



The Rapture:
The
Believer's
Wonderful
Hope

*First in a series on
Bible prophecy*

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Many people have good reason to fear the events of the future. Believers, however, can rejoice because they will escape the dreadful events predicted for the last days. They know that any moment an event commonly referred to as the Rapture may snatch all genuine Christians from the earth into the presence of Christ. The Rapture is a distinct New Testament truth, first announced by Christ in John 14 and, twenty years later, taught by the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4 under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These two passages are central to our understanding of how the present age will end. In John 14 we have the solemn promise of the Lord's return and in 1 Thessalonians 4 a splendid picture of His return. No prophecies need to be fulfilled before this event can transpire.

The Promise of the Lord's Return

1. The Savior's Precious Advice

The disciples were with Christ in the Upper Room the night before His crucifixion. They were perplexed and distressed about many things, but especially about the Lord's prediction concerning His death and departure (John 13:31ff). At that time they neither understood nor believed the Savior's words of comfort, words that subsequently have prompted believers through the ages to eagerly anticipate Christ's return for them.

Amidst the disciples' growing anxiety and alarm, Christ spoke words of exhortation and promise: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14:1). The Savior's words are probably best understood as commands. Jesus suggested that the proper remedy for doubt and fear is belief in a personal God. Whether or not the disciples understood the details of future events (and they obviously did not), they could avoid fear by acknowledging the

Savior. Trust in God is commendable. Trust in Christ is indispensable, because He is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). Personal acceptance of Christ is necessary to secure a place in the Father's house. By asking the disciples that they believe Him equally with the Father, He asserted His deity. As one commentator observed, "If he were not true God with the Father, this faith would be false and idolatrous" (Stier, *The Words of Jesus*, Vol. 5, p. 185).

Even so today, when men are perplexed about the future, true peace amidst the perilous portents of the future comes through accepting Christ as one's substitute Savior. Doing this assures us of an eternity with Him and permits us to live in the calm of eternity now.

2. *The Savior's Present Activity*

"In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2).

Christ spoke to the disciples about their future communion in the Father's house and His present construction of their future home. While Christ and the disciples would soon be separated, they eventually would enjoy unbroken fellowship in Heaven, in the Father's house. Christ needed to leave them in order to build their eternal abode. The "many mansions" do not refer to palatial residences or huge houses. The Greek word *monē* like its old English counterpart "manse," from the Latin *mansio*, means "abiding place, abode, compartment." Perhaps the modern term "condominium" best gives the sense of the Greek word. The imagery that Christ conveys with the term "Father's house" and "mansions" was well understood by the disciples.

Biblical scholar Merrill C. Tenney explained the cultural significance of the mansions in the Father's house: "In the Orient the sons and daughters of a wealthy patriarch, with their families, often lived under his roof. The one great house contained living quarters for all. By analogy, Jesus intimated that

there would be room for all in the Father's house" (Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief*, p. 213). The thrust of Christ's revelation is that while He must be absent from His disciples, it would be for a good reason. He would prepare for them abodes where they would enjoy unbroken fellowship and intimacy.

Not until the final two chapters of the Bible (Rev. 21; 22) does God give us an actual description of our eternal home. It is an enormous city, the New Jerusalem, with twelve foundations and twelve gates. Its dimensions, undoubtedly to be taken literally, stagger the imagination. "The city is laid out as a square, . . . fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal" (Rev. 21:16, NASB). Christ has been constructing the city in Heaven while completing the Church on earth. When the last building block is added to the city in Heaven and the last believer is added to the Church on earth, Christ will return to take the Church, His beloved Bride, to her eternal home. While the Lord created the universe in only six days, it has taken Him almost 2,000 years to fashion our eternal abode. What a magnificent place our heavenly Home must be! In glorious fellowship we will share the city with the triune God, the holy angels and all the redeemed of all the ages (Heb. 12:22, 23).

3. *The Savior's Promised Appearance*

"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3).

The Lord promised in John 14:3 that He would go to Heaven, that He would prepare abiding places for His own, that He would come again and that He would take the believers to Heaven. As He literally went away, so He will assuredly return. Our friends who insist that the Church must go through the Tribulation generally ignore this crucial Rapture passage in John 14. Writer Robert Gundry, however, wrestles with the text. In an effort to avoid its obvious teaching, he spiritualizes its meaning by sug-

gesting that Christ "is going to prepare for [the disciples] spiritual abodes *within His own person*. . . . The rapture will not have the purpose of taking them to heaven" (*The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 154, emphasis in the original).

