

The Truth About the Rapture

Revelation 1:7-8

Studies in Revelation #4

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You should be familiar with the concept of a sacred cow. It means there are some things considered so true that you just don't question their existence or validity. What's a sacred cow in our culture? Social security. Politicians who dare question it have no chance of winning. Touch it and you automatically want grandma to die on the street a beggar. Can you think of any other sacred cows?

In the modern American evangelical sub-culture there are lots of sacred cows. I would argue that the biggest, shiniest sacred cow is the teaching about the rapture of the church. This is the teaching that there will be a rapture, or, taking up, of the church just prior to the beginning of the last days, a seven-year period known as the tribulation, during which God will revive his plan with Israel, and at the end of which Jesus will come again. So there is the rapture, or Jesus' coming for his church, and then the Second Coming, or Jesus' coming with his church. This is the orthodoxy of so much of American evangelicalism. For example, in the doctrinal statement of the Calvary Chapel movement, there is not one word about justification by faith alone; but, guess what is listed? You guessed it: the rapture.¹

Besides the fact that this doctrine was originated in the mid-1800s through the teaching of John Nelson Darby and was unknown in the history of the church until then, it is not supported by Holy Scripture. Let me put it like this. Recall from

¹ <http://calvarychapel.com/about/doctrine/view/doctrine/> (Accessed October 10, 2014).

my first sermon the futurist interpretation of Revelation. This view says that after John addresses the seven churches in chapter 2–3 that existed in his day, the rest of the book is for the future, the so-called “end times.” And they argue that the term “church” does not occur in chapters 4–20, thus, this must be after the rapture. In fact, some say that the rapture is symbolized by John’s going up into heaven in 4:1.² So, if the futurist interpretation is correct, and John is writing to real churches in chapters 1–3, but that the church will not be around in chapters 4–20, why then when Jesus himself speaks here in 1:7–8 does he offer the churches the comfort of his *Second Coming* and not comfort them with the imminent rapture?

Well, I’m using the sacred cow of the rapture to get at what Revelation 1:7–8 truly teaches: the church’s hope and comfort is the Second Coming of our Lord and not the secret rapture. In fact, the rapture, the catching up of the church, occurs at the Second Coming. Do we believe in the rapture? Yes. When is it? When Jesus “come[s] again to judge the living and the dead.” There are two things about this Second Coming that I want you to see here:

1. ***A Glorious Coming***
 2. ***A Universal Coming***
 3. ***An Assured Coming***
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² For this interpretive sequence of events, see Chuck Smith, *What The World Is Coming To: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* as found at http://calvaryfrederick.com/resources/books/what_the_world_is_coming_to.pdf (Accessed October 8, 2014). Revelation 4:1 as a type of the rapture was also taught by John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 103. For a futurist interpretation that does not see Revelation 4:1 as the rapture, see Keith H. Essex, “The Rapture and the Book of Revelation.” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 13.2 (Fall 2002): 227–228; John MacArthur, A Trip to Heaven: Part 1,” as found at <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/66-16/A-Trip-to-Heaven-Part-1> (Accessed October 8, 2014).

A Glorious Coming

The first thing we see here is that John comforts the suffering churches with the Second Coming, which is *a glorious coming*. **Behold, he is coming**—and notice what John writes next—**with the clouds** (v. 7). This **coming** of the Lord of is described in Old Testament terms. You see, when John calls us to behold this coming **with the clouds** he is not simply saying, “Direct your attention to the sky, where the clouds are.” Instead, John uses an Old Testament image.

In the Old Testament God would manifest the glory of who he was in visible ways, which we call “theophanies,” that is, appearances of the Lord. And guess what normally accompanied a theophany? Clouds. For example, think of the glory of the Lord that was seen in the cloud at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1-9); think of the tabernacle when the Lord “descended” in a cloud (Ex. 40:34-38); think of the cloud that Ezekiel saw, which was the glory of God (Ezek. 1:4-28); think of Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man who came with the clouds heaven before the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:13); think of the same glory that appeared to Peter, James, and John when Jesus was transfigured (Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:7); think of the cloud of glory that took Jesus up to the right hand of God (Acts 1:9-11). And how did Jesus say he would return? On the clouds of glory (Matt. 24:29-31; Mark 14:62). In biblical terms, to say that God would come “with glory” was to say that he would come **with the clouds**.

So those of us who came to this church from an evangelical church, what was the hope you were waiting for? The rapture; the secret rapture, in fact. But for

thousands of years what has the church been hoping for? The glorious Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we confess in the Nicene Creed, “and he shall come again, with glory.”

Now let me say that this glorious coming is both law and gospel; it is both a warning and a comfort; bad news and good news. It is bad news because when Jesus returns it will be not be as a lamb, but as a lion. He will come again not to give you another chance, but will come in unsheathed fury. If you are not covered in the lamb’s blood the lion will have your blood. I want you to have an image of this so turn over to Revelation 6:15–17. Here is a vision of the Second Coming and what do we read from those who do not believe in Jesus Christ?

