

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

53.2 What Is Going to Happen When Christ Returns?

Part II

Scripture: I Thessalonians 4:13-18; I Corinthians 15:51-53; II Peter 3:10-12

We concluded our study together last time with the thought that when Christ returns He will remove His church from the world. We also reflected upon the truth that the returning Christ will verify His promise to return, He will justify His hard death on Calvary's cross, and He will complete the redemption of His people. Let us look further into the Scripture's assuring words concerning the removal of the church when Christ comes again.

III. CHRIST WILL RETURN TO REMOVE HIS CHURCH:

The Latin word “rapere” furnishes us with that which has become the watchword of the sudden transferring of people from this planet when Christ comes. It is the word “rapture” and means “a snatching away” or “to transport from place to place.” It is common for Christians to speak of the rapture of the church. Two key passages having to do with this event are cited above, I Thessalonians 4:13-18 and I Corinthians 15:51-53. In examining them I was interested to find seven truths having to do with the returning Christ.

1. The Returning Christ's Descent:

This is the way Paul explains it as he is guided by the Holy spirit, “*For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven...*” (I Thessalonians 4:16a) A concordance is helpful in tracing the Lord's place in the heavens. It can be noted that Christ was received into heaven **(Mark 16:19)**, that He passed through the heavens **(Hebrews 4:14)**, that He has been made higher than the heavens **(Hebrews 7:26)**, that He sat down on the right hand of the majesty in the heavens **(Hebrews 8:1,R.V.)**, that He is said to be in heaven **(Ephesians 6:9)**, that He appears as our advocate and high priest in heaven **(Hebrews 9:24)** and that it is from heaven that we expect to see Him return to earth **(I Thessalonians 1:10)**.

The Bible uses the word “heaven” to describe three locations. There is the atmospheric heaven in which the birds of the sky habitat. (Genesis 1;20) There

is the starry heaven wherein the sun, moon and stars are located. (Psalm 8:3-4) Lastly, there is the *“third heaven”* which is sometimes called the *“heaven of heavens.”* (II Chron.6:18; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 148:4) This, apparently, is where Jesus ascended to and has taken His present abode. (Mark 16:9) We assume that the word *“ascend”* means that Christ went up. Of course as the earth turns on its axis, any direction becomes *“up”* so that we may think of the *“third heaven”* as the area which surrounds the starry heaven entirely just as the starry heaven envelops the atmospheric heaven. The starry heaven is so vast that observation of the third heaven is not possible, if such is real to natural eyes at all.

Christians have always believed that Christ would appear again from heaven. Alexander Maclaren has inspiringly written, *“The primitive Church thought more about the coming again of Christ than about death or heaven. They were not looking for a cleft in the ground called a grave. They were not watching for the undertaker, but for the ‘uppertaker’.*

2. The Returning Christ's Shout:

The Bible teaches He will return *“with a shout.”* (I Thessalonians 4:16b) The word in this passage is *“keleusma.”* It is a command kind of a shout much the same as a general would use in ordering his commanders, or the captain of a galley ship calling the stroke of his oarsman. It was used by the charioteer in command of his horses. It is a word of high authority. In regard to Christ's descent and shout, no power on earth shall render it impotent. The gathering shout of Christ will break the graves open, his fiat command will see to it. We may well recall the instance in the gospel narrative when Jesus brought Lazarus from the grave with this shout. The shout of Christ will again loosen the grave so that sleeping ones emerge and living ones are set free from the weaknesses of a body long humiliated by sin and its effects.

3. The Returning Christ's Voice:

We read of *“the voice of the archangel.”* (I Thessalonians 4:16c) The Bible speaks of angels many times over. They are ministering spirits, ordained of God, to serve His purposes both positively by the execution of His will, and negatively by being examples to the universe of punished rebellion. (Hebrews 1:14; II Peter 2:4) They are finite beings but evidently greater than man in intelligence and power. They are spirit-bodies capable of moving with ease from the third heaven to earth and capable of materialization to human form. They are great in strength (Psalm 103:20), superhuman in intelligence (Matthew 24:36;

