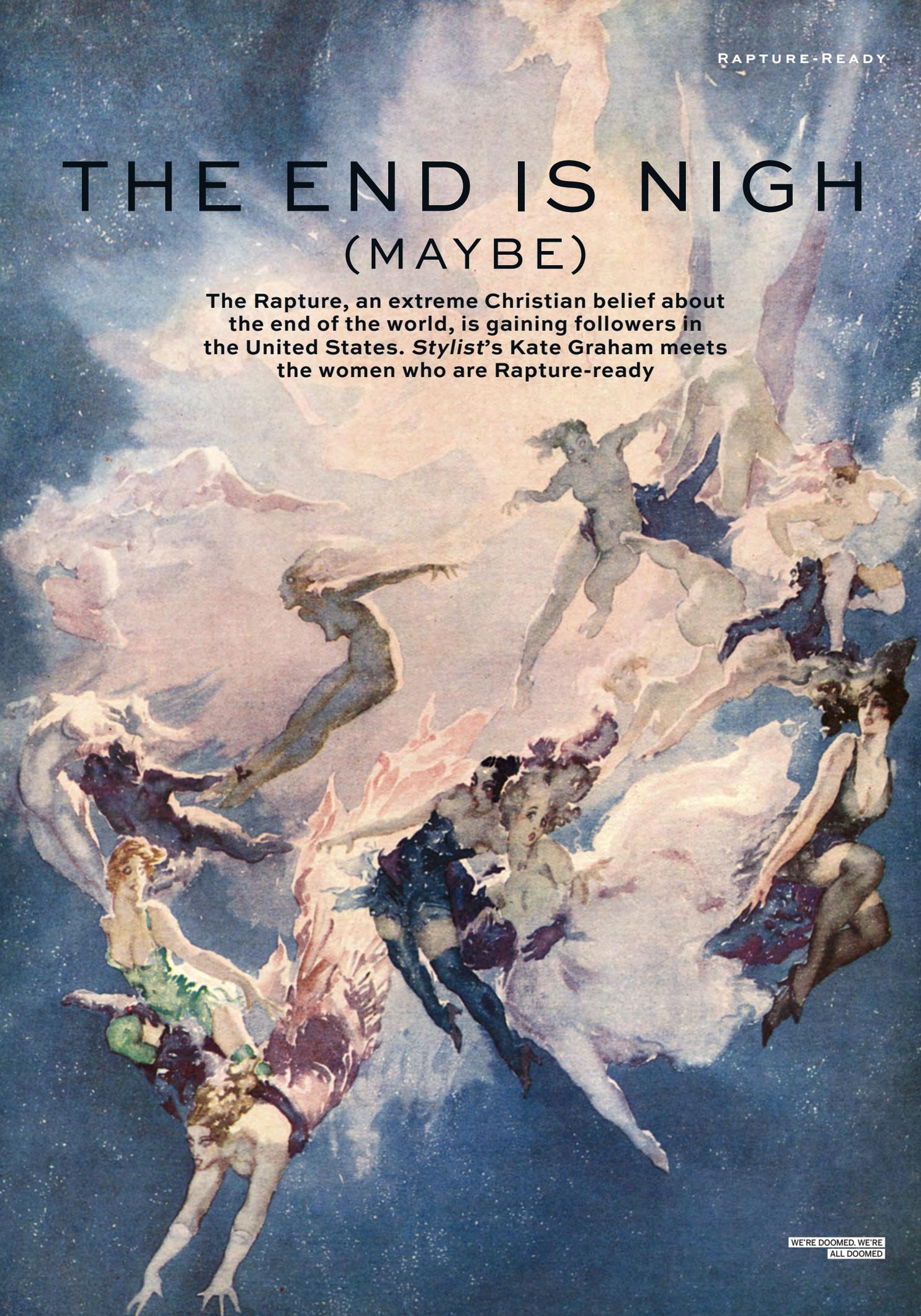


RAPTURE-READY

THE END IS NIGH (MAYBE)

