

Chapter Two The Catching Away

The popular term is “rapture.” It refers to a moment in time when Christ will gather His Church to Himself. Our English word “rapture” is derived from the Latin “*rapere*,” which means “seize by force.” Its past participle was “*raptus*,” which formed the basis of the Medieval Latin noun “*raptura*,” meaning “seizure or ecstasy.” That word worked its way into the Old English carrying that same connotation of extreme joy and bliss. So, the modern word “rapture” signifies the events concurrent with the instantaneous resurrection and transformation of the saints.

Opponents of rapture teaching are quick to point out that “rapture” is not a Bible word. You can search the canon from top to bottom and you will, in fact, never encounter that word. The concept, yes - but the word, no. Though the actual word is not found in the Bible, the concept of believers being taken off the earth is pervasive in Scripture. We barely get five chapters into the book of Genesis before we bump into the first “rapture,” the seizure of someone off the planet.

Jared lived one hundred and sixty-two years, and became the father of Enoch ... Then Enoch walked with God three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah, and he had *other* sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. (Gen. 5:18,21-24)

Interestingly, the name Enoch most likely means “initiate” or “discipline,” the root of the term “disciple.” Now, lest we misunderstand exactly what took place way back in early Genesis, in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews (the chapter that lists the heroes of faith) we read --

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. (Heb. 11:5)

The New Testament affirms that Enoch was taken up in such a manner that he did not die a natural death. He was instantaneously changed into a glorified state and was no longer found on Earth. But, he is not the only Old Testament individual to do so.

In the first book of the Kings we are introduced to the man who would become the leading prophet of Hebrew history, Elijah the Tishbite. Elijah is one of the Bible’s most prominent characters, referenced in both testaments and playing a key role in prophetic and apocalyptic Scripture. You can read of his earthly exploits from 1Kings 17 through the

end of the book. During his earthly tenure, he took a servant named Elisha, who was with his master right up until the crucial event of Elijah's life.

And it came about when the LORD was about to take up Elijah by a whirlwind to heaven, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. (2Kings 2:1)

Elijah attempted to persuade Elisha to wait behind while he went to Beth-el, the "house of God." But, the faithful servant would not leave his master's side. Once they arrived at Beth-el, the "sons of the prophets" approached Elisha, fully aware that the Lord intended to take Elijah that very day.

Then the sons of the prophets who *were at* Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?" And he said, "Yes, I know; be still." (2Kings 2:3)

Not only was God going to take Elijah from the earth, He forecast the event in advance! Again Elijah attempted to persuade Elisha to wait behind, but again Elisha pledged his fidelity and stayed with his master. They went on to Jericho. And the "sons of the prophets" at Jericho knew that this was the day of Elijah's departure.

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The sons of the prophets who *were at* Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be still." (2Kings 2:4-5)

A third time Elijah tried to persuade Elisha, but to no avail. Fifty of the "sons of the prophets" watched from afar as the two went down to the river Jordan (where Christ would later be baptized). Elijah took off his overcoat and slapped the water with it. The water parted and the two walked over on dry ground. (A similar event took place at this very river when the children of Israel crossed with Joshua into the Promised Land.) Once they had crossed, Elijah offered Elisha the opportunity to request anything of him. Elisha asked for a double portion of the spirit of Elijah to be upon him. Elijah responded --

He said, "You have asked a hard thing. *Nevertheless*, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be *so*." As they were going along and talking, behold, *there appeared* a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. Elisha saw *it* and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw Elijah no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. (2Kings 2:10-12)

As Elijah went up with the chariot, his overcoat fell from him and Elisha picked it up. As he returned, he smote the river Jordan with Elijah's mantle and the water parted. When the "sons of the prophets" saw this they concluded, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

The fifty sent out a search party just in case the Lord had decided to leave Elijah on some mountaintop or valley, but after three days of searching they “did not find him.”

Notice a couple of details - God did not take both of His servants. He only took one. He did it in the sight of the “sons of the prophets,” who had been taught in advance that the event would occur and they were convinced that it would. So, God was selective but not completely secretive. And, there is no grand theology attached to the event, just the simple revelation that it would happen because God said it would. In God’s own time, in accordance with His own will, Elijah was gathered with his forefathers, later to appear with Moses and Christ at the Mount of Transfiguration (Mat. 17:3).

Elijah, then, is the second Old Testament character “raptured” off the earth. And, that brings up a vital point. Too frequently when people discuss this concept they apply the definite article “the” to the word “rapture.” They speak of the rapture. But, the Bible recounts several raptures. They occur in both testaments and are an integral part of any complete Biblical overview. Just as Enoch and Elijah are taken away in the Old Testament, the last occurrence of people being seized and taken off the planet occurs in the last book of the New Testament, Revelation.

