

The Rapture

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There is a very definite feeling amongst the people of God that the day of grace is about to close. In the words of the prophet we may say. "The day goeth away, for the shadows of the evening are stretched out." For the Christian, we may add, in the words of the Apostle "The night is far spent, the day is at hand".

Even men of the world have a vague uneasy feeling that some great crisis is approaching. What form it will take, and how to meet it they know not. Christians, however, with the Bible in their hands, Christ in the heart, and the Holy Spirit to guide, are not left in darkness. They know that Christ is coming, and that His coming is very near. We realise in some measure the deep need of this sad world, and we know that all the efforts of men to meet that need will be in vain. Kings and Dictators, Parliaments and Committees, may for a time and in some limited measure, relieve local distress, but they cannot remove the universal misery of a world under sin and death. Neither conferences and leagues, nor treaties and pacts, will end the sorrows of the Jew, the misgovernment of the Gentile, nor the corruptions of Christendom.

There is only One who can deal with all the evil, end the sorrows of the earth, hush creation's groan maintain the glory of God, and bring in universal blessing for man. Whether realised or not, the great need of the Jew, the Gentile, and the Church, is the coming of Christ; as we sometimes sing,

Lord, Lord Thy fair creation groans,

The air, the earth, the sea

In unison with all our hearts,

And calls aloud for Thee.

The condition of the professing people of God, in these last closing moments, may well solemnise our hearts, and humble us in the dust. It is foreshadowed in the condition that existed, among the people of God in the closing days of Old Testament history, for history has a strange way of repeating itself. At that time Israel had utterly broken down; the little remnant who had returned from captivity had completely failed. But in the midst of all the prevailing corruption there were a few godly souls who feared the Lord, thought upon His Name, and spake often one to another. One thing marked them above all else — they looked for the coming of Christ. They did not look for improvement in the world; they had no thought of seeking to put things right in Israel; they made no pretension to be anything themselves but they looked for the Sun of righteousness to arise with healing in His wings. Their only hope was the coming of Christ. Amongst themselves all was weakness; behind them all was failure, around them all was corruption; but before them stretched the glory to be ushered in by the coming of Christ.

Their position, in very many ways, sets forth that of the people of God today. The Jew has crucified his Messiah, and has been scattered over the world; the Gentile has so utterly broken down in government, that civilisation seems on the verge of being lost in a welter of lust and violence; the Church has utterly failed in its responsibility as a witness for Christ; and those who, in the midst of the ruin, have sought to answer to the mind of God, have utterly broken down. The failure on man's side, is absolute and irretrievable. But our only hope remains, Christ is coming; and in spite of all the failure

behind us, and around us, the glory lies before us.

If then the coming of Christ is the great hope that is set before us for our special encouragement and comfort, in a day of ruin, we shall do well to examine Scripture, not with the vain idea of attempting to fix a date for the coming, or indulging the fleshly love of prying into the future, but with the desire of having our affections awakened towards the One who is coming.

First let us turn to Scriptures which establish the great facts that the Lord Jesus is coming to reign in glory, and that when He comes His saints will come *with Him*. Then we may look at Scriptures that tell us how the saints will be brought to Christ, in order to come with Him.

Turning to the last Epistle in the New Testament we find we are carried back by Jude to the first Book in the Bible, to learn that in less than seven hundred years after the Creation of man the world had become apostate. In the days of Enoch the world was approaching the great crisis of the Flood. No hope was held out of any recovery of an apostate world; but, in view of the judgment to come we have the first great prophecy of the coming of Christ. Enoch says, "Behold the Lord cometh *with ten thousand of His saints*" (Jude 14). The world passes on to judgment, the saints are preserved to come with Christ in glory.

Passing on to the prophet Zechariah, who prophesied in the day of Israel's ruin at the close of the Old Testament history, we find he holds out no hope of the recovery of the nation; but, in view of another great crisis, there is again held out before the saints the hope of the coming of Christ. The prophet says, "The LORD my God shall come, and all the saints *with thee*" (Zech. 14: 5). Again the world passes on to judgment, but the saints are preserved to come with Christ.

Now may we listen to the testimony of the Apostle John, as declared in Revelation 19: 11-16? His prophetic utterances close the witness of the New Testament. John speaks in view of another great crisis in the history of the world — the complete break down of the nations and of Christendom. As in the days of Enoch before the close of the Old World, and as in the days of Zechariah before the close of the Old Testament, so in the days that will close the course of this present world, we learn there is no hope but in the coming of Christ, and that when the "heaven is opened", and the "King of kings" comes forth, the armies of heaven will follow Him. Thus again we learn that the present world rolls on to judgment, but the saints are preserved to come *with Christ*.