The Rapture, an extreme Christian belief about the end of the world, is gaining followers in the United States. *Stylist's* Kate Graham meets the women who are Rapture-ready



WE'RE DOOMED. WE'RE
ALL DOOMED

What if you woke up one morning and your partner, two of your closest friends, 10 people in your apartment block and five of your colleagues had just disappeared? You step onto the streets, bewildered, only to find others with the same wild expression, also desperately searching for absent loved ones. Bus drivers have just evaporated leaving double-deckers crashed into walls, aeroplanes have been downed as pilots and air traffic controllers have disappeared from their seats, a third of parliament and the police force have vanished; even the Queen has gone missing. Without a trace.

The Rapture is the moment when believers in God are lifted into heaven leaving the remaining population to deal with seven years of plagues of blood and boils, darkness and earthquakes, death and destruction and the appearance of the Antichrist. According to believers of the Rapture, the above scenario is not only going to happen, it's going to happen soon.

"The world and those left behind will be in a major crisis and mass confusion will be taking place," Rosemary Fisher, Tennessee-based author of *The Smokin' "Hot" Bride of Christ: Rapture Ready* tells me with fervent belief. "Imagine the destruction when no-one is behind the wheel of a car or manning the aircraft. Chaos will erupt as people speculate how these people disappeared."

For 22-year-old La'Queasha Beard (right; her Twitter feed warns: "Tweets may cause conviction! Heels high, standards higher") the Rapture is not far away at all. "This world is not going to last forever," she explains cheerfully. "You can bet your bottom dollar that the Rapture is going to be one of the prophecies that comes to pass." I ask her if she thinks it will happen in her lifetime. "The Bible says no man knows the day or hour, but I would say give it another 10 or 15 years and it will happen."

In 2014, the Rapture is big business in America. Because for Rapturists like Rosemary, global events such as war in the

Middle East, the spread of the internet and contactless payment systems are just precursors to the apocalypse, or the 'End Times' as it they're also known. The Rapturists' interpretation of the New Testament's *Book of Revelation* predicts all these technological advances and geopolitical conflicts – believers expect to find themselves taken up to heaven very soon.

POPULAR BELIEF

However extreme these viewpoints may sound, the Rapture is far from a fringe idea in the United States and you can find believers in many Christian

aftermath of a 'Rapture-like' event. Led by cop Justin Theroux, and co-starring Liv Tyler and Christopher Eccleston, the town struggles to make sense of a world where 2% of the world's population has simply vanished. With eight million viewers in the US, it's just been recommissioned for a second series.

I admit, I had a preconceived image of what a Rapturist would be like. Kim Reynolds, a glamorous 47-year-old Californian running a social media consultancy, was not it. Although a lifelong Christian, she only heard about the Rapture in 2000 when her son picked up a *Left Behind* book and

the creation of the European Union and the development of technology. Slowly, over time she came to feel that if those parts were true, then the whole *Book of Revelation* was true. That was when she accepted the Rapture.

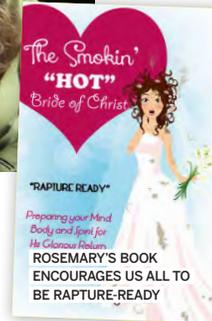
She's not exactly sure who will vanish ("Personally, I believe there'll be a lot more people raptured than many evangelical Christians say"), but whatever the number, she is Rapture-ready, which essentially means that she "lives for Jesus the best way possible". There are not any specific things Rapturists need to observe to gain salvation, only accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour, which requires them to live out that truth in whichever way they can, read the Bible often and share the good news, so they are ready for heaven.

Amy Frykholm, author of *Rapture Culture: Left Behind In Evangelical America*, isn't surprised to hear so many professional, educated women are on the Rapture train. "In my research, I found all kinds of women who believe in it. One sociologist told me that it's actually the default belief of a lot of Americans. It's what they believe if not given anything else to counter it, it's that deeply rooted in our culture. It's in the air, it's in the water."

