

GOD'S MESSAGE TO MAN THROUGH THE PROPHETS

IV. THE PROPHETIC WORD AND THE CHURCH

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Prophecy concerning the Church is to be found only in the New Testament. Types and illustrations of the Church are readily seen in the Old Testament, but the Body of Christ is not a subject of Old Testament prophetic revelation. See Matt. 16:18. The New Testament, which discloses truth concerning the origin, the constituency, the privileges, the warfare, the service, and the responsibilities of the Church, also foretells the events which consummate her history. Let us consider the next event in God's prophetic plan for the Body of Christ. It is rightly called the rapture of the Church. By the term Church we mean that body of individuals who have placed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer from sin in this age of grace. The catching up or rapture of the Church is taught in a number of New Testament passages. So clear is this teaching that we maintain that without a proper understanding of it, the entire Scriptural doctrine of the Church will be and must be misunderstood.

THE PROPHECIES OF THE RAPTURE

We take them not in the order of their original proclamation, but as they are found in our Bibles.

John 14:1-3

The following three points should be observed in this passage. First, the depression of the disciples (v. 1). Second, the preparation of Christ (v. 2). The Father's house is heaven, and not the temple on earth. The ark went before Israel in the wilderness to search them out a resting-place (Num. 10:33). So Christ has gone on for us. Third, the return of Christ (v. 3).

I Corinthians 15:50-58

First, the divine principle (50, 53). The kingdom in glory is meant here. No need in this body for renewal as does a body with blood. Flesh and blood are suited to the earthly sphere and not the heavenly. Paul has answered two questions (v. 35): (1) How are the dead raised up? It is only a sowing and there will be a harvest. (2) What kind of a body do they have? A body like Christ's. Now the question is raised: What will happen to the body of believers alive when the Lord comes? This passage is the answer and it is the rapture.

Second, the mystery (51, 52). (1) the change, (2) the time: (a) in a moment, (b) in the twinkling of an eye, (c) at the last trump. Third, the fulfilment of all Old Testament prophecies (v. 54). See Isa. 25:8, where the prophet is speaking of death by the Assyrian.

Fourth, the victory of Christ (55-57). The serpent, death, has lost its poison, specifically in the rapture. Fifth, the practical purpose of the truth (v. 58). No need to remain in skepticism and doubt. Does this truth make us lazy? Hear the words: "always abounding in the work of the Lord." And the labor is not in vain as though there were no resurrection.

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

First, the cause of this disclosure, (v. 13). Second, the comparison in this disclosure (v. 14). The verse teaches that just as Christ died and rose again, so will all His own also. Ellicott says: "The if here obviously involves no element of doubt, but is simply logical and virtually assertory." Equivalent here to since. Notice Jesus died, but believers have fallen asleep. He tasted all the bitterness of death. Bring with him--the very thing the Thessalonians feared would not happen to their loved ones. Third, the confirmation of the disclosure (v. 15a).

Fourth, the content of the disclosure (15b-17). v. 15--to allay their fears with regard to the dead. "The Lord Himself"--not through any angel, archangel, cherub, seraph, or man. God in His grace used Abraham to found a nation, Moses to lead a people out of bondage, Joshua to conquer a land and settle that nation, David and Solomon to rule this people. But in the rapture of His own the Lord delegates this to no one. "Shall descend from heaven"--He did ascend and has been seated at the right hand of the Father these many centuries. "Shout"--that of a commander to his followers (term is a military one). It will be grander far than that which brought Jericho's walls tumbling down (Josh. 6:16ff). "The voice"--that voice of the mighty leader of all the angelic hosts, above angels, cherubim, and seraphim. "The trump"--Num. 10:4--more mighty than the trumpets of Gideon (Judg. 7:19ff). Then there will be union (or better reunion and recognition), "together with them"--hama sun. No introductions in heaven. Fifth, the comfort of the disclosure (v. 18). A Christian visitor was once visiting a very poor and sorely afflicted believer in Dublin, and tried to comfort him with the text, "In my Father's house are many mansions." "Stop a minute," said the dying but happy sufferer, "that is a beautiful text, but there is one sweeter than it in the next verse: 'I will come again, and receive you unto myself.'"

