

The Coming Again of Jesus Christ

Discussing the Distinctions Between The Rapture and The Second Coming

One of the undeniable truths contained in the Bible is that Jesus Christ is coming again. When Jesus ascended, the disciples were left gazing up into heaven, and even after Jesus disappeared into a cloud, the disciples could not take their eyes off the sky. As they stood there amazed at what they had just seen, two angels spoke to them and said, *Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven* (Acts 1:9-11).

But the return of Jesus Christ is one of the most confused doctrines in Christianity. It has more variations to it than almost any other Bible subject. There are those who believe Jesus is coming before the Tribulation. There are those who believe He is coming in the middle of the Tribulation. There are those who believe He is coming about two thirds of the way through the Tribulation. There are those who believe He is coming only after Tribulation is completed. There are those who believe He is coming before the Millennium. There are those who believe He is coming after the Millennium. And, there are those who believe there is no Tribulation or Millennium by which to measure the chronology of His coming.

A study of future events as prophesied in the Bible is like putting together one of those really big puzzles that has several thousand pieces. When you first open the box, all the pieces are scrambled and it is difficult to find even two pieces that fit together. Little by little, however, to the persevering puzzler, the picture takes shape as each piece finds its proper place. Deciphering the chronology of future events outlined in the Bible requires a lot of patience. The pieces to the prophetic puzzle are scattered throughout Scripture and must be put together very carefully to insure that each piece is placed where it belongs. One comic book story I remember from my childhood is of Little Lulu. Lulu received a package in the mail from her grandmother, but before she was able to open it, she dropped the box, shattering whatever was on the inside. Lulu opened the box and found a thousand little ceramic fragments; but Lulu was at a total loss as to what the figurine had looked like before it was broken. Knowing that her grandmother would call and ask her how she liked her gift, she painstakingly reassembled all the pieces. When she was finished, she was pleased to discover the shape of a horse's head. Sure enough, her grandmother called little Lulu and when Grandma ask about the package, Lulu joyfully thanked her for the statue of a horse's head. There was a moment of silence and then Grandma said, "Lulu, I didn't send you a horse's head. I sent you a bust of myself." How aptly this illustrates the difficulty of studying biblical prophecy and the potential of putting the pieces together wrongly. Rightly dividing the word of truth is just as crucial to the study of prophecy as it is to any of the other subjects in the Bible.

Getting the chronology of future events correct is important for several reasons. First of all, there is the matter of biblical integrity. There can only be one true chronology of things God intends to happen in the future. Opposing views cannot be equally true. And, if the church tolerates opposing views in prophecy as having equal credibility, damage will result in our ability to convince unbelievers that any truth the Bible teaches is absolute. Secondly, the doctrines of the Bible are integrated. What one believes about the chronology of the future can have a great influence on what he believes about other biblical subjects. There is a real possibility of a domino effect occurring in doctrinal beliefs and prophecy stands close to the front of the row of theological dominoes. Third, what we believe about the events of the future has a strong bearing on how we live now. Peter said that future judgment should be a motivation to godly

living (2 Peter 3:10-14). In light of these things, let us see if in the ensuing study we can put some of the pieces to the prophetic puzzle together into a coherent picture of what God has actually said will take place in the future.

One of the points of confusion about the return of Christ results from the fact that we are given two completely different descriptions of the circumstances involved in that event. One of these descriptions is given in the context of a world that is full of chaos and tribulation, into the midst of which Jesus Christ comes in judgment. This is typically referred to as the Second Coming. The other account of his return describes a time of glorious reunion between Christ and His church in which there is only joy and rejoicing and reward. This is typically called the Rapture.

The Second Coming

While He was still with His disciples here on earth, Jesus informed them that He was going away and that He was coming again. In John 14:1-3 He said, *Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. 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. 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.*

This aroused the disciples' curiosity and so they asked Jesus about the future events to which He alluded. *Tell us, they said, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?* (Matthew 24:3).

Jesus told them about the beginning of sorrows (Matthew 24:8). The word He used for sorrows was the same word the disciples would have used in describing the pains a woman experienced in giving birth to a child. The beginning birth pangs of a woman in labor are less severe than the later and the final birth pangs, but serve as a clear indication that labor has begun. The beginning of sorrows at the start of the Tribulation period will be less severe than the great tribulation of the second half and the severe wrath that will come at the end, but they will be a clear indication that Israel has entered into its 70th week prophesied by Daniel (Daniel 9:24-27).

He then told them about the abomination of desolation, reviewing what Daniel had prophesied concerning the desecration of the Temple by the Antichrist (Matthew 24:15; Daniel 11:29-32). This event will take place in the middle of the Tribulation and be the warning signal for the Israelites to run for safety in the face of serious persecution (Matthew 24:16-20; Revelation 12:6,12-17).

He told them that great tribulation will follow this horrendous event (Matthew 24:21-22). This time of great severity, which Jeremiah called Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7), will be the most intense turmoil the world has ever known. It will be a time of great deprivation, death and religious profanity. Yet through it all, God will insure that Israel will survive (Matthew 24:22; Jeremiah 30:7).

At the end of this time of Tribulation, Jesus said, there will be great cosmic disturbances (Matthew 24:29). The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give her light, the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Only after all these things, Jesus said He will return and bring judgment to the earth. *And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes*

of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:30-31)

In this Second Coming of Christ, Jesus descends all the way to the earth, setting his feet upon the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4) moving quickly to bring judgment (Psalm 2:9; Revelation 19:11-21). He said in Matthew 24:40-41 that two will be together, one will be taken and the other left behind. His parables in Matthew 13 make it clear that the lost are the ones taken at this time (Matthew 13:40-42) to be judged by the King of Kings. In Matthew 25, He described the judgment that will follow, first relating it through parables, and then in more direct terms. He said in Matthew 25:31-32,

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory; and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats.

In Matthew 25:46, He described how the goats will be sent away into everlasting punishment.

Jesus also explained that no one will know the exact day or hour of his coming because it will be just like it was in the days of Noah - totally unexpected by those who reject Him (Matthew 24:36-39). But His disciples can be watchful and expectant of His Second Coming just as a man guards his house against the intrusion of a thief (Matthew 24:42-44).

Other passages of Scripture also speak of Christ's Second Coming in the context of judgment.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-10

And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.

2 Thessalonians 2:8-12

And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

This will be a fearful time. A time that unbelievers will face with extreme dread and devastation (Revelation 6:16; 9:6). They will confront it with denial and defiance (Revelation 9:20). But in the end, they will be doomed to eternal death (Matthew 25:30, 46).

The Rapture

The other context of Jesus' return is one of gladness and rejoicing as He gathers the body of Christ out of the earth. This is commonly called the Rapture, which is the Latin word used by Jerome (340-420) in the fourth century to translate the statement made in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: *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 Rapture is the "catching up" of the body of Christ into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And the biblical description of the coming of Christ in conjunction with the Rapture is far different than that of His coming in conjunction with the judgment that takes place at the end of Tribulation.

Paul described the event in some detail in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 as a means to comfort those who mourned for believing loved ones who had fallen asleep in physical death. He said that the Lord will descend from heaven, bringing with Him those who are absent from the body and present with Him in Heaven. Then there will be a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the sound of a trumpet. In this moment, there will be a resurrection of the dead in Christ, reuniting their souls with their bodies. Then the believers who remain physically alive on the earth will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:52-54) and they will be caught up with them in the clouds and meet the Lord in the air. From that time forward, he said, those who are in Christ will ever be with the Lord. He specifies that the resurrection consists only of those who are "dead **in Christ**" and the rapture consists only of "we which are alive and remain," implying the living **in Christ**.

In 1 Corinthians 15:51-54, Paul described the wonderful moment of this rapture/resurrection event for those who are in Christ. He said that it will take place in a single moment, just like the twinkling of an eye. It will take place at the sound of the trumpet when the dead shall be raised and we shall be changed. This change, he said, will consist of transforming our corruptible, mortal, fleshly bodies into something incorruptible and immortal. And, he said we will not all die physically before this happens, but we will all experience the change together, which perfectly fits the description of the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Other passages of Scripture confirm that this coming of Jesus Christ is a time of gladness and joy for all those who are in Him.

1 Thessalonians 2:19

For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?

1 Thessalonians 3:13

To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

1 John 2:28

And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.