In fact, this is exactly what Christ was teaching. Christ promised that where He is—and that is Heaven—we will likewise be. By avoiding the clear implication of John 14 that the Rapture, when Christ comes *for* His saints, is distinct from the Second Advent, when He comes *with* His saints, Gundry is forced to unwarranted spiritualizing.

Posttribulationists teach that the Church must endure the Tribulation, then Christ will descend from Heaven, and the Church will meet Him in the clouds and immediately return with Him to earth. If this scenario is true, then Christ spoke an untruth in John 14. In the posttribulationist view the believer never spends a single moment in Heaven.

The believer's future lies with Christ His Bridegroom. He eagerly awaits the arrival of the Savior, Who then transports the Bride to her heavenly Home. There are no preceding events, no signs—just a brief promise. Further revelation is given much later.

The Picture of the Lord's Return

In John 14 Christ revealed for the first time that sometime prior to the Second Advent He would remove the believers from the earth. Not until two decades later were details about the Rapture disclosed.

In each chapter of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul mentioned at least one aspect of Christ's return. He related specifics about the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. If it was important for first-century believers to be informed about this great hope of the believer in Christ, it is also crucial that those living in the 20th century understand the future hope of the Rapture.

Their Ignorance. Paul wrote about three major problems in 1 Thessalonians 4: the problem of immorality (vv. 1–8),

the problem of indolence or laziness (vv. 9-12) and the problem of ignorance (vv. 13-18). Concerning the latter he wrote, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope" (v. 13).

Paul had spent three weeks at Thessalonica. The Thessalonians may have been inattentive when Paul taught them about the Rapture. They were ignorant concerning their loved ones who had died. All of these early believers had hoped to live until the Rapture. But the Lord tarried, and some of their loved ones had passed away. Would they miss out on future blessings? Would they not be resurrected until after the Millennium?

The Preview. The Thessalonians should not have been concerned about their departed friends and relatives: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Thess 4:14, NIV). Since all believers have identified themselves through faith in Christ with His death, burial and resurrection, they upon death shall likewise be raised and be safe with Jesus in Heaven. Then they will accompany Christ at the Rapture and meet those of us who are living at the time of this event!

It is significant that the term "sleep" is used three times in the immediate context. Contrary to the teaching of the cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the metaphor "sleep" describes the state not of the spirits and souls of individuals but of their bodies, especially in this Christian context. When believers die, their bodies are placed in the ground. The term "sleep" is fitting because the bodies rest from their earthly labors and await the awakening of the Resurrection. Interestingly, the English word "cemetery" is derived from the Greek *koimeterion*, that is, a place of sleep. What a lovely description of the place where we lay our loved ones to rest.

It is comforting to realize that the moment a believer dies, he is present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23),

conducted there safely by the angels (Luke 16:22). When an unbeliever dies, his body is likewise placed in the ground; but his soul and spirit go immediately to the place of torment: "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

The Bible knows nothing of an intermediate state called purgatory or of a second chance for salvation after death.

The Promise. We even have the promise of the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:15: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." The doctrine of the Rapture, Paul asserted, came directly from the Lord, possibly revealed during Paul's three-year stay in Arabia (Gal. 1:17, 18).

The Picture. In the final verses of 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul revealed the detailed sequence of events at the Rapture. (The headings are those of Charles Ryrie, whose excellent book *What You Should Know about the Rapture* has been republished by Harvest House under the title *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus.*)

1. The Return of the Lord

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16).

Christ's coming will be heralded by three sounds. There will be a shout or a command, given either to men or to the angels. Next there will be the voice of the archangel, possibly Michael, and finally the trump of God. This trumpet will summon the dead from their graves and will conclude God's program for the Church. The trumpet is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:52 and is not to be confused with the seventh trumpet of judgment of Revelation 11:15.

2. The Resurrection of the Dead

At the return of the Lord, the first event will be the resurrection of "the dead in Christ"; that is, the Church-age

saints. The dead return from Heaven with Christ, and their bodies in the graves will be transformed into their glorious resurrection bodies (1 Thess. 4:16).

3. The Rapture of the Living

"Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17). The living believers will be "caught up together with them," or reunited with those who fell asleep in Christ. The transformation of the bodies of living saints as well as the resurrection of the bodies of the dead saints will be instantaneous, "in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52).