To anyone subject to the Word of God these Scriptures, with many others that might be cited, definitely prove that the Lord Jesus is coming to earth the second time, in power and glory, and when He comes His saints will come with Him. Seeing however, that from the beginning of history to the present day, generations of saints have passed away, and their bodies have been laid in the grave, and that, at the present moment, millions of believers are living on the earth, while Christ is in heaven, the question naturally arises, How will the saints join Christ to come with Him?

This important question was allowed to be raised very early in the history of the Church, that we might have an inspired answer through the Apostle Paul. His first Epistle to the Thessalonians was written to give us the answer. In the first chapter of this Epistle we are told that these Thessalonian saints had been "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven . . . even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come". When Christ appears the second time it will be in wrath, or judgment, upon the nations that have rejected Him; but with complete deliverance for His people who have suffered persecution for His name's sake. These Thessalonian saints were sustained in the midst of their persecutions by rightly looking forward to a glorious answer to all their sufferings at the appearing of Christ, when they would share with Him in the glories of the Kingdom.

This hope will not be disappointed; but as time passed on, and the coming of Christ was delayed, some of their number "fell asleep". This troubled them with the thought that possibly the saints who had passed away, would miss all the blessings and glories of the reign of Christ, that would be enjoyed by those who were alive on earth when Christ appeared. They probably had no question as to their eternal blessing, or that they would enjoy the heavenly blessings of the Father's house, but they feared they would miss the Kingdom glories. The Apostle meets this difficulty in the fourth chapter of the Epistle. He first sets their minds at rest in regard to those who had been taken from them. He would not have us ignorant "concerning them which are asleep" (verse 13).

These saints were in ignorance, and sorrow was the result of their ignorance. The Apostle wishes to dispel their darkness, and wipe away their tears. And the way he takes is the only effectual way of dispelling the clouds and ending the sorrow. He presents Christ. He reminds us that Jesus has died and is risen again; and that His death and resurrection is the great pattern of them that sleep. Christ's resurrection was secret; so, indeed, will be the resurrection of His sleeping saints. Just as we believe one, so we can believe the other. Unknown to the world they will be raised again in order that God may bring them with Jesus (1 Thess. 4: 14).

Still the question remains, How will these risen saints, and how will the living saints, be brought to be with the Lord, so that they may come with Him? This question the Apostle proceeds to answer in the parenthetical verses, 15 to 18, of chapter 4. The Apostle stresses the importance of this passage by specially reminding us that he is speaking "by the Word of the Lord ". We know that all his Epistles were inspired, but there are truths of such special importance that he introduces them with the reminder that he speaks by special revelation. The truth of the gospel, the truth of the Mystery, the Lord's Supper, and, in this passage, the truth of the Rapture of the saints are all introduced in this way (Gal. 1: 12, 1 Cor. 11: 23, Eph. 3: 3, 1 Thess. 4: 15).

This, perhaps, is the only Scripture that directly tells us how we shall be taken to be with the Lord. There are, however, two other Scriptures to which we may profitably refer before examining this passage.

First, 1 Corinthians 15: 51-53. In this chapter the great subject is resurrection. The coming of the Lord is not actually mentioned though we know, from 1 Thessalonians 4, that the events of which these verses speak, will take place at His coming. The Apostle says, "Behold I show you a mystery," and then he tells the secret that "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." That we are coming with the Lord was no secret, for, as we have seen, Enoch and the prophets had spoken about this great event. But no prophet had ever hinted that a number of saints would never pass through death. This, indeed, was a secret reserved for the New Testament times. But if all will not pass through death, all will be changed. The sleeping saints will be "raised incorruptible", and the mortal bodies of the living will "put on immortality". The passage, however, does not go further. If we only had this Scripture we should not know into what likeness we are changed, nor what would happen to us when we are changed. This then is the first step in the great event that leads to our being with Christ. "We shall all be changed."