The reasons, she explains, can be traced back to the success of a British-born revivalist preacher called John Nelson Darby. "Back in the late 19th century, he travelled the USA preaching the 'Secret Rapture'. His idea was that Christ wouldn't come back once,

but twice; once to take up the true believers, and again in the Second Coming."

His idea was just one doing battle for prominence in America at the time. There were all kinds of end-of-the-world theories floating around – the Rapture was just John's personal reading of the scripture. But he's gained prominence because he gained the right backers. "He successfully convinced



denominations. Recent surveys say as many as 41% of the US population expect the Rapture to happen before 2050. Interest has also peaked due to the 16-book Christian Evangelist *Left Behind* series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which has sold more than 65 million copies. Their contemporary spin on a post-Rapture battle with the Antichrist was made into a straight-to-DVD film (also called *Left Behind*) this year, starring Nicolas Cage.

Then, there's the HBO show *The Leftovers*, currently airing on Sky Atlantic. Adapted from the bestselling novel by Tom Perrotta, it looks at a small town in the

asked her if it was true. "I was intrigued," she explains. "At heart, I'm a researcher, so I spent two years asking, 'Is there any Biblical claim to this, any supporting evidence?' I love science. I'm a rational, logical thinker and I was convinced."

For Kim, the *Left Behind* books put the Rapture into a modern context that really made her think about the prediction in a new way. Having read about the prophecies and signs, she began to see parallels between what was happening in 2000 and what was written in the Bible, such as

wealthy donors to take on his ideas, and they published the Scofield Reference Bible, footnoted with his apocalyptic beliefs," says Amy. "It became the most popular Bible in the USA, and as Rapture-believing Christians were building their own colleges and Bible schools, it was read everywhere. All of a sudden, the Rapture wasn't just one guy's idea, it was scripture. His interpretation caught on like wildfire." It's worth noting, however, that prior to John's preaching, the Rapture was not part of any Christian teaching.

WILL IT BE TODAY?

John's ideas found a foothold because American culture is by nature apocalyptic: "We don't believe that the way of life we've created is sustainable, even non-religious liberals believe that the world is about to end," explains Amy. There's also another, simpler reason for its continuing popularity, she says. "It's a captivating story, the idea that you never know when it could happen. It could happen right now. It could happen when I'm having sex. It could happen when I'm getting drunk. It takes over the imagination, even if you resist it intellectually or emotionally. Most Americans absorb it, even if they don't realise it."

And while Amy thinks belief in the Rapture might be undergoing a small post-Millennial slump, La'Queasha sees it exploding, all thanks to social media: "The majority of the people I follow on Twitter believe. And I get email after email from young women, saying how excited they are to have learnt about it." As well as spreading the good news on how to get Rapture-ready, she also shares the bad news for those that remain on the ground (one of her recent tweets reads, "God doesn't NEED you. Don't believe me? JUST DIE"). "The image from *Revelation* that scares me the most is the locusts," she tells me. For her, this is not a metaphor. "They'll have the face of man, the teeth of a lion and the tail of scorpions. And stung people would hurt for seven months."

For Rapture-ready women,

these torments are not allegories. I ask Angela, a 37-year-old project manager from Arkansas, if she really expects bodies to vanish and plagues to descend. "Absolutely. I believe it will happen more than I believe that I will see the sunshine tomorrow."

Does she wake up and wonder will it happen today? "Yes, yes, yes! Every day I look at the sky and think, could it be today?" is her excited response. "I know this Earth is not my home, I know that I'll spend eternity in heaven because God's word says that my life here is but a vapour. So there hasn't been a day that it doesn't cross my mind." Angela's joy evaporates the minute I mention those who'll remain earthbound. "It breaks my heart," she says, after a very long silence, then begins to cry. "It just breaks my heart."

THE LEFT BEHIND

Belief in the Rapture doesn't impede day-to-day reality for Angela, Kim or La'Queasha. If anything, it seems to enhance

"MY HUSBAND ISN'T A BELIEVER. IF THE RAPTURE HAPPENED TODAY, HE'D MOST LIKELY BE LEFT BEHIND. IT'S SCARY"

it, imbuing it with meaning and purpose. But expecting to be whisked up to heaven while others they love will suffer, that's clearly heartbreaking, dividing both friendship groups and families.