THE PROGRAM OF THE RAPTURE

From the passages already treated and others, we understand that the rapture will be:

Before the Great Tribulation. It will not be post-tribulation nor mid-tribulation. This can be seen from two vital facts:

The nature of the Church's hope. Phil. 3:20, 21; I Thess. 1:9, 10; Tit. 2:13; I Thess. 4: 13-18. The hope of believers is not long life nor painless death nor wealth nor world conversion, but the coming of the Lord. It is no bright hope if the Tribulation must intervene. The Epistles, which speak of every phase of Christian life, do not mention the Church's passing through this time (Rev. 3:10. Lot--Gen. 19:22).

The nature of Daniel's seventy weeks. They are a unit in their reference to Israel and cannot be torn apart (Dan. 9:24). If God deals in this period with Israel, then the Church is not a group on earth. The interpretation of the whole Book of Revelation hinges on the nature of Daniel's seventieth week, for such is its setting. If there is confusion here, the distinction between Israel and the Church is blurred (I Cor. 10:32). As long as the Church is on earth, no Jew or Gentile can accept Christ without entering immediately the Body of Christ. If a saved remnant of Israel is in Jerusalem (Matt. 24), and is still reckoned as of Israel, and if 144,000 (Rev. 7) are saved (the seal of God is theirs), then why are they still of Israel, and not designated of the Church, if the Church be on earth? If the Church were on earth, they would be a part of it.

In a moment. Not a long process like sanctification. Notice Enoch and Elijah. Not after some specified event. The Church is said to be timeless and signless. See Jas. 5:7. Some (that is, those who seek the revival of the apostolic gifts,) take this as another Pentecost. There are some events in Scripture that are so epoch-making as never to be repeated, such as the creation of man, the giving of the Mosaic Law, the incarnation, Gethsemane, Calvary, and Pentecost. What is meant by James is a figure from nature in Palestine. They have two rainy seasons, spring and fall. Dt. 11:14. The verse speaks not of one rain but of two. The text has no indication in it that one looks back and the other forward.

As a body. The Church will not be raptured in sections or parts--no partial rapture. There will be only two classes: dead saints and living saints. Eph. 5:25-27--a glorious Church, not a spotted or wrinkled one, let alone a mutilated one. Heb. 9:28: The expression may apply to the deliverance of the Jews who wait for Him in the last days. He will appear for their deliverance. Thus it is applicable to the Jewish remnant in the last days. Note the character of the Epistle with its assumption of an unsaved nucleus as well as a saved portion in Israel, now forming the Church.

Accompanied by the giving of rewards to the saints of this age. 2 Cor. 5:1-10; 2 Tim. 4:8. This will be the time of the judgment of Christ (on the works of Christians) at the Bema.

Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Rev. 19:1-9. This is the hour in history to consummate the eternal relationship between Christ and His Bride. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25ff.

Return to earth. Rev. 19:11-16; 2 Thess. 1:3-10.

Reign with the King. 2 Tim. 2:11-13; Rev. 11:15-18; 20:6.

THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE RAPTURE

Many assert that belief in the blessed hope is a detriment to Christian life and service. They say it leads to pessimism. They need to be reminded that you can't be optimistic with a misty optic. The Spirit of God must have considered otherwise, for He relates it in the New Testament to practically every exhortation whether it be to watchfulness, moderation, patience, practical sanctification, faithfulness in service, purity, endurance in trials, brotherly love, separation from worldly lusts in this life, consolation in time of bereavement, and many others. Above all, it keeps our eyes in the right direction--looking for the Lord!

When Shackleton was driven back from his quest of the South Pole, he left his men on Elephant Island, and promised to come back to them. Working his way as best he could to South Georgia, he tried to get back to fulfill his promise, and failed; tried again and failed. The ice was between him and the island: he was not able to return, but he could not rest. Though the season was adverse, and they told him it was impossible, yet in his little boat he tried it again. It was the wrong time of year, but he got nearer the island; there was an open avenue between the sea and the place where he had left his men. He ran his boat in at the risk of being nipped, got all his men on board, and came out again before the ice crashed to. It was all done in half an hour. When the excitement was partly over, he turned to one of them and said, "Well, you were all packed and ready!" and the man said, "You see, boss, Wild (the second in command) never gave up hope, and whenever the sea was at all clear of ice, he rolled up his sleeping-bag, and said to all hands, 'Roll up your sleeping-bags, boys; the boss may come today.'" Such was the manner in which a dark, black outlook was suddenly changed, and they were all safe, homeward bound. Are we keeping our hope bright? It is based on a surer promise than ever man could make.

Believer, keep the hope warm and bright!