But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God came into them [the two witnesses], and they stood on their feet; and great fear fell upon those who were watching them. And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." Then they went up into heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them. (Rev. 11:11-12)

Harpazo

In the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we find an intriguing account of the Apostle Philip. He was residing in Samaria, fleeing the havoc that had risen in Jerusalem as Saul of Tarsus persecuted the Church. After preaching and baptizing in the areas around Samaria, Philip was beckoned by an angel to head south of Jerusalem into the desert near Gaza. Once there, Philip happened upon a eunuch from Ethiopia, a man of great authority under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

Philip was instructed by the angel to approach the man, who ‘just happened’ to be reading the book of the prophet Isaiah. When Philip asked the man if he understood what he read, he replied, “How can I, except some man should guide me?” And, starting from the very place in Scripture where the Ethiopian was reading, Philip expounded Christ to him. Later they came upon some water and the eunuch asked Philip if he could be baptized. Philip consented and the two went down into the water. Then, the baptism complete, Philip found himself at the center of a most amazing event.

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 8:39-40)

Philip, having completed the specific task God ordained for him, was suddenly snatched away from the baptismal proceedings and disappeared from the sight of the Ethiopian. Phillip was “caught away.”

The single Greek word that is translated by the English phrase “caught away” (KJV) or “snatched” is “*harpazo*” (ἁρπάζω). Literally it means, “to seize upon with force,” and in classic Greek literature it has to do with open robbery of another’s belongings. In Biblical terms it means, “to forcibly snatch away or take to oneself.” “*Harpazo*” occurs when the lesser is overtaken by the greater.

For instance, if we lay hold on something we can overpower – like say, a chocolate chip cookie – we have the force to pull that cookie to ourselves and the cookie is powerless to resist. That is the essence of “*harpazo*.” The thing snatched contributes nothing to the event. The one who grabs or seizes the object exerts all the energy and force necessary to complete the action. That’s important. Because when God snatches His own people, His overwhelming force takes them; a force they cannot resist. And, that is exactly what happened to Philip. He was forcibly caught away by the power of God, only to reappear somewhere else.

Why? Well, to be honest, no one knows. When he was in the city of Samaria, Philip was quite near Caesarea, where he ended up. He went a long way south in order to baptize one Gentile, then he was caught away out of the Ethiopian’s sight and appeared in Azotus, some twenty miles to the north. Then, he preached through all the cities between Azotus and Caesarea as he headed north, ending up pretty much where he started.

Now, being the logical sort of person that I am, I could have found a perfectly rational reason for God’s show of power if He had taken Philip at the beginning of this story and dropped him in front of the Ethiopian. Then we could have developed a “Theology of the Urgency of Salvation” - this eunuch had to be converted right away and God rushed Philip to his side to accomplish God’s will. But, it didn’t happen that way. Instead, the story has Philip walking all the way out to the Ethiopian, not even knowing for whom or what he was looking. Then, after he had accomplished his task, God caught him away. We do not read of any particular urgency in getting Philip to Azotus, nor does the account tell of any tremendous events on the way to Caesarea.

So, to be redundant, why did He do it?

Because He could! And, because He wanted us to know He could. God seemed to want us to be familiar with the idea. What we do know for certain is that God - who can do anything He wants, anytime He wants to - chose to pluck Philip up and deposit him elsewhere.

Interestingly enough, this story immediately precedes the account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, later known as the apostle Paul, on the Damascus road. This very same Paul would have the privilege of revealing the mystery of the Church, the spreading of the gospel to the Gentiles and the theology of salvation by grace without the works of the law. And, integral to Paul’s theology was his constant awareness of the impending return of

Christ and the instantaneous change that living believers would undergo when the Lord did return. Paul would later write of just such a “catching away” in his own life.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago -- whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows -- such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man -- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows -- was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. (2Cor. 12:2-4)

Thessalonians

To continue our investigation of the events that surround the instantaneous transformation we turn to Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica. Paul had planted that church and according to Acts 17:4 it was the first place where Paul’s preaching achieved a numerous and socially prominent following. Unfortunately, Paul and his companions had to leave Thessalonica suddenly in the early summer of AD 50, exposing the church to great persecution for which they were not prepared (for instance, see Acts 17:5-9).