The Reason For The Difference

The reason there are two very different descriptions for the coming again of Jesus Christ is because there are two different events that happen at two different times. It is easy to determine the timing of the Second Coming. In Matthew 24, Jesus described the Tribulation

from its beginning of sorrows to its cataclysmic finale. And **then**, He said, will appear the sign of His coming, and the tribes of the earth will mourn, and He will come in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. The word “then” is a chronology word meaning “at a particular time which follows the occurrence of other events.” Thus Jesus said He will come after the events of the Tribulation Period, after all the terrible years of wrath are completed. This coming is also described in Revelation 19:11-21. The judgments that will come upon the earth during Tribulation and the Satanic attempt to annihilate Israel and seize divine power are described in Revelation chapters 6-18. Then in chapter 19, John tells us of the triumphant invasion of the Son of God. Heaven is opened and Jesus appears riding on a white horse. His eyes are as a flame of fire, and on his head are many crowns. He is clothed in a vesture dipped in blood and He bears several names: the Word of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and a name that no one knows but Himself. The armies of heaven follow him, riding on white horses and clothed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth goes a sharp sword with which He smites the nations. He rules with a rod of iron and treads out the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. The armies of the world are slain with His sword and left in the fields for the fowls to be filled with their flesh.

The timing of the Second Coming could not be more clear. It is at the end of Tribulation. At the time of this coming, the beast and the false prophet are cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20), and Satan is chained in the bottomless pit (Revelation 20:1-3). The removal of this diabolical trio is obviously related to the ending of the Tribulation Period. At the same time, the armies of the world are destroyed and the Tribulation martyrs are vindicated (Revelation 20:4). King Jesus sets up His throne in Jerusalem and begins His peaceful 1,000 year reign (Revelation 20:5-6).

But it is not as easy to determine the timing of the Rapture. If it were, there would not be so many different beliefs about the matter. Some believe the Rapture happens before Tribulation ever begins. This is the Pre-tribulation Rapture position. Some believe that the Rapture happens at the same time as the Second Coming at the conclusion of Tribulation. This is the Post-tribulation Rapture position. Some believe that it happens in the middle of Tribulation. This is the Mid-tribulation Rapture position. Some believe that it happens about two thirds or three fourths of the way through Tribulation. This is the Pre-wrath Rapture position. Some believe that there are a series of raptures that take place according to the readiness of individual believers. This is the Partial-rapture position.

So when does the Rapture happen and what are the biblical pieces to the prophetic puzzle that settle the matter without reservation?

When Does The Rapture Happen?

The Thessalonian believers were shaken in their minds and troubled because someone told them the day of Christ had already begun (2 Thessalonians 2:2). In fact, they said that a letter from Paul himself affirmed this to be so. What is the day of Christ and why would its activation cause such concern for believers?

The day of Christ relates to the day of the Lord, which is a time of judgment yet to come upon the earth. The phrase "day of the Lord" is used 29 times in Scripture, 26 times in the Old Testament and 3 times in the New Testament. These references make it abundantly clear that this will be a time of judgment. For example:

Isaiah 13:9

Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it.

Amos 5:18

Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! To what end is it for you? The day of the LORD is darkness, and not light.

Zephaniah 1:14

The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly.

1 Peter 3:10

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

It becomes the day of Christ because judgment is given to the Son by the Father.

John 5:22-27

For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.

As to the judgment of the day of the Lord, it is Jesus Christ who opens the seals to the book in heaven which releases the specific judgments contained therein (Revelation 5:1-6:1). Thus the day of the Lord becomes the day of Christ, decreed to be forthcoming upon the earth during the seven year period otherwise known as the seventieth week of Daniel, or the tribulation period.

Yet in the midst of the severity of the day of the Lord is a note of triumph for the church. There is a distinction to be noted in that Israel faces the tribulation as a time of trouble (Jeremiah 30:7); but for the church, the day of the Lord will be a time of rejoicing.

1 Thessalonians 5:2-4

For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.

2 Corinthians 1:14

As also ye have acknowledged us in part, that we are your rejoicing, even as ye also are ours in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Even if there is chastisement to be experienced in our earthly experience, members of the body of Christ can look forward to the day of Christ with optimism.

1 Corinthians 5:5

To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

In fact, Paul had previously discussed these matters with the Thessalonian believers when he was with them.

2 Thessalonians 2:5

Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?

He had taught them both by the spoken word and by letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15; Acts 17; 1 Thessalonians). Thus, they knew that the day of the Lord would come as a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2), but only upon the children of darkness who did not see the truth (1 Thessalonians 5:3,6,7). The children of light know that day is coming and can therefore watch for it and will not be overcome by it (1 Thessalonians 5:4-6).

So when they were informed that the day of Christ had already begun, the Thessalonians wondered how they could have been overcome by it and how they could have missed the triumph that had been promised (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Paul wrote to reassure these believers that they had not missed anything (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17). He sought to defuse the trouble of their hearts by dismissing the communication they received as a deception from an imposter (2 Thessalonians 2:2-3). He reinforced this by reminding them of some things he told them when he was with them in Thessalonica.

He referred them to the matter of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto him (2 Thessalonians 2:1). This whole statement refers to one event as described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Jesus will descend from heaven, raise the dead in Christ and rapture living believers from the earth.

He explained once again that two things must take place before the day of Christ can occur. First there must be a falling away and then the man of sin will be revealed. The obvious implication from Paul was that neither of these two things had yet taken place and, therefore, the day of Christ was not at hand (enistemi, Strong's number 1764, to be present, to be upon us – 2 Thessalonians 2:2). This information was intended to comfort their hearts and encourage productivity in their Christian walk (2 Thessalonians 2:17). This was to result from a reassurance in them of the everlasting consolation and good hope they had been given through the grace of God (2 Thessalonians 2:16).

Does this passage of Scripture have the same effect on believers today? Understanding

what the falling away is will determine the answer to this question and affirm for us the timing of the rapture in relationship to the tribulation period or the day of the Lord.

1. The Meaning of the Word

The term “falling away” is translated from the Greek word *apostasia* (Strong’s number 646). In its noun form it appears only twice in the New Testament – here and Acts 21:21 where it is translated “to forsake.” In the Acts reference, *apostasia* is not preceded by a definite article but it is accompanied by a qualifier – “from Moses.” Here in the Thessalonians passage, *apostasia* is preceded by a definite article but is not accompanied by a qualifier. In Acts 21:21 there is **a** forsaking or falling away **from Moses**. In 1 Thessalonians 2:3 there is **the** falling away, but there is no specification regarding either who is falling away or what they are falling away from. It is clear that the readers of the letter knew what **the falling away** is, because Paul was only reminding them of what he had told them before (verse 5). There was no need, therefore, to include the qualifier in the immediate statement. But the effect of this is that we are left with only the meaning of the word and the context in which it is used to determine what it is referring to.

The word *apostasia* is typically defined as a falling away from the faith. Bible dictionaries, Greek Lexicons and commentators consistently explain the word in this way. This interpretation is thus imposed upon Paul’s statement in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. As a result, the verse is typically understood to say there will be some kind of departure from the faith before the tribulation period can begin. Those who take this position disagree about who is departing from the faith. Some say it refers to believers in the church. Others say it is unbelievers who are pretending to be in the church. Some say it refers to Israel. Others insist it is Gentiles. The confusion is understandable since there is no qualifier given in Paul’s statement to explain either who is falling away or what they are falling away from.

A further examination of the word *apostasia* reveals, however, that the word by itself does not automatically contain the qualification of departing **from the faith**. It is more generic in connotation meaning simply to depart. It can be used to refer to a departure or rebellion from some belief, idea, or object of authority, but it can just as easily refer to a spatial departure, or a going away from a place. In *A Greek-English Lexicon* by Henry George Liddell and Henry Scott the second definition given for the word *apostasia* is “departure, disappearance.”

It is for this reason that the word was consistently translated “departure” throughout the generations of the church up until the sixteenth century. For example, Jerome (340-420), who is the same man that gave us the word “rapture” in his Latin translation of the fourth century, translated *apostasia* as *discessio* which is the Latin word meaning simply “departure.” If we are confident in our use of the word rapture, which is based solely on Jerome’s Latin translation of the Greek word *arpazo*, then Jerome’s translation of *apostasia* into the Latin term for departure should have some weight. In fact, every English translation prior to the King James version did translate *apostasia* with the simple term “departing.”

1384	Wycliffe Bible	departynge
1526	Tyndale Bible	departynge
1535	Coverdale Bible	departynge
1539	Cranmer Bible	departynge
1557	Geneva Bible	departynge
1576	Breeches Bible	departing
1583	Beza Bible	departing

If “falling away” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 refers to a departure, who is departing from what? Without a qualifying statement in the immediate context, some further investigation is required in order to make an accurate interpretation.