Passing on to the second Scripture, we read, in Philippians 3: 20, 21, that "we look for the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour who shall change our body of humiliation that it may be fashioned like unto His body of glory". This Scripture throws further light on this momentous event. The Epistle to the Corinthians has told us we shall be changed. This passage tells us we shall be changed into the likeness of Christ. Not only shall we be morally like Him, but we shall have bodies of glory like His own. In the light of this revelation we may well ask ourselves, Why this amazing grace? Why are poor sinners such

as ourselves going to have these bodies of humiliation fashioned like His own glorious body? Ah! we know the answer, we are going to be like Him that we may be the everlasting witness to the worth of His Person and the efficacy of His work. Think of that poor degraded thief on the Cross, think of the proud Christ-hating Pharisee Saul of Tarsus; then pass on in thought to heaven and as, in the day to come, we gaze upon these men as glorified saints shall we not see the amazing efficacy of the work of Christ, that removes every trace of sin, and enables these men to be changed into the likeness of Christ. And what is true of these men will be true of all the saints in that vast scene of glory. When we come out in His likeness it will be according to the riches of His grace, and to the praise of the glory of His grace.

Thus we learn from Philippians that when changed it will be into the likeness of Christ, but this passage does not state what will happen to us when changed. For this further truth we must return to the fourth chapter of the First Epistle of Thessalonians. There, in verse 16, we read that "the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven". Here then we have the blessed intimation that the Lord is coming for us. The language is very explicit. It is not simply stated that the Lord shall descend, but that the Lord, *Himself*, shall descend. This is in accord with the Lord's own words to His disciples, "I will come again and receive you unto myself." He will not be accompanied with the great host of His holy Angels as when He comes to earth. He will come alone to meet His saints, even, as in the beautiful type, Isaac goes forth alone at eventide to meet his bride as she comes up from her wilderness journey.

Then let us notice, it is not a descent to earth, as when He appears to reign, and His feet stand once again on the Mount of Olives. It truly says He will descend, but it very precisely says it is a descent from heaven, not a descent to earth.

Moreover, we are told, that at the moment of His coming there will be a triple summons. The assembling shout, the voice of the Archangel, and the trump of God. From 1 Corinthians 15, we know that the trump of God raises the sleeping saints. The voice of the Archangel does not imply that the Archangel is present, or that the Archangel speaks, as our translation might suggest. The true translation is "with an assembling shout, with archangel's voice, and with trump of God". There is no article before Archangel and trump. It is simply characteristic of the Lord's voice. He speaks in this way, with Archangel's voice, and it may be this is the voice that changes the living saints, as the trump of God raises the dead. Then with an assembling shout He gathers both classes of saints together, and calls them to Himself.

Having assembled His saints we are *caught up together*. How blessed to know that, in this happy moment, so soon to come, all the things that have divided the saints will vanish away, and the humiliating divisions that have rent the Church of God, and scattered the people of God, will be for ever past. At last for one brief moment, it would seem, in the very scene of all the failure, His people will be together. For it will not be in little companies or groups of saints that we shall be taken. It will be no partial rapture by detachments, as some falsely teach today, for the word is "We . . . shall be caught up together."

Further, we learn that the meeting will take place in the air. Then how blessedly it all concludes, "So shall we ever be with the Lord." It is the Lord Who will bring us together, and the Lord Who will hold us together; never more to be divided from one another, never more to be separated from the Lord. "Wherefore," says the Apostle, "comfort one another with these words."

Here, then we have the mystery of His coming, the secret rapture of the saints by which they are taken from earth to meet Christ in the air, that they may be with Him when He comes.

Nevertheless, this great passage does not go beyond the meeting in the air. It is silent as to what

happens after that wondrous meeting. Turning to the first three verses of John 14, we hear of a further stage in our journey to the glory of the Kingdom. Here the Lord tells us that He has gone to prepare a place for us in the Father's house, and that when He comes again it will be to receive us unto Himself. That meeting, we know from Thessalonians 4, will take place in the air. Having received us to Himself, He will conduct us into the Father's house, as He so blessedly says, "that where I am, there ye may be also." He is leading us along the path of life which He Himself has trodden, and which leads to fulness of joy, and pleasures for evermore in the Father's house.

The last stage in the path to glory will be when Christ comes forth to reign. At His first coming He came in humiliation, and in circumstances of weakness. At His second coming the heavens will open and He will come forth as the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. His mighty angels will accompany Him, the armies in heaven will follow Him, and, Enoch's prophecy will be fulfilled, "Behold the Lord cometh with ten thousands of His saints."

These are the stages on our way to glory. First the meeting with the Lord in the air; then to pass in to the joys of the Father's house; lastly to come forth with Christ to share His Kingdom and His throne.

This then is the blessed hope that lies before us; The joy of the Lord's presence. The fulness of the Father's house, and The glory of the everlasting kingdom.

We may add, in the great eternity beyond there lies the eternal state in the new heaven and the new earth where God will be all in all.

Seeing then that we wait for these coming glories, we may well say, "What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God."