When Paul sent Timothy back to see how the church was faring, Timothy returned to Paul with good news of their steadfastness and zeal in spreading the gospel. But they also had certain theological problems, which included a concern over those believers who had died. They feared that the dead in Christ would be at some disadvantage when the Lord returned. Paul addressed the issue head-on.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. (1Thes. 4:13-15)

Paul’s assurance to the Thessalonians began with the same foundation he laid before the Corinthians. Christ’s own death and resurrection was their assurance that even though believers may die, they will rise from the grave. Lack of this knowledge caused others to end up sorrowful and hopeless. But, the assurance of Christ’s resurrection was a source of comfort and hope. Paul proclaimed that the knowledge he was imparting came directly from the Lord, Himself. We who are alive and remain at His coming will be no hindrance to the resurrection of the dead, nor will we have any advantage. The instantaneous transformation will happen to the entire Church of believers at the same moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

But, then Paul added more detail to this mysterious event that he did not reveal in his letter to Corinth --

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then

we who are alive and remain will 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. (1Thes. 4:16-17)

Jesus will descend from Heaven, though He does not touch the earth. We will meet Him "in the air." He will shout, calling the dead to rise to life, not unlike His command, "Lazarus, come forth!" when the dead man was revived (John 11:43-44).

This is both a particular and an effectual call. It is particular, or specific, in that only those people Christ intends to raise will hear His voice. This is made obvious in Revelation 20:12-13 where the sea, death, and hell give up the dead which are in them to be judged at the great white throne. If Christ's shout from Heaven were a universal call to all the dead, there would be no one left in death or hell to be called to the throne. But, Paul's language is specific, "the dead in Christ shall rise first."

It is an effectual call in that every one of His sheep that Christ calls will respond. Just as Christ did not ask dead Lazarus to decide if he would like to be revived, the power of the command of Christ will be sufficient to raise every individual Christ intends to raise. No one will have to dig through the dirt with their fingernails and no one will be partially awake crying, "Wait, you forgot me!" Just as salvation is from the Lord and it is a complete salvation, needing nothing added to it to complete it, the resurrection of the saints is completely the Lord's enterprise. He needs nothing beyond His own authority to accomplish it.

The voice of Christ will be as the Chief of the Angels, the powerful Prince of God who rules in the Heavens. Again Paul referenced the sound of the trumpet and the faithful dead rising from their graves. Then they and we shall be "caught up" - *harpazo* - forcibly drawn into the heavens to meet the Lord in the air. From that point forward into eternity we shall never be separated from His company, nor ever return to our earthly, sinful state. But this event, breathtaking as it is, is not without its precursors and foreshadows. After the crucifixion of our Lord, Matthew recounts --

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Mat. 27:50-53)

These were obviously Messianic believers in Judea who lived and died prior to the passion of Christ. But, with His resurrection victory they were taken forcibly from their graves. And, since the book of Hebrews states unequivocally, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27), we must assume that those saints who shed their graves after Christ's resurrection were taken to Heaven, though the Gospels fail to tell us what became of them.

Later, after Christ had appeared to His disciples He, Himself, was taken up into Heaven --

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11)

The promise from the two men, apparently angels, was that Christ would return in the same manner in which He left. He will be wrapped in clouds and shall descend through the air just as He ascended up into the air. Notice the parallel to Paul's description of our "catching away" -- "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air." Our *harpazo* is the fulfillment of that angelic promise.

This concept, this teaching, this theology was so vital to Paul's view of Christianity that he expected the Thessalonian believers to recite it to one another and to "comfort one another with these words" (v.18). Not only do we find comfort in the knowledge that departed loved ones who died in Christ will share in the resurrection and in the "catching away," we also have the sure knowledge that our Lord will return to gather us to Himself.

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also. (John 14:1-3)

It is also a very simple deduction to conclude that Paul had taught this very thing to the church at Thessalonica while he was with them in person. There is no other way to explain the concern that the Thessalonian believers recounted to Timothy, which provoked Paul's reply. So, part and parcel of Pauline theology, preached to the first century church and interlaced into the overall picture of both present and future Christianity is this teaching that Christ will re-appear in the clouds to gather living and dead believers to Himself.

Now, Paul did not stop there. He continued to expand his theology of the "catching away" and returned to this same theme in his second letter to the Thessalonians. But, in order to understand the rest of his discourse, we need to become familiar with some concepts that he assumed his readers already knew. Paul referenced them as though the saints were readily familiar with them, so we need to become familiar with them, too. We will return to this very spot in First Thessalonians later in this book.

What We Know So Far

- Jesus Christ rose from the dead and resurrected to a perfect body.
- The saints of God, followers of Christ, will be resurrected when He returns, putting on bodies similar to Christ's, immortal and incorruptible.

- The instantaneous change will occur suddenly and quickly, in the twinkling of an eye.
- Dead and living saints will participate in this glorious change.
- Christ will descend from Heaven with a shout and the voice of authority, calling His people out of their graves and up from the earth; a particular and effectual call.
- The living saints will have no advantage over dead believers when Christ returns.
- We will all rise to meet the Lord in the air – “harpazo,” snatched away by an irresistible force greater than ourselves.
- There is no indication that Jesus touches the earth on this occasion.
- We will be gathered in the clouds, just as Christ was when He left the earth.
- We will be joined with Him, and so will we ever be with the Lord.