The verb form of Apostasia which is *aphistemi* (Strong's number 868) appears in the Bible 15 times. The primary sense of the verb form is a spatial departure and it is consistently used this way in the Bible. In addition, it is not always used in a negative context. For example, when Peter was secretly released from prison by an angel and the angel had finished his task, Acts 12:10 says, *and forthwith the angel departed (868) from him*. There is nothing bad at all about this departure. The angel simply left Peter and went some place else. Other biblical references illustrate this idea of a spatial departure.

Luke 2:37

And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed (868) not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

Luke 4:13

And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed (868) from him for a season.

Acts 15:38

But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed (868) from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.

Acts 19:9

But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed (868) from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus.

Acts 22:29

Then straightway they departed (868) from him which should have examined him....

2 Corinthians 12:8

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart (868) from me.

In places where the verb form refers to a non-spatial departure, it is accompanied by a qualifier which makes this clear. For example,

1 Timothy 4:1

*Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart (868) **from the faith**, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;*

Remove the words “from the faith” and you are left to question what some are departing from in the latter times. The word departure does not automatically mean departing from the faith. It must be qualified with the words “from the faith” to know from what the departure is occurring.

The same thing is true in Hebrews 3:12.

Hebrews 3:12

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing (868) from the living God.

Here, instead of departing from the faith, some are in danger of departing from the living God. Remove the words “from the living God” and you cannot tell this.

So, the word apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 does not automatically mean departing from the faith. Standing alone it only means to depart. We must look further to determine from what the departure is occurring. It is here that the presence of the definite article gives a little assistance. This is **the falling away**, or **the departure** which means Paul is referring to a specific event, not just a general movement. It was also a specific event with which the Thessalonians were familiar from Paul’s previous instruction.

If **the** departure is referring to a specific departure from the faith, little clarification is provided to the church concerning the timing of the day of Christ. Even in the first century there were those who departed from the faith, being deceived by false teachers (Galatians 1:6, 3:1, 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:18) And since the first century, there have been many and massive departures from the faith on the part of Christians, the organized church, Israel, and secular societies. Which one was **the** departure, signaling the coming of the day of the Lord? Or is there another one yet to come? And if so, how do we know that the current departure from the faith is **the** departure from the faith to which 2 Thessalonians 2:3 refers? The fact is that a departure from the faith is too ambiguous of a matter to be a significant consolation to believers whose minds have been shaken by the news that the day of the Lord has already begun. Besides, what solace is there in the thought that the day of the Lord cannot begin until things start to go bad?

The Context

The only thing that helps us understand who is departing and what they are departing from in Second Thessalonians chapter 2 is the context in which the word departure is used. The subject of the chapter is *our gathering together unto him*. The whole chapter must be interpreted in light of this subject introduced in verse 1.

Paul begins the chapter with the word **now**. In its Greek connotation, this word is intended to provide a transition from what was said in chapter one to what is about to be said in chapter two. While the effect of the word provides an element of continuation of thought, it also supplies an element of contrast. In chapter 1 verses 3-12, Paul talked about the purpose of the day of the Lord. It is to serve as a means by which God will recompense (repay or render) divine vengeance to the wicked (verse 6) and the relief of seeing divine justice accomplished to believers (verse 7).

But now, he says in chapter 2 verse 1, now he would like to talk to the Thessalonians about our gathering together unto Christ. He does not want them to be troubled about missing the rapture because of some erroneous report that the day of the Lord had already begun. So he wrote to explain once again (verse 5) about the timing of these events.

After noting that the day of the Lord cannot come until the departure and the revealing of the man of sin happen first, he then gives some further explanation of these two events. In verses 6 and 7 he explains something about the departure and in verses 8 through 12 he explains something about the revealing of the man of sin.

In verse 8 he says, *and then shall that Wicked be revealed....* This is a clear reference

to the second of the two things that must take place before the day of the Lord comes. *The man of sin, the son of perdition, who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that (in the middle of the tribulation period) he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God (verse 3-4), that Wicked (one), whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall (eventually) destroy with the brightness of his coming (verse 8)* will be revealed before the day of the Lord begins. It does not specify to whom he is revealed. Here again there is no qualifier. Since the text does not explain to whom the man of sin is revealed, we must determine this from a larger context. The verb “revealed” is in the passive voice, so this is not the Antichrist’s revealing of himself in the middle of the tribulation period referred to in verse 4. Rather, this is a revealing of the Antichrist by someone else. Even before the day of the Lord begins, God is the one that reveals the identity of the man of sin in the confirming of the seven year covenant with Israel (Daniel 9:27). Who will see this and understand? All those who believe after the rapture and have the prophesies of the end times opened up to them (Daniel 12:8-10). Some will never see the Antichrist as the man of sin or the son of perdition, or the wicked one. They will believe a lie and follow him as a god (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). Nevertheless, the man of sin will rise and fall and be consumed by the Lord in the Second Coming at the end of the tribulation period (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10).

Since Paul discusses the second of the two things which must occur before the day of the Lord in verses 8 through 12, it is apparent that he also discusses the first of these two things in the preceding verses, or verses 6 and 7. Consider. Why would Paul say there are two things that must occur before the day of the Lord begins, then name both of these things, then ignore the first item, discussing something totally unrelated to what he has just said, and then return to the subject and discuss the second of the two things that must occur? This is the typical explanation of the context --

1. Paul tells us two things must occur first, the falling away from the faith and the revealing of the man of sin (verses 3-4).
2. Then Paul skips to the subject of the removal of the restrainer (verses 6-7).
3. Then Paul returns to the second of the two things that must occur first, the revealing of the man of sin, expanding upon the subject (verses 8-12).

But, it is more reasonable to think that verses 6 and 7 have a direct connection to the first of the two things that must occur, that is, the departure. In fact, the restrainer being taken out of the way (verse 7) has a direct connection to the departure referred to in verse 3.

Who is the restrainer? The terms used in the King James are *withholdeth* (verse 6) and *letteth* (verse 7). Both of these English words are translated from the same Greek word (katexo, Strong’s number 2722). The two English words are the opposite sides of the same Greek coin, so to speak, in that the work of restraining (katexo) on the one hand withholds someone from certain activities and on the other hand lets, or allows, only what the restrainer will permit.

The restrainer is identified with both a neuter pronoun and a masculine one – *what withholdeth* in verse 6 and *he who now letteth* in verse 7. This indicates that there is both a non-personal and a personal element to the identity of the restrainer. The non-personal element refers to the church. The Devil and the church are adversaries (1 Peter 5:8). God has given the church the capacity to stand against the wiles of the Devil (Ephesians 6:11), to wrestle against principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12), to withstand in the evil day (Ephesians 6:13), and to quench the

fiery darts of the wicked (Ephesians 6:16), making it possible for the bold manifestation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 6:19-20). The church has been given power over the Devil so that if we resist him, he must flee (James 4:7). This leads us to the identification of the personal element of the restrainer which is the Holy Spirit. The church's capacity to stand against the Devil in this world and quench his fiery darts comes from the Holy Spirit that dwells in the church (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:16). There were some Jewish exorcists who tried to cast out some demons in Acts 19:13-17. They were unsuccessful because they were not saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The demons violently tormented the exorcists until they ran away, but they confessed that if they had been confronted by Jesus or Paul, their response would have been different. In the Gospels, Jesus often confronted demons and the Devil himself, but as the Holy Spirit accompanied Jesus on His earthly journey, Satan and his followers were compelled to submit to the will of the Son of God (Luke 4:1,14; Matthew 12:28). Now the Holy Spirit accompanies the body of Christ in the same way He accompanied the person of Christ and thus the work of the Devil and his servants is restrained by the presence of the body of Christ as long as it remains on earth. When he, the Holy Spirit/restrainer, is taken out of the way (2 Thessalonians 2:7), only then can the Devil begin to implement his plan to fully consume the kingdom of the earth for himself (2 Thessalonians 2:8 – **and then**). And, if the Holy Spirit/restrainer is taken from the earth, the church/restrainer must depart also because of the promise of the permanency of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit given to the members of the church (Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30; Romans 8:11,23).