"I have sisters who've always made fun of me for it," Vera, 27, from South Dakota, explains quietly. "I try to talk to them about it, but they just think I'm crazy, which I'm used to. They don't want to think about it, nobody wants to believe that they'll be left behind. Everyone believes they're good people, so it can be a touchy subject."

Kim Reynolds has a similar struggle. "My husband isn't a believer," she says, with absolute sincerity. "If the Rapture happened today, he'd most likely be left behind. It's scary

because I hate thinking of him going through seven years of hell on Earth."

This specific figurative device – the righteous woman vanishing with her children, and the husband left behind – is extremely popular in Rapture fiction says Amy Frykholm, and not just in the *Left Behind* books. "Throughout the 20th century, they almost always picture a woman raptured from her home, the dinner left burning on the stove, and the husband coming home to find her gone."

This image is one reason Amy believes the Rapture appeals to so many more women than men. "This worldly man who cared only about money and

power is left, and the woman who was so good, nurtured her family and did everything right is taken. She gets her reward for her good deeds, and perhaps even has a moment of feminine triumphalism, the chance to say, 'I told you all along I was right!'" In fact, it could be re-purposed as the age-old knight-in-shining-armor fantasy that's behind practically every fairy tale and film from *Sleeping Beauty* to *Pretty Woman*; just wait, do the best you can, and someone will rescue you from the trials of the world in the end.

But, and this is key, the Rapture story also offers redemption for those left behind. Wayward husbands, friends and family still have seven years in which they can accept Jesus and be saved. "The women



NICKY WHELAN AND NICOLAS CAGE IN THE 2014 RAPTURE FILM, LEFT BEHIND...



I interviewed for my book loved the possibility that family members get a second chance, that they wouldn't have to lose their loved ones for all of eternity, which is a great fear," reveals Rosemary Fisher. "This way there is a hope."

THE DOW JONES OF DISASTER

The growing belief in the Rapture is also due in part to globalisation. Advanced technology and global media are sending information around the planet so if

you're looking for signs that match the predictions in *Revelation*, you can just about be assured a daily news bulletin will deliver them. "The world is full of very confusing information," says Amy. "But if you put on your apocalyptic glasses – the lenses that show the signs that the Rapture is coming – then the world starts to make sense. All the crazy information you get all the time can be clarified into certain events that need to be watched [out] for."

This is also known as the Rapture Index. As part of the popular website raptureready.com (16 million page visits per month), this is 'a gauge of the End Times'. Every day the site's founder runs through 45 categories, including Moral Standards, Inflation, Climate, Plagues and Food Supply. Each is given a numerical value (the higher the number, the closer the Rapture is), and added up to create a Rapture Index total.

"It was created to give a Dow Jones feel," explains co-creator Terry James, referring to the American share index. "Although I see it more as a speedometer. The higher the total, the more quickly we are heading towards the pre-Tribulation Rapture." For him, that will not only involve piles of discarded clothes, glasses and prosthetic limbs, but the disappearance of every single child, including the unborn. "I believe wombs will be empty, and that will probably cause more horror on earth than

anything,” says Terry. The current Rapture Index total stands at 181. Anything from 100 and below denotes ‘Slow Prophetic Activity’. Rather worryingly, anything over 160 falls in the category ‘Fasten your seat belts’.

To a Rapture outsider, some of the categories are rather confusing. Under the subhead ‘Satanism’ (currently given a score of four) the comment says, “Satanic ‘black mass’ gets green light in Oklahoma City”. Easier to fathom is the subhead ‘False Prophet’ (with the score of five), where it simply says, “Pope Benedict XVI’s decided to step down”. Others are just surprising. Globalism only has a score of three, because “a secessionist movement in Europe has hurt the globalist agenda.”