Colossians 1:16; II Samuel 14:20), and move swiftly (Daniel 9:21). Rabbinical and Apocryphal literature abounds with references to angels. In the Apocryphal Book of Enoch four archangels are mentioned: Michael, Uriel, Raphael, and Gabriel. The rest of Scripture outside of the Apocrypha mentions only one archangel. He is "*Michael the Archangel.*" (See Daniel 10:13-21; 12:1; Jude 9; and Revelation 7:7) His name means "*as God is He.*" In Scripture Michael seems to be the messenger of law and judgment. Milton called Gabriel (God's hero) an archangel, although he is not so named in Scripture. Some have felt that there is only one of whom it can be said; "as God is He," and that His position and work indicate that Michael is the official name of Christ. Whether Christ will bring Michael, the archangel, with Him to shout or it is the voice of Christ Himself, is academic. The shout of welcome will be heard. If the message is, "*Rise up and come away,*" it will be but music in the ears of those who wait to be with their Lord.

4. The Returning Lord's Herald:

The sixteenth verse of I Thessalonians, chapter four continues, "*and with the trump of God...*" Not only will Michael and/or Jesus cry out, but another angel, possibly Gabriel, will blow the trumpet of God. These three sounds will signal the full redemption of Christians is at hand. In the Old Testament, Numbers 10:1-10, we have a wonderful picture regarding the use of two silver trumpets. Among many purposes they were used to or for the "*calling of the assembly and the journeyings of the camps,*" and when the Israelites were confronted by the enemy, then the priests were to "*blow an alarm.*" Thus, the trumpets were blown to gather the people for worship and by the sound of the trumpet they were mustered for battle. There are also two main trumpet blasts regarding the coming again of Christ. In I Corinthians 15:52 we have the "*last trump*" to rouse the sleeping saints, and in Revelation 11:15-18 we have the sound of the trumpet when Christ and His saints will do battle.

5 The Returning Lord's Harvest:

In I Corinthians 15:22-23 we read, "*As all died in Adam, the same also shall all live in Christ, but each in his order, Christ as the first fruits, then those who belong to Christ, at the time of his coming.*" The coming again of Christ is like a great harvest day. This harvest will not carry the seeds of decay and disorder which is currently experienced in the physical world. In the physical world there is the thermodynamic Law of Entropy which states that every system or process tends

to move in the direction of increasing entropy which is the turning of motion into heat and is synonymous with disorder and confusion. Scripturally, this law is found in Romans 8:22, *"The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now."* But, there will be a new product, it will be incorruptible. (I Corinthians 15:52) I Thessalonians 4:16 reads, *"and the dead will rise, first."*

These words were read by Cardinal Cushing at the funeral of President John Kennedy; and they have been recited again and again all over the world. Believer's at present are with the Lord in intermediate spirit-bodies, they are disembodied physically, though their bodies are distinct and real. (II Corinthians 5:1, 8) Until Christ comes the dead bodies of believers remain in the grave. Such bodies have been dissolved to dust, devoured by wild beasts, and burnt to a crisp amid raging flames. It makes little difference. There will be a great "gathering together and getting up morning." The same Lord who originally called matter into being will now perform a miracle equal to it. The redeemed of all ages will participate in this event. All the believing dead will rise to meet the Lord. This is a very great comfort. Let me say that no Christian should allow himself to be denied for one moment the assurance that Jesus Christ is coming back, and loved ones will be reunited. Merv Griffin mused during an interview on live television, "I've often wondered what would happen if Jesus came back again." It is one thing the true Christian needn't wonder about, even in his most doubtful moments. Let no follower of Christ be deluded or robbed of confidence in Christ's concern. Clearly, we live in a world which abounds with disbelief. The doctrine of Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead is an affront to the secularist outside the church and to the agnostic ecclesiastics within. Dr. Gerhard Gloege of Bonn University to the Lutheran World Federation convened in Helsinki in 1963 that the doctrine of Christ's coming again is "clearly an embarrassment." I suppose that each of us will have to decide for himself if it is an embarrassment to believe in the resurrection of the dead. There is the old sorrowful refrain, "They that dwell upon the earth are but a handful, To those who sleep within its breast." The people who lived in Thessalonica so long ago were concerned about their loved ones who had fallen asleep. The Holy Spirit's comforting words to them emphasized that because Christ had died and risen again, so surely they could count on their loved ones rising when Christ returned. I doubt very much if they were at all embarrassed to believe it would happen.