Thus understanding the apostasy as meaning the departure of the church from the earth perfectly fits the flow of the context. Paul starts the chapter by introducing the subject of the church's gathering together unto Christ in contradistinction to the day of the Lord. He then says that there are two things that must take place before the day of the Lord can begin. First, the church must depart and then the man of sin will begin to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament. He further explains that the departure of the church must come first because the presence of the church indwelt by the Holy Spirit is preventing the Devil from implementing His plan. Only after the restrainer is removed can the Devil begin to make his moves. The man of sin has to become active before the covenant can be signed with Israel, laying the foundation for the day of the Lord.

Therefore, the church does not go through any of the tribulation period. The church leaves the earth first. Then the man of sin will put together the pieces which give him the opportunity to deceive Israel and set her up as a target of his devilish wrath (Daniel 11:21-35; Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:15-28; Revelation 12:12-17). And only then can the day of the Lord begin.

This offers great comfort, not only for the historic believers of the Thessalonian church, but to all members of the body of Christ. We cannot be overcome by the day of the Lord. We know it is coming and we watch for it as someone who watches for a thief in the night. But in our watching, we live in the expectancy of the coming of Christ and our gathering together unto Him. This is our triumph in the day of Christ. As the rest of the world is surprised by the night intrusion of the day of the Lord, the church is delivered from it by the rapture. What comfort and consolation this provides to our hearts and what motivation to be as productive as possible while we have the opportunity to serve the Lord here on earth (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).

This interpretation of 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 then gives perspective to the other pieces of the prophetic puzzle that refer to the pre-tribulation rapture of the church. These we will consider next time. 📖

More Pieces To The Pre-Tribulation Rapture Puzzle

Let us pick up again on the puzzle analogy as we seek to understand the biblical teaching that the rapture of the church occurs before the tribulation period begins. Once a large part of a puzzle has been assembled, it is possible to get a fairly good idea of what the picture represents. Yet, some details are not visible because little pieces to the puzzle are missing here and there. Second Thessalonians chapter 2 is a large enough part of the pre-tribulation rapture teaching that we can see this truth rather clearly. But there are other places in the Bible that fill in little details that add to the clarity of this doctrine. These additional pieces to the puzzle are the subject of the following paragraphs.

Delivered From The Wrath To Come

God made some promises to Israel that He did not make to the church or to anyone else. For example, He promised Israel that they would possess a specific piece of geography throughout eternity – Genesis 17:8, *And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession....* Israel has been given this unique promise which has not been given to any other person, nation, or spiritual body including the church.

Likewise, God made some promises to the church that He did not make to Israel or to anyone else. One of these is the promise of deliverance from the tribulation period which is to come upon the earth sometime in the future – 1 Thessalonians 1:10, *And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.* The church as a unique spiritual body has been granted the special privilege of being removed from and kept out of the seven year time period in which God will judge the world with his wrath, purge Israel in preparing her for her Messiah, and redeem many additional gentiles in the midst of great persecution. This promise is given not because believers are necessarily immune from experiencing collateral suffering as a result of the wrath of God, but because God has chosen to grant the bride of His Son this special privilege.

The phrase, *the wrath to come*, refers to a specific event of wrath which will occur on earth at some future time. This is distinct from the eternal wrath of God from which all believers of every dispensation including the church have been rescued by the cross of Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 5:9 the Bible says, *For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ.* In this verse, there is no definite article in front of the word wrath. Wrath is contrasted in the verse with salvation. The verse refers to the eternal salvation we have been granted by the redemptive work of God's Son which delivers us for all eternity from the wrath of hell and the lake of fire. The church stands in this dispensation in this salvation as the children of light and the children of the day in contrast to those who are still lost in their sins and thus dwell in darkness (1 Thessalonians 5:5). As those in this dispensation who have not been appointed to eternal wrath, we will not be surprised by the coming day of the Lord. We have been enlightened and know that it is coming so that we live in expectancy of it (1 Thessalonians 5:4,6).

In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the word wrath is preceded by a definite article which suggests a different concept than that which is taught in 5:9. In 5:9, believers have not been appointed, set or established, unto eternal wrath. In 1:10, believers have been delivered, separated by time and space, from **the** specific event of wrath that is scheduled to occur some time in the

future.

The specific event of wrath to which this refers is different from eternal wrath. In eternal wrath people are cast into the means of wrath – the lake of fire. This lasts for eternity (Revelation 20:11-15). In **the** specific event of wrath from which the church has been promised deliverance, the means of wrath is brought upon the world. This lasts for a limited period of time. Revelation 3:10 says, *Because thou has kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.* Here again, the definite article indicates a specific event – **the** hour of temptation, or trial. In fact, in the Greek text, there is a double definite article which is only implied in the English – **the** hour of **the** temptation which shall come upon all the world. The word *hour* indicates a limited period of time in which this event will take place. The word *temptation* indicates that the purpose of this limited period of time is different from the purpose of eternal wrath in the lake of fire. In eternal wrath, God executes final and endless judgment for sin. In the hour of temptation, God executes a test upon everyone in the world making them choose between Himself or Satan, truth or error, righteousness or sin, faith or faithlessness. For His own divine reasons, He has promised to remove the church before this event takes place.

Also in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the preposition “from” gives some assistance to our understanding. Those who believe in the mid-trib rapture might suggest that from their point of view believers are delivered from the wrath of the tribulation period by being taken out of the middle of it. But if this were the intent of the statement in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the Greek text would more likely have used the word *ek*, meaning to come out from within the midst of something. The Greek word used, however, is *apo*, suggesting that believers have been separated from the event altogether. In Revelation 3:10, the Greek word *ek* is used when it says that the church is **kept from** or out of *the hour of temptation*. But by combining these two statements we can understand the whole perspective – the church is separated from the tribulation period by being removed from the earth before it gets started and is therefore **kept out of** it altogether.

How do we know this specific event of God’s wrath which lasts for a limited period of time and from which the church has been promised deliverance is the tribulation period? A series of Scriptural statements linked together leads us to this conclusion.

1. In Daniel 9:24-27, God decreed seventy weeks, or seventy sevens, upon His people. History bears testimony to this being seventy sevens of years, or a total time period of 490 years. Sixty nine of these weeks, or 483 years were fulfilled up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ which Daniel described as the Messiah being cut off (Daniel 9:26). The remaining seven years includes the event of the desecration of the temple by the antichrist, or the abomination of desolation. From Matthew chapter 24 and the book of Revelation, we are able to decipher that the abomination of desolation takes place in the middle of the seven year tribulation period. (Matthew 24:15-22; Revelation 12:12-17).
2. Daniel also describes this period of time as one of great persecution for the nation of Israel – Daniel 11:33, *And they that understand among the people shall instruct many: yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by spoil, many days.*
3. Jeremiah also referred to a time to come in which God would deal harshly with the nations of the world and at the same time correct in measure the nation of Israel, not leaving them unpunished (Jeremiah 30:1-17). He described this time as *the time of*

Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7). He also referred to this time as *that day*. What day?

4. Isaiah, in speaking of *that day*, described it as *the day of the Lord* - Isaiah 2:11-12, *The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up: and he shall be brought low.* In this same context, Isaiah described how men will seek to hide from God in the caves of the earth for fear of the LORD (Isaiah 2:19-23). This exactly corresponds to the events described in Revelation 6:12-16.

5. Ezekiel tells us about some of the other things that take place in Revelation chapter 6. He describes the great intensity of the fury or wrath of God expressed through the sword, the famine, the noisome beast and the pestilence (Ezekiel 14:13-21). This corresponds especially to Revelation 6:8 and more broadly to at least the third, fourth, and fifth seals described in Revelation 6:5-11.

6. Zechariah refers to all four horsemen that are mentioned in the seal judgments of Revelation chapter 6. Chariots led by red, black, white, and bay horses are identified as *the four spirits of the heavens which go forth from standing before the Lord of all the earth* (Zechariah 6:1-8). This description follows that of other items that also correspond to things that Revelation talks about. There are the two anointed ones, or two witnesses that come during the tribulation (Zechariah 4:11-14 and Revelation 11:4). There is the flying roll that contains the curse that goes forth over the face of the whole earth (Zechariah 5:1-4 and Revelation 5:1 with Revelation 6:1-17). There is the woman of wickedness sitting upon Babylon (the land of Shinar) (Zechariah 5:5-11 and Revelation 17:1-7). Then, in this context, the horsemen riding upon chariots are standing before the Lord of all the earth (Zechariah 6:5) and it is the LORD who sends them forth to walk to and fro through the earth (Zechariah 1:8-10).