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling on the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev. 6:15–17)

This glorious coming, though, is good news if you trust in Christ. As one song says,

Hear the roaring at the rim of the world
See what every eye shall see
Behold He's coming with the clouds
Setting all the captives free
And those who longed to see this day
Will tremble with delight
As a sea of upturned faces there
Is bathed in endless light.³

³ Michael Card, “The Unveiling.”

How is his coming to judge the living and the dead a comfort to me, a sinner?

In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and has so removed the whole curse from me. All his enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and the glory of heaven. (HC, Q&A 52)

A Universal Coming

The second thing we see here is that John comforts the suffering churches with the Second Coming by saying it is *a universal coming*. John says, **Behold, he is coming...and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him** (v. 7). This is not a secret coming in which only believers see the Lord by faith; no, this is an appearing of the Lord in which no one will be unaffected, no one will be unaware.

John, again, uses Old Testament imagery. Whereas earlier in his writings he used this text from Zechariah's prophecy to speak of the crucifixion in John 19:34 and 19:37, its ultimate expression is found in the returning of the Lord. Notice in Zechariah 12:10 the text says, "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him." We see here that Zechariah speaks of the Old Covenant people, Israel. But we see the amazing Spirit-led interpretation of John as he adds two interpretive phrases to

this prophecy: **every eye** and **of the earth**. It is no longer just a prophecy about ethnic Israel, but one about the Jews *and* Gentiles!

What John is expressing here is not the wailing cry of the unrepentant as they prepare to be judged, but the cries of repentance, the cries of humility and contrition that Jesus' people will have. They are cries for "grace and pleas for mercy." Those who **pierced** the Lord are not those who killed Jesus, but those whose sins fixed him to cross! Again, John is expressing the repentance of God's people, not the wailing cries of those upon whom judgment is coming. What this means for us is that we shall ever be reminded of the first Adam's fall, when we look upon the second Adam who raised us up; we shall ever be reminded of our guilt and sin that led to the Lord's life of trial and passion upon the cross; and therefore we shall always know what kind of a Savior we have.

Beloved, even in eternity we shall never get beyond the Gospel! We shall never say, "We know that, so let's move on," as it is so often peddled from pulpits in our day. We shall always be a cross-centered people. And if then, how much more so now?

John's interpretive phrases also lead us to another wonderful conclusion about this text and the gospel it proclaims. Notice that later in Revelation when John speaks of the end of all things and the eternal state he speaks of the final city as being filled with "the nations" and "the kings of the earth" (21:24-22:3). These are the same terms used here in speaking of the Second Coming. What John is saying to us is that those from "every tribe and language and people and nation"

(5:9 cf. 7:9), the new Israel, will humbly welcome their Savior and King. And this is exactly what was promised to Abraham when the Lord said, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3 cf. 28:14). Christ’s work is a cosmic work, it is a universal work in that he saves a people from amongst all the people of the earth. And thus on that day “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11; cf. Rom. 14:11; Isa. 45:23).

In response to this scene John, on behalf of the church, bursts out in response: **Even so. Amen.** Are we looking for the coming of the Lord or are our hearts so encumbered by the cares of the world? Are we daily lifting up our hearts to the Lord in expectation of our glorification or are we content to struggle with sin? Of course, ultimately, it does not matter whether we are eager for Jesus’ coming or not. That is John’s point! To say, “Amen,” is to say “so shall it truly and surely be. For my prayer is much more certainly heard of God than I feel in my heart that I desire these things of Him” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 129).

An Assured Coming

Finally, John shows us that Jesus’ Second Coming is *an assured coming*. We can say “Amen” to his coming because it is he who says, “**I am the Alpha and the Omega,**” says the Lord God, “**who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty**” (v. 8).

The Lord Jesus calls himself **the Alpha** and **the Omega**, which is an amazing self-designation of being fully divine. It is also an amazing literary way of speaking, for he uses what is called a merism. A merism is the use of two words that are polar opposites to highlight everything in between, such as night and day, young and old. Jesus here is saying that he is the “beginning and the end” (21:6, 22:13) and everything in between. Oh Christian, Jesus your Savior is the sum and substance of all there is, creation, human history, redemption, and our lives that he has purchased! He further describes himself in this way, calling himself the One “who is [present] and who was [past] and who is to come [future].” What is the base meaning of all of this? That Jesus Christ is “the Almighty;” he is the sovereign governor and ruler of history.

Conclusion: The Second Coming is the Rapture

I want to conclude by connecting this text with 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17, the so-called “rapture text.” Our friends might say, “Well, yes, Revelation 1 is about the Second Coming, but 1 Thessalonians 4 teaches the rapture.” We need to show them that how the so-called rapture is described is exactly how the Second Coming is described. Why? Because they are the same event! Like Revelation 1, 1 Thessalonians describes a public event; it also describes the resurrection of the body; and finally, it describes meeting Christ in the clouds, which is the sign of his glorious presence.