6. The Returning Lord's Meeting:

I Thessalonians 4:17 reads, *"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."* The word *"caught up"* is *"harpazo"* and means literally "to snatch away." It carries the thought of taking by force. It is found in Matthew 11:12 and Acts 23:10. It is also translated "pulling" as when pulling one out of the fire. (Jude 23) The thought is found in John 10:12 as when a wolf *"catcheth"* a sheep and carries it away by force. There is another instance in Acts 8:39 where Philip was *"caught away"* from the eunuch's side and was later found in Azotus. The same picture is seen when Paul was *"caught up"* to the third heaven. (II Corinthians 12:2-4) The thought is of being carried away by irresistible force.

This week I saw a bumper sticker which read, "When The Rapture Occurs This Will Be An Unmanned Vehicle." We might smile at that, but it is good theology providing the car is being driven by a Christian. The verse we are looking at tells us that there is no power on earth, no gravitational law, no might of the unseen world, that will be able to retard the uplifting power of the Lord when He comes to carry His people away. As the needles fly to the magnet, so the attractive power of Christ will unloose His own from whatever holds them here on earth. Here will be the great meeting.

We read, *"caught up...in clouds to meet the Lord in the air."* The word *"meet"* has a comforting significance. It means to join oneself with another and to come back with that one. The word occurs in two other places. We read in Matthew 25:1-6 that the virgins *"went forth to meet the bridegroom"* and came back with him. In Acts 28:15 we read that the saints went out *"to meet"* Paul as far as the Appii Forum and then came back with him to Rome. So when Christ comes, we will meet with Him only to be brought back to the place He has been preparing.

Much attention has been given to the word *"clouds."* We would normally feel that the word describes the clouds of atmosphere which will be present when Christ returns. However, there is no article in the original language, so that the sentence more literally reads, *"caught up in clouds."* Clouds of what? Not air necessarily. Possibly, clouds of believers. In Hebrews 12:1 we read of *"so great a cloud of witnesses."* Perhaps we shouldn't push the point, but it does seem that we could think of a cloud from Wilton, one from Fairfield, one from every surrounding township, every hamlet and city the world around. Or perhaps,

massive clouds from each country of the world. Whatever, believers will be caught up in clouds and will all converge at one magnetic point, *“to meet the Lord in the air.”*

7. The Returning Lord's Satisfaction:

“So shall we ever be with the Lord.” We shall be satisfied when we are with Him, and He will be satisfied to be with us. There is a very beautiful picture in the Bible which suggests this truth. It is the picture of a relationship which exists between bride and bridegroom. Jesus is the groom and the church, Christians, are the Bride. In a certain city I am thinking of a bridegroom, while his bride-to-be is a thousand miles away. Their wedding is planned for a certain day of a certain week, month and year. He counts the days and the hours. He is waiting for the day to come when he will travel to claim his bride. What a moment of satisfaction it will be when they are together. So it is with Christ. He is the heavenly bridegroom eagerly awaiting the time when He will come in the air to claim His chosen Bride, those who have been redeemed through His precious blood. (Isaiah 53:10-11; II Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 21:2; 19:7; 22:17)

When will that be? When will the rapture take place? The exact time cannot be foreseen. The Lord said to the disciples, *“Keep yourselves ready, for the Son of man shall come in an hour when you do not think.”* (Luke 12:40) Furthermore, the rapture will take place in the twinkling of an eye. Jesus will claim His own as lightning. (I Corinthians 15:52) We are told, however, that the rapture will take place when the Church is complete. This is, in effect, what Paul says in Romans 11:25-26. He instructs, *“until the totality of the Gentiles has come in.”* God knows when that will be, He alone knows. In the great mystery of election God knows when the era of grace will have closed. We may be assured by this passage, as well, that God will not leave one seeking person who desires the truth to enter His kingdom. We also must realize that the day of His coming may be hastened by our faithfulness in presenting the good news about Christ to those God has been pleased to place in our way. (II Peter 3:12) To be sure, the calling and election of the Church is a great mystery. (Ephesians 3:3-10) What counts is that we be ready when He comes.

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