When living believers are caught up to meet the Lord, they are said to be raptured. The term "rapture" is not found in the Bible. It comes from the Latin *rapio*, meaning "to seize or snatch," accurately conveying the meaning of the Greek word in that verse, *harpazo*, a sudden removal from this earth. The identical word is used of Philip, who was caught up by the Holy Spirit near Gaza (Acts 8:39), and of Paul, who was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2-4). When one couples 1 Thessalonians 4:17 with John 14:1-3, there can be no doubt that the term *harpazo* means an actual removal of people from earth to Heaven.

4. The Reunion in the Air

At the Rapture we will meet our Lord and loved ones in the clouds (1 Thess. 4:17). We have missed our loved ones who preceded us. They exist in God's glorious presence unperturbed by the succession of time. Withheld from them presently is anything that would detract from the bliss of Heaven. On the other hand, their joy in Heaven may be increased by knowing about the salvation of loved ones on earth (Luke 15:10).

5. The Remaining with the Lord

Being with the Lord forever includes returning with Him to Heaven, being rewarded at the judgment seat, rejoicing

at the marriage of the Lamb and ruling with Him during the Millennium and, after a new Heaven and new earth, for all eternity.

6. *The Reassurance from the Lord*

First Thessalonians 4:18 concludes, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." The comforting hope of the Thessalonian believers and for all Church-age believers is the descent of the Lord and their deliverance from the wrath of the tribulation period. Three times the Holy Spirit assures the saints that they are exempt from the wrath to come (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). Were the believer to face the Tribulation, then Paul's concluding words would not be those of comfort but of caution.

The believer's fondest hope is the any-moment return of the Lord. Since Christ first disclosed the event of the Rapture in John 14 and Paul added details to the information of the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, almost 2,000 years have passed. We live, therefore, 2,000 years closer to that glorious event than did the Thessalonian believers. For them, for the saints throughout the Church Age and for us, as well, the Rapture is a comforting hope ("Wherefore comfort one another with these words," 1 Thess. 4:18), a purifying hope ("And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure," 1 John 3:3), a blessed hope ("Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing," Titus 2:13) and a sure hope ("We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed," 2 Pet. 1:19).

Let no one rob the believer of his fondest hope. The Bride awaits the Bridegroom. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." ■

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A Tool for Learning

Douglas Ferry

When I was a youngster, my father operated a machine shop. He taught me how to use everything he owned.

One hand tool that we used often was a Crescent adjustable wrench. We had them in several sizes. I call every adjustable wrench a "Crescent." I have used many tools over the years, but the Crescent wrench is the only tool that has ever taught me a lesson in fatherhood. Let me explain.

God's design is that fathers train their children. Few experiences have demonstrated my failures as a father more than an event that happened a few years ago. My son, Mark, was about 13 at the time. His main interests were track and raising pigeons—not hand tools. In the midst of a project one afternoon, I asked Mark to go to the basement and bring up my Crescent wrench. After some time, he returned with a pair of pliers. "That's definitely not my Crescent wrench," I told him sternly. "Get me my Crescent!" Returning empty-handed a few minutes later, he asked, "What's a Crescent wrench, Dad?"

My first thought was that I had an ignorant kid in my home. *Mark doesn't know what a Crescent wrench is! How stupid can he be?*

Then I realized the problem! Crescent is a brand name, and the wrench downstairs was not a Crescent. My son was not the failure—I was. I had never taught him what a *Crescent* wrench is. His ignorance was my fault. Mark was untrained. And training is a father's responsibility. In God's Word we read, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but

bring them up in the nurture [training] and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). How could I expect my son to know and be responsible if I had not trained him?

Obviously Mark can survive life without knowing how to use a Crescent wrench, but the spiritual implications are many and significant! Often we expect our children to know what we know and to do what we can do without giving them specific information and proper instruction. Their ignorance may mean we have failed as fathers! Perhaps the root of the anger they sometimes express stems from the disappointment caused by a lack of training.

Admonition is primarily corrective verbal teaching that we can accomplish somewhat quickly. To admonish means "to put into the mind." Training, however, requires an investment of time because it involves teaching by example. Training is showing how to do something. It means "to nourish or feed." Just as we cannot accomplish the total nourishment of a child with one meal, neither can we train a child quickly.

Telling children to serve God is admonition. We train them when they learn how to serve by watching us serve! Young eyes observing Dad showing kindness is far more effective than a lecture on kindness. Teaching compassion is good, but we will train our children better when they see Dad choked with emotion over human heartache.

Whenever I see a Crescent wrench, I remember that it is a father's responsibility and privilege to train his children. ■

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