

The New Heavens and the New Earth: The Real Rapture

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the Heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new Heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. ~ 2 Peter 3:11-13

FOR SOME CHRISTIANS IN TODAY'S CULTURE, the single most important question has to do with the "end times," when the world will experience great tribulations, according to our Lord's prophecy (see Mt 24:3-44). Many of these Christians are caught up not only in speculation about the end times — when it will come, whether it has started, what evils of contemporary culture match the Scriptural prophecies — but also what will happen to them personally. To that end, a variety of speculations have sprung up around the concept of the "rapture," a term expressing the notion that not everyone must undergo the prophesied trials but will be exempted from them, "raptured" (taken up) from the earth to Heaven in a "secret" coming of Christ before the Second Coming. These ideas are quite new in Christianity, having arisen only in the

last few centuries and becoming widely believed only in the 19th century in English-speaking Protestant communions. Popular novels of the 20th century and in our modern day have spread this belief even further.

What does the Church teach on the subject?

The New Heavens and the New Earth

The Church teaches us that "God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, in which happiness will fill and surpass all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men"¹ (CCC 1048). From the beginning of Sacred Scripture, there is a theme of Paradise, of an Eden for which we were

*"We bear the promise of a new creation,
where God will be always with us, and we
will be able to drink unceasingly of the
water of life, the Holy Spirit."*



created: "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of

¹ *Gaudium et Spes* 39 § 1

life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden” (Gn 2:8-10). In this vision of loveliness and tranquility, God “walk[ed] in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gn 3:8) and spoke with Adam and Eve. This is the initial vision that God gives us, of a garden watered by a river and centered on the tree of life, in which we humans had intimate communion with God. This is what our first parents lost in their rebellion against God (see Gn 3:23), when God barred their “way to the tree of life” (Gn 3:24).

St. Paul tells us that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). This promise of future joy suggests that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot truly imagine the joys of Heaven. However, God in his goodness and kindness has given us ways to think about it. He promises a new creation in which the visible universe will be transformed and returned to its original state. Through the prophet Isaiah, he promised: “For behold, I create new Heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Is 65:17). The prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of the temple in Jerusalem from which water flowed ever more copiously, until it became a river (see Ez 47:1-5), and God told him that “on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing” (Ez 47:12). And Zechariah prophesied: “Then the Lord your God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there shall be neither cold nor frost. And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the Lord), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out

“Current theories of the end times focus on fear and a hope of escape from suffering.”

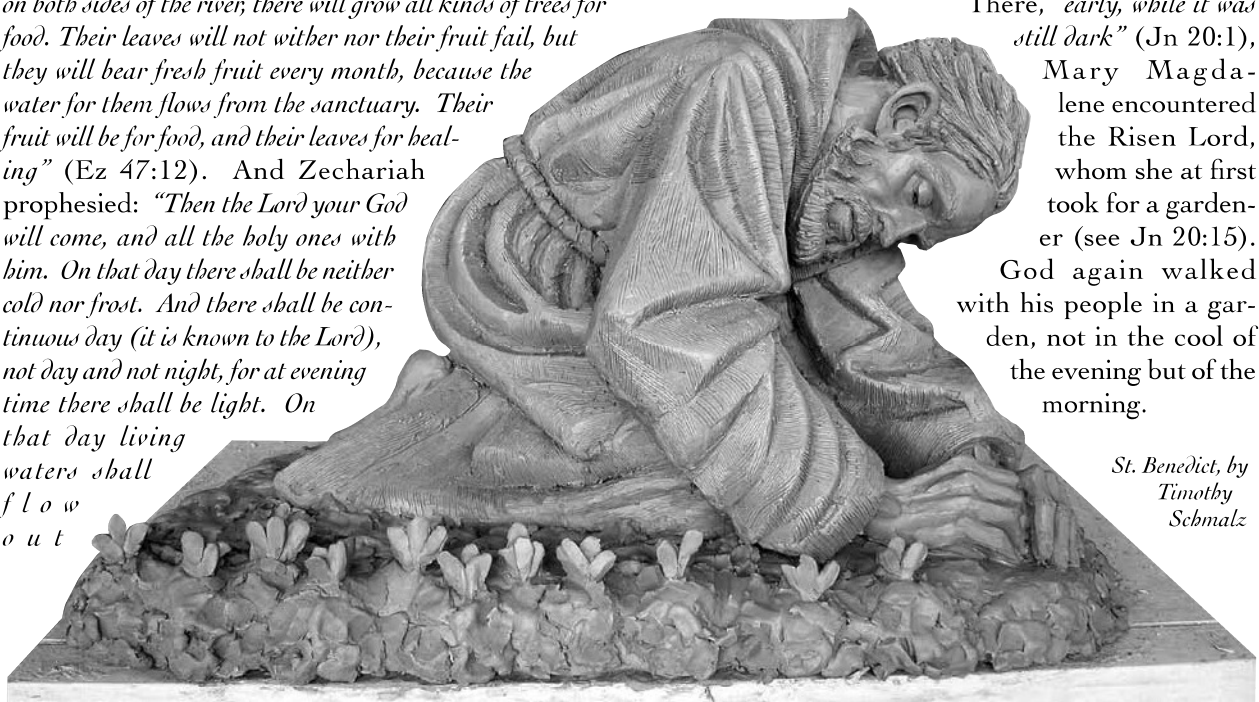
from Jerusalem.... And the Lord will become king over all the earth” (Zec

14:5-9). These were the shining visions of a future life of perfection, everlasting happiness in a garden sustained by flowing water from God’s own sanctuary and filled with good things, over which God reigns supreme.