7. This is, of course, only the beginning of the wrath of God to be executed during the tribulation period. Revelation 6:17 says that the great day of His wrath comes after this. Jesus described a similar break down of intensity in Matthew 24 where he talked first about the beginning of sorrows and then talked about the great tribulation.

This evidence combines to affirm that the wrath to come includes the tribulation period from its very beginning. The seventieth week of Daniel is decreed upon Israel as a time of great persecution which is otherwise called the time of Jacob's trouble. Corresponding to this time of Jacob's trouble is a time of God's vengeance which He brings upon the whole world to tempt or try the gentile nations. The Old Testament clearly relates this time of God's wrath to the events that occur during the tribulation period from its very beginning. Thus, the specific limited period of wrath from which the church has been specifically promised to be delivered is indeed the tribulation period and includes the entire tribulation period as described in the book of Revelation.

Absent From The Earth And Present In Heaven From Chapter 4 Through 19 In Revelation

The book of Revelation contains within its own text the indication of a natural outline for its contents. In Revelation 1:19, Jesus Christ said to John, *Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.* In this verse, Jesus told

John to write three things: 1) the things which he had seen, 2) the things which are, and 3) the things which shall be hereafter. The contents of the Book of Revelation are very easily divided into these three categories. Chapter 1 consists of the things which John had seen. The voice of Christ said to John, *what thou seest, write in a book...* (1:11). Then John *turned to see the voice that spake...* (1:12), and he saw seven golden candlesticks and Jesus Christ standing in the midst of them. Chapters 2 and 3 consist of the things which are. As 1:20 says, *the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches*. In chapters 2 and 3, John records the letters to the seven churches which together describe the state of the entire body of Christ throughout the church age including both its successes and failures. Chapters 4 through 22 consist of the things which shall be hereafter. 4:1 says, *After this I looked, and behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter*. This is a rather clear indication that everything following 4:1 is future to the present age.

In Revelation chapters 4 and 5 we are given a glimpse of the throne room in heaven. Within this setting, there are present twenty four elders. These elders appear to represent the church. In 5:8, these elders fall down before the Lamb, holding golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints. In 5:9, these same elders sing a song to the Lamb in which they say that the Lamb who was slain, redeemed **us** by his blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation. Having come from every kindred, these would not be Jews, but redeemed gentiles. Neither would these elders represent tribulation saints because the scene is recorded for us before any of the seals of the tribulation book are opened (Revelation 5:3-4). The only group they could represent is the church. The scene then puts the representation of the church in heaven in a future context (Revelation 4:1) before the tribulation period or the day of the Lord could possibly have begun (Revelation 5:3-4).

When the scene switches to the earth, the discussion also switches to Israel. In chapter 7, 144,000 Jews, 12,000 from each tribe, are given the seal of God in their foreheads. In chapter 11, the two witnesses appear about whom Zechariah spoke (Zechariah 4:1-14) who are killed in the streets of Jerusalem (Revelation 11:8) and are resurrected and taken up to heaven. In chapter 12, Israel is the subject of great persecution at the hand of the antichrist. In chapter 14, attention is once again given to the 144,000 sealed Jews.

In chapter 19, the scene switches again, this time back to heaven. Verse 1 says, *And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven....* Verse 7 puts the church in heaven as a single, whole, completed unit as it says, *Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready*. The church has now progressed from being the bride of Christ to being the wife of Christ and since the marriage ceremony has already been accomplished, preparations are made for the marriage supper to take place (Revelation 19:9). All members of the body of Christ are therefore in heaven before Christ leaves heaven to fulfill the Second Coming to earth and engage the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 19:11-21). This eliminates the possibility of a post-tribulation rapture.

While martyrs of the faith are mentioned in 6:9-11, there is no use of any language that would relate them to the church. In fact, in chapter 7 when another reference is made to these martyrs, John is uncertain about their identity and inquires from one of the elders in heaven. The elder describes them as residents of the great tribulation who died because they had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. He did not, however, in any way describe them as part of the church. Believers are called saints regardless of the dispensation in which they live. The word saints is used 36 times in the Old Testament in reference to Jewish believers. For

example, Psalms 148:14 – *He also exalteth the horn of his people, the praise of all his saints; even of the children of Israel, a people near unto him. Praise ye the LORD.* The fact that martyrs of the faith in the tribulation period are identified as saints does not automatically connect them with the church. It more likely connects them with believing Jews and Gentiles who turn to Christ during the tribulation period because there is no language to suggest they represent the church and there is absolutely no other references to the church on earth between Revelation 4:1 and 20:1. The church is in heaven in chapter 5 and the church is in heaven in chapter 19. The conclusion is that the church is removed from the earth before the first seal of the tribulation book is opened and remains there until Jesus Christ returns to the earth at the end of the tribulation period.

Conclusion

The church has been given a promise to be delivered from the specific event of wrath that will come at some future time on the earth and will last for a limited period of time. The church therefore cannot be identified in any of the text which describes this event of wrath, or tribulation period.

The tribulation period has two specific purposes neither of which apply to the church. One is for Israel. The seventieth week of Daniel was given to Israel for her to endure, to be punished (Zechariah 1:8) and purged (Isaiah 13:9) and purified in preparing her for the Messiah (Zechariah 12:9-10). The other is for gentiles who have rejected Christ. It will be a time of testing (Revelation 3:10) in which they will have to choose between the mark of the beast (13:16) by which they seal their eternal condemnation (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12) and the faith of Jesus Christ (Revelation 7:14) by which they face the real possibility of martyrdom at the hand of the antichrist (Revelation 6:9).

The church has been given a unique promise which has not been given to any other group of saints. The church has been promised a deliverance from this event of wrath (1 Thessalonians 1:10). She will be kept out of it altogether (Revelation 3:10). Some time before this event of wrath begins, the Lord Jesus Christ will come in the clouds bringing with Him the souls of those who have slept in him as part of the church. The trumpet will sound, the dead bodies of those who sleep in Christ will be raised, we church members who remain and are still alive on earth will be caught up together with them in the clouds, and the whole church will go to heaven together to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and be married to the Lamb of God. It is only after the church is gone and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit is removed that the antichrist will be revealed, the seals of the book will be opened and the tribulation period will begin.

The testimony of Scripture is clear. The rapture happens before the tribulation period begins. This means that there is nothing for present day Christians to look for as signs that the rapture is coming. We are to live every day of our lives with the expectancy of the rapture occurring at any moment. This life of expectancy will be the subject of next month's article.

Living In Expectancy

Noah Webster said that an expectation is “the act of looking forward to a future event with at least some reason to believe the event will happen....Expectation,” he said, “is founded on some reasons which render the event probable.” The future event for which Christians live in expectancy is the rapture of the church. The reason we believe this event will happen is that God Himself said His Son would *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: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up (raptured) together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Since our faith convinces us that God keeps His promises, we who trust the Word of God live in constant expectation of the rapture taking place.

The question that many raise about this subject is whether or not our expectation of the rapture is precluded by the necessity of other events taking place first. In other words, is the rapture truly imminent, or are there other things about which the Bible speaks in prophecy that must happen before the rapture, thus diminishing our expectancy of the rapture and redirecting our anticipation to other things? Those who believe that the rapture takes place some time during the tribulation period or after it is concluded, obviously do not expect the rapture to happen at any moment. They may be waiting for it to occur, but they first anticipate the revealing of the man of sin, the opening of the seal judgments, and perhaps any number of other “signs” that the time for the rapture is drawing near. To illustrate their point of view, they would say that in the month of October, we are waiting for Christmas, but we anticipate Thanksgiving to take place first.

On the other hand, those who believe the rapture will occur before the tribulation period begins, live in expectancy of the rapture happening at any moment. In this point of view, there are no signs in biblical prophecy to indicate the nearness of the rapture, nor are there any prophetic indications that anything will happen chronologically before the rapture. The pre-tribulation rapture position says that the rapture is imminent. That is, it can happen at any moment and we therefore live each moment of every day in expectancy of the sound of the trumpet.

So which of these two views is correct? Can we support the imminent rapture of the church from Scripture?

Was the Rapture Imminent in the First Century?

One objection to the teaching of imminence is the apparent obstruction to imminence in the first century. In John 21:18-19, Jesus told Peter that he would live to be an old man and die a violent death. The contention is that since Jesus predicted this, it had to occur just as He said it would, and so it was not possible for the rapture to take place until after Peter’s prophesied death. In fact, more than 40 years later Peter referred to this prediction and said that he still anticipated its fulfillment (2 Peter 1:14) Therefore, Peter was not looking for the rapture of the church but his own impending death.

