

V. The Rapture and the Return

A. Scriptural Data

In many Scriptures related to Christ's Second Coming, we discover some that appear to make a distinction between the "rapture" aspect of His coming and the "return" or "revelation" aspect.

In I Thessalonians 4:16-17 we read that "the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, 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, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

The term "caught up" is the one from which we get the term "rapture". The *American College Dictionary* defines "rapture" as follows: "1. ecstatic joy or delight; joyful ecstasy. 2. an utterance or expression of ecstatic delight. 3. the carrying of a person to another place or sphere of existence." The English word derives from the Latin *rapio* which literally means "to seize and carry off, to snatch, tear, drag, draw, or hurry away", and figuratively means "to snatch, force, carry, or hurry away, and to carry along or away with passion, to transport, ravish, captivate."

In II Thessalonians 2:1 Paul says "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our *gathering together unto* him."

In II Thessalonians 1:7 Paul speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ being "revealed from heaven with his holy angels"; and in verse 10 he says that this will happen when "He shall come to be glorified in his saints."

And in Revelation 19:6--8 and 11-14, John sees the bride of Christ in heaven, dressed in the fine white linen of the righteousness of saints; and then sees that bride accompanying Christ as He comes to earth to fight the Battle of Armageddon and establish His Millennial kingdom on the earth.

On the one hand Christ is seen coming for and catching up His saints. On the other hand He is seen as being revealed to the world in power and glory and coming with His saints to earth. What is the relationship between these two aspects of Christ's coming? Are they simply two aspects of one event? Or are they two distinct phases of the Second Coming, with a time interval between?

In John 16:33 Jesus says: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." This appears to be speaking of distress, affliction, persecution that all disciples of Christ are to expect as they live their lives in the midst of an evil, hostile world-system. But in the Olivet Discourse He mentions a special form of tribulation, encompassed in a relatively brief period. In fact, He says that that brief tribulation period will be unique in world history, both in its intensity and its destructiveness. He speaks of it as "great tribulation". Thus there is both a general sense of tribulation that all believers in all ages experience, and a special sense of tribulation that only some persons living at a specific time will experience. Jesus said that this Great Tribulation period would immediately be followed by His Coming in power and glory; i.e., His return or revelation. But does the rapture occur at the same time? Or does it occur