Church in the world. Will the final antichrist somehow

use these sanctuaries to proclaim "himself to be God"? Perhaps. This would fit in with his being called a "son of perdition," a "Judas-priest" perhaps.

We can be certain, however, that even though the antichrist might be a priest, he cannot possibly be the Pope. In Matthew's Gospel, Peter and his successors are promised that "the gates of Hades" will not prevail against Christ's Church (16:18). This includes an assurance that, although the Pope may not be the best leader possible, he will never *teach error*. Since proclaiming "himself to be God" would certainly qualify as error, we can be sure the Pope cannot be the antichrist.

Some of what this passage means will never be known for certain until it happens. But of one thing we can be certain even now: this passage does not teach a two-stage coming, nor the necessity of a rebuilt Jerusalem Temple. It does teach that Christians will still be here on earth when the battle with the final antichrist rages.

Our blessed hope: Titus 2:11-13

Many rapturists nonetheless refer to the rapture as their "blessed hope." They find this language in St. Paul's epistle to Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our *blessed hope*, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Rapturists believe that the "blessed hope" refers to the secret, imminent rapture. (The Greek word here is not *parousia*, but *epiphaneia* ["appearing."]) But the passage speaks of glory, and what is glorious about secretly stealing away your followers and shuffling them off to safety while your enemy runs rampant for seven more years?