This is an interesting problem to imminence of the rapture in the first century, but does not prevent the Scripture from promoting a genuine expectancy of the rapture in the heart of believers today. From hindsight we understand that the New Testament was not written just for the benefit of first century Christians, but was prepared in such a way as to be relevant to every generation throughout the church age. In fact, Peter himself did nothing to suppress an expectancy of the coming of Christ in spite of the necessity of his own physical death occurring. In 2 Peter chapter three, Peter referred to those who objected to such expectancy. *Knowing this first, he said, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming?* (2 Peter 3:3-4). He could easily have responded that of course Jesus had not yet come or would not come until he had died according to Jesus' prediction. However, he did not answer in this way at all. He placed the scoffers in a future tense (*shall come*) and responded to their objection by saying that the delay in the fulfillment of the promise of Christ's coming was due to the longsuffering of God who is not willing that any should perish, but is desirous that all should come to repentance (verses 9 and 15). He then encourages believers to live holy lives because of their anticipation of the day of the Lord (verses 10-14). It is here that the pre-tribulationist takes a similar point of view as the non pre-tribulationist, only in reverse. We do indeed look for the coming of the day of the Lord, but we live in expectancy of the rapture occurring before the day of the Lord will begin. This fits perfectly with Paul's discussion in 1 Thessalonians chapters 4 and 5. We live in expectancy of the rapture, but watch for the day of the Lord which is to follow. So Peter's response to those who would object to believers living in expectancy of the coming of the Lord was to encourage that expectancy to continue.

Paul, as a contemporary of Peter in the first century, clearly indicated his own expectation of the rapture. In the 1 Thessalonian passage where he described the rapture in detail, he said, *Then we which are live and remain shall be caught up* (1 Thessalonians 4:17). He did not say "you which will be alive and remain;" he said, "we which are alive and remain," clearly including himself and indicating his personal hope and expectation of still being on earth when the rapture would occur.

Waiting, Watching, And Looking

Turning to the intent of Scripture as we may apply it to our own experience today, God used three words to tell us we ought to live in expectancy of the coming of Jesus Christ for the church – wait, watch, and look.

Waiting

There are two things for which the church is waiting. First, we are waiting for the Son of God to come from heaven.

1 Thessalonians 1:10

And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

2 Thessalonians 3:5

And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:7

So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we are waiting for the redemption of our body, which is the transformation of the mortal into immortality and the corrupt into incorruption as described in 1 Corinthians 15:52-54.

Romans 8:19

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

Romans 8:23

And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

We wait for both of these things which together comprise *the hope of righteousness by faith* for which we wait through the Spirit (Galatians 5:5). We wait for these two things because they occur at the same time. Jesus will come down from heaven to the clouds in the earth's sky, the trumpet will sound, the dead in Christ will rise first and then we which are alive and remain will be caught up together with them, transformed into incorruptible and immortal bodies to meet the Lord in the air. This indeed is the hope of the righteousness we have received by faith in Jesus Christ and with patience we do wait for it (Romans 8:25).

Watching

While the church waits for the rapture, it is to watch for the day of the Lord. In 1 Thessalonians 5:2, Paul explained that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. But this will only be for those who are unprepared with the hope of righteousness by faith. He said in verse 4 that the brethren are not in darkness, so the day of the Lord will not overtake them as a thief would. This is because we know it is coming and are able to watch for it.

1 Thessalonians 5:6

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

1 Thessalonians 5:8

But let us, who are of the day, be sober (or watchful), putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation (or deliverance).

The last phrase in verse 8 is key to the idea of watchfulness for the believer in relationship to the day of the Lord. The word salvation in this context is not used in reference to the regeneration we have experienced because of our faith in Jesus Christ and God's forgiveness of our sins by His mercy and grace. Rather, it is referring to the deliverance of the church in the rapture which rescues us from *the* wrath to come. Consider a similar usage of the word salvation in Romans 13:11 – *And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.* If the word salvation in Romans 13:11 is referring to basic regeneration, then regeneration would occur some time after faith is exercised. This simply cannot be. Ephesians 2:8-9 and other scriptures make it clear that regenerative salvation is a present possession and not just a future hope. Therefore, the word salvation in Romans 13:11 is referring to some other kind of deliverance that is future to our regeneration, yet getting nearer every day. The reasonable understanding of this is the

deliverance of the church from **the** wrath to come. In the same sense, the word salvation is used in 1 Thessalonians 5:8. Hence, the believer's watchfulness for the day of the Lord involves his hope for and anticipation of the deliverance of the church from the day of the Lord by means of the rapture of the church. Paul then explains that the validity of our hope of deliverance from the day of the Lord is rooted in our regenerative salvation which we have in Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10).

Looking

There are also some things for which the church is looking as we wait for the rapture and watch for the day of the Lord. We look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). We look for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life (Jude 1:21). And, we look for the cataclysmic events of the day of the Lord which will ultimately bring a renewal to the heavens and the earth (2 Peter 3:12-14).

The root word behind the word look is translated in Acts 12:11 as the word expectation. This gives a good sense of what the word look means. In that context, James had been executed by Herod, Peter was in prison, and the local church was in the house of John Mark conducting a prayer meeting. All the Jews in Jerusalem expected Herod to do to Peter the same thing he had done to James. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Peter was about to be executed. They lived in full expectation of Herod executing Peter.

This is the sense of the word as it is translated "look" in the references noted above. The church lives in expectation of the blessed hope and glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). We also live in expectation of the application of divine mercy in redeeming our bodies and delivering us from this contaminated flesh (Jude 1:21). And, we live in expectation of the day of the Lord; not as though we have any thoughts of actually going into it or going through it, but we know it is coming. We know it will be a time of awful judgment and wrath. We know that others will be going through it and suffer in it. And we therefore must live the kind of lives that both reflect our expectations and convince others of the hope they can have if they join us in the faith of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:11-14).

The Lord Is At Hand

In Philippians 4:5, Paul said, *The Lord is at hand*. "At hand" is translated from a word that means "to be near." Was Paul in this statement referring to the comforting presence of Christ saying that He is near to us by means of His indwelling Spirit, or was he referring to the nearness of the coming of Christ for His church saying that it was imminent? Both applications may be equally valid to the statement. Certainly Christ's abiding presence makes him as near to us as He could possibly be, dwelling in our very bodies, making them His temple on earth. But an examination of the use of this word in other scriptural contexts suggests that the nearness indicated is not one of an abiding presence, but rather, describes something that is close but not yet present. In Matthew 26:18, Jesus said that His time was at hand, meaning that it was about to occur but had not yet occurred. In Luke 19:11, Jesus was nigh to Jerusalem, but was not actually in Jerusalem. In John 11:18, the town of Bethany is described as being nigh unto Jerusalem, yet fifteen furlongs away. In John 19:20, Jesus was crucified nigh to the city, that is, at a place close to the city but not in it. In Acts 1:12, Mount Olivet is described as being near Jerusalem but a Sabbath day's journey from the city. There is an exception to this pattern found in Romans 10:8 where it says that *the word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart...* But this is an exception to the usage of this word in Scripture where it is used more commonly in the previous sense. This provides considerable support for interpreting

Philippians 4:5 as saying that the Lord is close at hand but has not actually come yet, so we live in expectancy of His soon return. And, in light of the other pieces we have already assembled to the rapture puzzle, this interpretation certainly fits the picture.

Conclusion

Consider the pieces we have assembled to the puzzle of the rapture's timing.

1. There are some distinctions between the Rapture and the Second Coming. The rapture is described in terms of joy and blessing while the Second Coming is connected to judgment.
2. The falling away in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is identified with the departure of the church. This departure which is accompanied by the removal of the restraining work of the Holy Spirit are prerequisites for the revealing of the man of sin and the beginning of the tribulation period.
3. The church has been given a promise to be delivered from **the** specific period of wrath to come on the earth which is known as the seventieth week of Daniel, or the tribulation period.
4. The church is absent from the earth during the tribulation period as noted in Revelation chapters 4 to 19.
5. The church is instructed to wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the redemption of the bodies of believers. These are the only things we wait for, though we expect other things to happen after the rapture occurs.