The symbolic themes of water and the garden with the tree are especially evident in the Gospel of John. When Jesus encountered a woman at a well in Samaria, he told her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water... [W]hoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:10, 14). The “gift of God” is the Holy Spirit, as St. John tells us when Jesus proclaimed to the crowds gathered for a feast in Jerusalem: “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (Jn 7:37-39). Jesus himself “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pt 2:24), and “in the place where he was crucified there was a garden” (Jn 19:41). Jesus’ tomb was in the same garden.

There, “early, while it was still dark” (Jn 20:1), Mary Magdalene encountered the Risen Lord, whom she at first took for a gardener (see Jn 20:15). God again walked with his people in a garden, not in the cool of the evening but of the morning.

St. Benedict, by Timothy Schmalz





JUPITERIMAGES

The ethereal Cathedral of Milan, Italy constructed from 1385 to 1485; the entire building is of pure white marble, with thousands of statues on the exterior

“This is the initial vision that God gives us, of a garden watered by a river and centered on the tree of life, in which we humans had intimate communion with God.”

The hope of the new Heavens and the new earth is taught by the apostles as well. St. Paul teaches that *“the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now”* (Rom 8:19-22). All that God has made shares our destiny. St. Paul also tells us that God *“has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on earth”* (Eph 1:9-10). And St. Peter reassures us that *“according to his promise we wait for new Heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”* (2 Pt 3:13).

The culmination of these Scriptural promises is found in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, much of which is focused on the end times and this dazzling vision of Heaven: *“Then I saw a new Heaven and a new earth; for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.’ And he*

who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ ... And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment” (Rv 21:1-6). In this passage, we hear again the promise of a new creation, where God will be always with us, and we will be able to drink unceasingly of the water of life, the Holy Spirit, the very expression of the love between the Father and the Son.

As the vision continues, God *“showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations”* (Rv 22:1-2). The garden is now within the holy city, which is the Bride of Christ, the Church (see Rv 21:9-10). *“[T]he Lamb in the midst of the throne”* — our Lord Jesus Christ — *“will be [our] shepherd, and he will guide [us] to springs of living water”* (Rv 7:17). And to *“him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God”* (Rv 2:7) — that is, those who are glorified with God will be given the Food of Life himself, our Lord Jesus Christ. Those who have been saved will experience the unity of humanity that God had willed from the beginning of creation, and the vision of God will be *“the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion”* (CCC 1045). The universe itself will be renewed, *“perfectly re-established in Christ”*² (CCC 1042).

² *Lumen Gentium* 48; cf. Acts 3:21; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20; 2 Peter 3:10-13

What, Then, of the Tribulation and the Earthly “Rapture”?

Rather than focus our hopes on God’s promises of glory to those who have placed their hope in him and have followed his commandments, some current theories of the end times focus on fear and a hope of escape from suffering.

We know that the end times will be violent and horrifying. Jesus described them in great detail to his apostles, when *“the Heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men”* (2 Pt 3:7). Jesus describes warfare, famines, and natural calamities. Evil will be far greater and therefore *“most men’s love will grow cold”* (Mt 24:12). He prophesies that there will be a terrible persecution of the Church, with the loss of faith on the part of many believers and internal betrayals and hatreds, and the rise of false prophets and false Messiahs that will lead people astray (see Mt 24:9-11, 23-24). This will be the time of the final effort of Satan to tear apart the Kingdom of God on earth. It will truly be a battle to the death.

And Jesus’ coming will be obvious, as St. Paul tells us: *“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”* (1 Thes 4:16). Those who will be saved will be *“a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues”* (Rv 7:9) *“who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Rv 7:14). We will not be exempt from the suffering of this time, but keeping the faith will be rewarded by God.

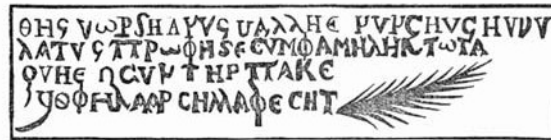
Many people have put together a number of verses from the book of Revelation to attempt to identify exactly when the “end times” will begin, how long they will last, and how many people will be saved. But Jesus tells us that we do not know when the end of the world will come (see Mk 13:32-33). For this reason, the Church discourages speculation on this question, because it focuses on the wrong things and seeks to know the unknowable.

But what of those expectations of being “raptured”? These seem to be derived from a verse in St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, where he tells them that, following the Resurrection of the dead, those who are left alive *“shall be caught up together with [the dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord”* (1 Thes 4:17). Being “caught up to meet the Lord in the air” has been labeled the “rapture” from the Latin word *rapiemur* which we translate into English as “we shall be caught up.” Yet the previous verse in the same letter shows that this is no secret coming of the Lord: *“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”* (1 Thes 4:16). Instead of a “secret rapture,” the just will meet the Lord at his Second Coming.