UKIP might be pleased to hear that Rapturists pay close attention to, and want to see the destruction of the Euro. “They believe that the Antichrist will bring one world currency and one world religion,” explains Colleen Prior, from the Catholic University of America and Research Associate at the upcoming National Museum of American Religion. “It’s a key sign. For this reason, many were and still are opposed to the establishment of the Euro.”

In fact, globalisation increases all kinds of out-there beliefs, says Colleen. The swirl of forces seemingly beyond our control creates a feeling



of powerlessness into which certainty becomes ever more attractive. Of course, the irony is that a shrinking world also means that we’re exposed to more world events, “giving those on the lookout for ‘signs’ an ample field of events to choose from.”

Such signs include rising crime, financial unrest, famine,

beheads people any more’. Then, lo and behold, it’s going on everywhere, in Syria, in Oklahoma, in London.”

She also sees signs in technology, both in the internet (“The Bible says that the Antichrist will be able to be seen by everyone around the world. Well, it is only in modern times that we have the technology for

“RAPTURE BELIEVERS THINK THAT THE ANTICHRIST WILL BRING ONE WORLD CURRENCY AND ONE WORLD RELIGION”

drought and nuclear proliferation. La’Queasha Beard sees signs in wars, pestilences and earthquakes. For Kim Reynolds, it’s gruesome deaths in the headlines. “The Bible talks about all these beheadings that will happen in the seven-year tribulation. Fifteen years ago. I remember thinking, ‘Nobody

that to happen”) and in the rise of cashless payment systems. “In the Tribulation there will be monetary restrictions; people won’t be able to buy, sell or trade at all without having this mark. There is debate about what this mark means, is it physical? Is it electronic? But the bottom line is, it is only in recent times that everything you bought

and sold could be tracked and monitored. Could that be the mark? A lot of these things that are prophesied in the Bible weren’t actually possible until fairly recently.”

Perhaps the biggest ‘sign’, one featuring heavily on the Rapture-ready site and in all my interviews, is Israel and war in the Middle East. “Within this theology, in order for Christ to return, the Jews must be returned to their homeland,” explains Prior. Kim Reynolds certainly plays close attention to the entire Middle East. “The End Times prophetic countdown started when Israel became a nation again in 1948. When it was miraculously reborn as a nation, that’s when the clock started.”

If this combination of modern day soothsaying and Biblical literalism sounds more than a little far-fetched, author Rosemary Fisher isn’t surprised. In fact she knows exactly how you feel: she used to be an unbeliever herself. She just wants us all to keep talking.

“During the Tribulation, many people will be saved, they will remember the *Left Behind* movie, or my conversation with them, or an article like this. I know it sounds crazy, it sounded crazy back in the day that we would have light bulbs or cars. We thought they were crazy too. But they were right about that and we are right about this.”



WHAT IS THE RAPTURE?

A basic guide to the coming (alleged) apocalypse

WHAT IS THE RAPTURE?

From the Latin word *raptura* (seizing), rapture, to some Christians, refers to the ‘end of times’, when believers will be carried to heaven and non-believers will remain to suffer the Tribulation – God’s wrath on earth. Not to be confused with the Second Coming, when Christ returns to earth.

WHICH PASSAGE IN THE BIBLE DOES IT REFER TO?

The word ‘rapture’ itself isn’t found in the bible but a similar concept is referred to in *The Book of Revelation*, particularly 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, which says the “dead in Christ” [those who died believing in Jesus] and “we who are still alive” will “meet the Lord in the air”.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN?

The most common interpretation is that believers in God will suddenly disappear from earth without warning and ascend to heaven, to count among the dead. Those left behind would suffer – or die and go to hell – seven years of hell on earth, under rule from an “abomination that causes desolation” (Matthew 24:15).

WHEN IS IT GOING TO TAKE PLACE?

Many Rapturists read modern occurrences, such as warfare, famine and plague, as signs of their imminent removal to heaven. But Matthew 24:36 states that it is impossible to give an exact date: “Concerning that day and hour no-one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”