While Peter, in the first century, was certain to live to be old and to die a violent death, others in the first century did live in expectancy of the rapture. Besides, Peter has been physically dead for a very long time. Even if the prophecy of Peter's death precluded the rapture from actually being imminent for first century Christians, this in no way diminishes the expectancy of the rapture encouraged by the New Testament. In fact, in bringing up the objection of the latter day scoffers to the promise of His coming, Peter acknowledged the expectancy that exists for believers. Paul also acknowledged several times that physical death was a real possibility for him to experience (Philippians 1:20-24; 2 Corinthians 1:8; 2 Timothy 4:6-8). Yet he held within him a hope that he might still be alive on earth at the time of the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:17). He further acknowledged that the waiting of the Thessalonians for Jesus to come from heaven was in connection with our hope of deliverance from **the** wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

All of these things taken together suggest that for the church in the 21st century, the rapture is imminent – that is, it can happen at any moment without anything else having to occur first. This indeed is the hope of the righteousness which we have by faith in Jesus Christ. It is the unique promise given to the church. We are privileged to possess a promise unlike any other.

We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

What a moment that is going to be! 📖

Is Jesus Coming Soon?

We have all seen the cartoon where a long haired old man dressed in prophets garb is carrying a sign which reads, "The end is near." While this is intended to contain an element of humor, we who live in anticipation of the rapture and the day of the Lord realize that there is more truth than humor in such a statement.

But how near is the coming of Jesus Christ? As we look around us and see the intensifying expression of mankind's depravity, many of us are heard saying that the Lord has to be coming soon. Certainly, it cannot get much worse. Things are so bad that Jesus must be on the precipice of heaven, poised to blow the trumpet to call us all home to glory.

Can we be so certain that Jesus will come soon? I had a friend once whose grandfather was a pastor. He began his ministry in the early 1900's and preached even from the beginning that Jesus would definitely come in his lifetime. He preached that same message confidently for 50 years. But he has long since left this earth and gone to heaven and Jesus did not come in his lifetime. Now here we are in the early 21st century. In another hundred years will someone else be writing another article like this one while the church still waits for the rapture, or will Jesus really come soon? If we believe that the rapture really is imminent, then there are no signs or indications outlined by Scripture to help us anticipate the timing of this event. We are left with nothing else but to wait patiently for the sound of the trumpet.

What About The Signs Of The Times?

Typical of their Jewish nature (1 Corinthians 1:22), Jesus' disciples asked for signs which would indicate the timing of His coming. They said, *Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?* Jesus answered by giving several things they could look for including false Christs, wars and rumors of wars, and famines, pestilences and earthquakes in divers places. All these, He said, will be the beginning of sorrows. He then talked about persecution, false prophets, and the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet. After that will come great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. This will end with the sun and moon being darkened, the stars falling from heaven and the powers of the heaven being shaken. At the conclusion of all these things, Jesus said the sign of His coming will appear in heaven, all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matthew 24:3-31).

This would appear to give a considerable number of things to look for which would indicate the soon return of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus said, *when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.* But all these signs occur within the tribulation period and point to the second coming at the end of it. So, do these signs help us at all with regard to the timing of the rapture?

The Reverse Order of Events

The rapture and the Second coming cannot happen at the same time and one particular thing makes this abundantly clear. In the rapture, believers are taken from the earth to heaven and unbelievers are left behind on the earth. But in the second coming, unbelievers are gathered first and cast into judgment fire, and then the elect are gathered together on the earth.

Jesus said that the elect would be gathered together at the time of the second coming.

Matthew 24:30-31

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

But He also said there would be two gatherings at this same time, a gathering of the unsaved and a gathering of the saved; and the gathering of the unsaved, He said, will take place first. In the parable of the tares (Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43), Jesus explained that the children of the wicked one (tares) and the children of the kingdom (good seed) grow up together in the field (which is the world). But in the time of harvest (which is the end of the world – trumpet compare Matthew 24:3) reapers (angels) will be sent forth first to gather out of the kingdom all things that offend and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire. Only after the tares are gathered do the reapers collect the wheat into the barn; or as Jesus explained, *Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.* The gathering of the elect in this case is not a removal from the earth but a gathering together on the earth to dwell together in the kingdom of the Messiah. And, the gathering of the elect takes place after all the unsaved and workers of iniquity are removed.

Now clearly, the rapture involves something entirely different from this. First, the whole idea of the rapture is a removal from the earth. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, the rapture trumpet sounds and the dead in Christ rise first, followed by believers who remain alive at the time. The entire church, resurrected and raptured together, meets the Lord in the air so that as one body it can be with Christ for ever. A similar description is given in John 14:2-3. Jesus said that there are many mansions in His Father's house, which is an obvious reference to heaven. He said He was going to go to that house and prepare a place for each of His followers. Then He said, *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.* The implication of these words has to be that the place Jesus was going to prepare for his followers was in heaven. Post-tribulationists insist that in the rapture believers rise to meet the Lord in the air and then immediately escort Him back to the earth. But the earth is not the Father's house. And why would Jesus say He was going to prepare a place for His followers in His Father's house if He did not intend to take them there? He clearly said He was going to come again and take His followers with Him to heaven. This He said to His apostles during the last supper, who were the men that were going to lay the foundation of the church. Thus, John 14:2-3 is an obvious reference to the rapture, showing that the church will leave the earth and go to heaven. This reinforces the teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 that the church meets the Lord in the air.

Secondly, the idea of rapturing the church from the earth is to remove it from the context of an ungodly world undergoing divine retribution and a chosen nation (Israel) undergoing a divine purging. If judgment is over and all the unsaved are removed from the earth, what is the

purpose of rapturing the church into the air so that it can accompany the King back to an empty earth? Jesus delivers us from **the** wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). The church is delivered before judgment and not after. This is clearly different from the gathering of the elect of Israel at the end of the tribulation period after judgment is concluded and the wicked are removed.

Signs and Thieves Don't Mix

Jesus explained to His disciples that signs of the times would be visible from the very beginning of the tribulation period. He said, *All these are the beginning of sorrows* Matthew 24:8. The *beginning of sorrows* is an expression that relates to the idea of the first birth pangs that come upon a woman when she is about to deliver a child. In fact, this same Greek word (Strong's number 5604) is used in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 where it talks about the beginning of the tribulation period: *For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail (5604) upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.* The wrathful events of the tribulation period follow a similar pattern as the birth pangs of a woman with child. The first one comes without notice, like a thief in the night. After the first one, the woman knows that more birth pangs are coming and that they will increase in intensity until the birth actually occurs. So it is in the tribulation period. The day of the Lord begins suddenly, like the first pain of child birth, coming upon the world as a thief in the night without notice. The beginning of sorrows is relatively light compared to what is to come. There will be a gradual increase in intensity throughout the tribulation period until the traumatic pain of Armageddon brings forth the Son of God to rule and reign on the earth at the very end.

The birth pangs of the tribulation period, including the very first ones, all serve as signs to those who are on earth indicating the soon coming of Christ. But if the beginning of sorrows cannot begin until after the departure of the church (see previous discussion on 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8), none of the signs occur while the church is present on earth. Therefore, there are no signs available to the church to indicate how near the rapture may be. As much as we would like to believe that it must happen soon, God has not given us any signs to know for sure. The only thing of which we are sure is the pregnancy of God's prophecies concerning future events. At some unexpected moment a trumpet is going to sound, the church will be raptured, and the birth pangs of the Messiah will begin.

Dr. Renald Showers states that ancient Judaism taught there would be seven years of trouble immediately prior to the coming of the Messiah. He quotes Raphael Patai as saying, "The idea became entrenched that the coming of the Messiah will be preceded by greatly increased suffering....This will last seven years. And then, unexpectedly, the Messiah will come." Even the Dead Sea Scrolls refer to the seven years of trouble before Messiah's coming as "the birth pangs of the Messiah." (Maranatha, Our Lord, Come!, page 21)

But the signs of the birth pangs are given to Israel and not to the church. They happen as a thief in the night coming upon an unsuspecting victim. Israel is told that the beginning of sorrows is a sign for them to prepare for a time of increasing trouble to come (Matthew 24). But the church is told that it will not be overtaken by the thief (2 Thessalonians 5:4). The word "overtake" does not have the sense of "surprise." Instead, it has the sense of "taking possession of, to seize upon, to lay hold of." It is used in John 8:3-4 in reference to the woman "taken" in adultery. In other words, not even the beginning of birth pangs which come upon the world as a thief in the night will lay hold of the church. This can only be because the church is delivered from the earth before they occur.