Believers in the rapture often pair this idea with a verse from the book of Revelation, where Jesus tells the members of one of the local churches: *“Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth”* (Rv 3:10). To believers in “rapture,” this

suggests that the righteous will be spared the sufferings of the end times — the “tribulation.” Yet there is nothing in Revelation that links protection from “the hour of trial” with a general dispensation from the suffering of the end times; the theme instead is that of receiving God’s grace so as to *“hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown”* (Rv 3:11). Later in Revelation, we are given a vision of *“a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes”* (Rv 7:9), and we learn that they are those *“who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Rv 7:14). They have experienced, not avoided, the tribulation. Jesus never promised to spare us suffering, but instead prayed to his Father for protection from loss of eternal life: *“I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the*

“Jesus will not come secretly to ‘rapture’ a few deserving folks before he comes publicly.”



Hic Gordianus Gallie nuncius, jugulatus pro fide, cum familiâ totâ; quiescunt in pace; Theophila ancilla fecit.

Here lies Gordianus, deputy of Gaul, who was murdered, with all his family, for the faith; they rest in peace. Theophila, his handmaid, set up this.

A 2nd century inscription on a grave in one of the catacombs near Rome, evidencing the willingness to lose one’s life for the sake of the next life

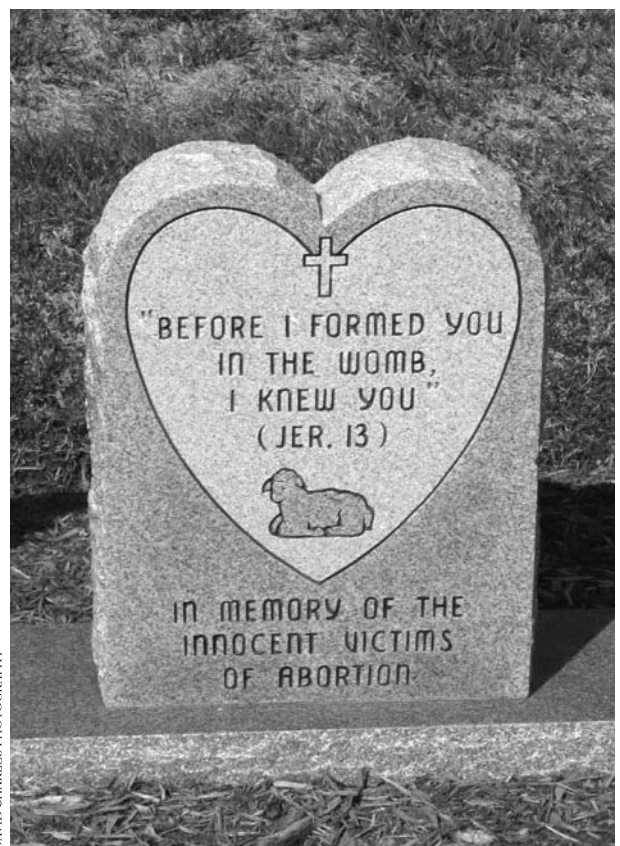
evil one" (Jn 17:15). Jesus will *not* come secretly to "rapture" a few deserving folks before he comes publicly. Jesus himself tells us that "*as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man*" (Mt 24:27). Jesus will come a second time, not a third, and we will know that he has come!

Other speculation centers on a "thousand-year reign of Christ" on earth before the Last Judgment during which some of the righteous will be resurrected to reign with him (see Rv 20:4-6). This passage is difficult to interpret but does not necessarily suggest a literal period of time, since most of the numbers in the book of Revelation are symbolic, as indeed are the images of the garden, the river, and the tree of life. The Church does not offer an official interpretation of this passage, but we do know that Christ is already reigning since he began proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It is possible that the symbolic language of the book of Revelation is referring to the present age, between Jesus' first and Second Coming, with the "*souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God ... [who] came to life, and reigned with Christ*" (Rv 20:4) being a description of the current state of the Church, with the saints in glory in Heaven reigning with him, as St. Paul assures us will happen: "*[I]f we endure, we shall also reign with him*" (2 Tm 2:12).

It is far more important to focus on the struggle the Church will have with Satan as the end times approach (see Rv 20:7-10) and not to assume that a "Heaven on earth" will exist before Jesus comes again to judge the world (see CCC 676). The Church specifically rejects pseudo-messianism "by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh"⁵ (CCC 675). This is the deception of the Antichrist — a claim that we can accomplish on earth what can be realized only following the Last Judgment (see CCC 676).

As we look toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, we live in the here and now, striving daily to build up the Kingdom. And, when "we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise ... according to the command of the Lord and in his Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal Kingdom"⁴ (CCC 1050). Then God will be "*all in all*" (Eph 1:23), and we will experience a *true* rapture, "caught up" in the joy of God.

(CCC 675-677, 1042-1050)



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

⁵ Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:4-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3; 2 John 7; 1 John 2:18, 22

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes* 39 § 3