

Caught Up in the Clouds

In some circles, 1 Thessalonians is valued for providing the primary biblical reference (or “proof text”) for what is called the “rapture”:

The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air. (1 Thess. 4:16–17)

The Greek word translated as “caught up” (*harpazein*) in this passage is used elsewhere to describe people being snatched by God's Spirit (Acts 8:39) or transported into heaven (2 Cor. 12:2–4). Paul seems to be saying that all Christians (alive and dead) will be miraculously lifted up to heaven by God (see also 2 Cor. 12:2, 4; and cf. Matt. 24:40–41; Luke 17:34–35).

The Greek word translated as “meet” (*apantēsis*) in the phrase “meet the Lord” is often used with reference to a custom of the day. People expecting an important visitor often went out from house or city to intercept and escort the approaching traveler on the final leg of the journey (Matt. 25:6; Acts 28:15). Thus Paul might be saying that as Jesus returns, all Christians (living and dead) will rise into heaven to meet him halfway; they will then join him in a triumphant procession as he continues his descent to earth.

The term *rapture* (an English word formed from the Latin for “caught up”) has come to be associated with one particular scenario of end-time events: the notion that faithful Christians will be taken up into heaven at some point before the return of Christ, while others are left behind to deal with a time of unprecedented tribulation. Christians who say that they “believe in the rapture” often mean that they accept this particular doctrine of a miraculous pretribulation deliverance of believers. Christians who say that they “don't believe in the rapture” may nevertheless expect to be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord Jesus when he returns; they just don't accept the particular scenario for a pretribulation deliverance with which the term *rapture* has come to be associated.