Of Course, We Do Not Know The Day Nor The Hour of Christ's Coming.

On the other side of this issue lies an entirely imminent rapture. Imminence implies that nothing must happen before the rapture can occur. There are no signs, no patterns to events, no movements in society, no indications of any kind that serve as harbingers to the sounding of the rapture trumpet. The doctrine of imminence does not say that nothing will happen before the rapture. There may be lots of things happen, like the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, before Jesus comes for His church. The doctrine of imminence says that none of these things happen as fulfillment of biblical prophecies and as precursors to the rapture.

Imminence goes even further than what Jesus told His disciples about not knowing the timing of his coming again. He said, *of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only* (Matthew 24:36). But of what day and hour was Jesus referring? This statement follows in the immediate context of Jesus' explanation concerning His second coming at the end of the tribulation period. It is significant that He says no one knows the day and the hour. It is also significant that He does not say no one knows the year and the approximate time. With all the signs of the tribulation period which precede the second coming, those who are on earth at that time and know God's Word will have some idea of the approximate time of Messiah's arrival. Even the Antichrist will know this and for this reason will gather the armies of the earth to Armageddon (Revelation 16:16; Joel 3:9-14). But no one will know the precise moment in which Christ will appear and engage the battle and take the victory.

Concerning the rapture, we know even less than the day and the hour. We do not know the month or the year or the century or anything else about its timing. The only thing we do know is that today our deliverance is nearer than it was yesterday (Romans 13:11). We are left to wait patiently for Jesus to come in the clouds and to catch us up into the air to meet Him. But we not only hope that it will happen soon, we are given the privilege to live in expectancy of its happening at any moment.

Jesus told John in Revelation 22:20, *Surely I come quickly*. The word "quickly" does not mean that He will come soon in a chronological sense, but that when He does come, it will happen very fast. Paul described how *in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump...we shall be changed* (1 Corinthians 15:52).

Of course, we want Him to come soon. We hope He will come soon. But even soon means later, not now. And any thoughts of a delay, even a brief one, are sufficient grounds for my flesh to think there is still time to do one more foolish thing before I face the Savior. The best motivation to godly living is the thought that we could be face to face with the King of Glory at any moment. So it is that John said, *And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming* (1 John 2:28). So it is that this same John closed the record of Scripture with the hope of the church, *Even so, come, Lord Jesus* (Revelation 22:20). If this prayer lives on our lips and we live each moment of our lives in expectancy of Christ's appearing to us in the clouds of the air, will we not walk more worthy of the vocation wherewith we have been called in Christ?

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

What Happens When This Mortal Body Puts On Immortality?

The church awaits the sounding of the trumpet! In that grand and glorious moment of the sounding of that heavenly instrument, an Archangel will shout, the dead in Christ will be raised, and we which are alive and remain will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). In the twinkling of an eye, we shall all be changed. Our mortal and corruptible bodies will put on immortality and incorruption (1 Corinthians 15:52-54). Glorified and completely transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, we will then be transported into the Father's house, where the Son of God has prepared a place for us (John 14:1-3). Those who have seen the Father's house and were able to record what they saw describe it as a marvelous place. They saw a sky blue throne and a shining red/bronze colored person sitting on the throne. The throne sits on a crystal floor that looks like a sea of glass. A rainbow of brilliant green hues rests over the throne. Seven lamp stands burn before it. Thunders and lightnings and voices proceed from it. And strange winged creatures surround it singing praises to the one who sits upon it (2 Corinthians 12:1-4; Isaiah 6:1ff; Revelation 4 and 5; Ezekiel 1:4-31). There we will be. Surely we will be stunned by the wonders we see. What will it be like to be there? And what will we do? What will life be like in our glorified bodies and what kind of experiences will we have in the chronology of eternity future?

Our First Sensations

The first thing we will notice is the Presence of the One sitting on the throne. His appearance will be brilliant and overwhelming (Ezekiel 1:27), and His voice will ring out with power (Ezekiel 1:24). As we look upon Him (Revelation 4:3) we will be greatly humiliated (Isaiah 6:5). Then the sound of the choir will fill heaven (Revelation 5:11-14). Ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands will sing with a loud voice and we will be amazed. We are given very little information about heaven, but everyone who had the privilege of seeing it and coming back to record his experiences were totally overwhelmed, like Isaiah who said "Woe is me!" and Ezekiel who fell on his face. Paul was speechless and found the things he saw to be indescribable (2 Corinthians 12:4) and so probably will we.

A Time For Evaluation

There are two judgment seats in heaven. One is the great white throne that will be used to judge the unsaved of all time. At this judgment seat, everyone will be found guilty and bad works will be judged as to how bad they are (Revelation 20:11; Matthew 23:14; Matthew 11:24; Luke 12:47-48). But the other judgment seat will be the one of interest to the church when it arrives in heaven. It is the judgement seat of Christ where bad works will be consumed by fire and rewards will be distributed according to the quality of the good works performed by believers while on earth (1 Corinthians 3:13-15). We will all take our turns before this judgment seat (2 Corinthians 5:10). Some will suffer loss, and some will stand in heaven without any additional reward. Others will receive rewards in varying quantities (1 Corinthians 3:14-15). Every member of the body of Christ will be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white (Revelation 19:8).

Adjusting To Our New Nature

As we grow accustomed to our new surroundings, we will begin to look around and recognize familiar faces. We will know each other with the same identity that we possessed on earth. Remember the appearances of Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:3-4). They had the same names and were obviously the same people even though they appeared in their glorified form. We will have a different relationship with each other though, neither marrying, nor being given in marriage, just like the angels whose home has always been in heaven (Matthew 22:30). But we will remain as thinking, responsible creatures with assigned responsibilities like judging angels and the world (1 Corinthians 6:2-3).

The Wedding

There is no more intimate relationship than that of husband and wife and this is the intimacy that the whole church will enjoy with Jesus Christ in eternity future. The church is the bride of Christ. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:2, *for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.* In Ephesians 5:31-33 he further describes this matrimonial relationship between Christ and the church.

Sometime prior to Christ's return to earth at the end of the Tribulation period, the bride will be made ready for the marriage ceremony.

Let us be glad and rejoice and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

Revelation 19:7-8

The New Jerusalem is prepared as the residence for the bride, the Lamb's wife (Revelation 21:9).

The church has a glorious future as the queen of Christ, sharing in his heritage (Romans 8:17), and reigning with Him (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 1:6). On the one hand, the church's marriage to Christ is figurative in that it will not involve a physical consummation. On the other hand, it is literal in that it will involve a spiritual and intimate union with the Son of God that will last for eternity.

What Will It Be Like To Live In A Glorified Body?

A. The Basis of Our Understanding

1 John 3:2 says, *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*

1 Corinthians 15:47-49 says, *The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.*

When Jesus arose from the dead, there was something very different about his physical

characteristics. For example, when Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, he still had the appearance of a human being, for Mary mistook Him for a gardener; but He refused to let Mary touch Him because He had not yet ascended to His father (John 20:11-17). Then when Jesus appeared some time later to a group of the disciples, they thought He was a spirit and He had to show them that he had flesh and bones (Luke 24:37).

The suggestion of 1 John 3:1-2 and 1 Corinthians 15:47-48 is that when the rapture happens and we are all changed in the twinkling of an eye, we will receive glorified bodies that are similar in nature to that of the glorified body of Jesus Christ. We know that some great change is in store for our physical nature as Romans 8:23 says we wait for the adoption which is the redemption of our bodies. We also have the promise of glorification recorded in Romans 8:29-30. And 1 Corinthians 15:52-54 describes the physical change that will take place in the rapture event. When that change takes place, what will our glorified bodies be like? By observing the characteristics of the glorified body of Jesus Christ, we will have some idea about the answer to that question.

Luke 20:35-36 says, *But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.*

Another subject in Scripture also gives us some hints as to what it will be like to be resurrected. While some well meaning people make up stories about human beings becoming angels when they go to heaven, there are no Scriptural statements that support such a hypothesis. Nevertheless, Jesus did say that when a human being goes to heaven, his physical nature will be different than it is now, and, in fact, will be very much like that of angels (Luke 20:34-36). By observing the nature of angels, we will also have some hints about our future characteristics.

B. The Physical Characteristics of Our Glorified Bodies

1. Visibility

Intrinsic to the Gospel of Jesus Christ are his appearances to various individuals and groups after his resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 which outlines the gospel is immediately followed by a list of those appearances. Matthew 28:17 clearly says the eleven disciples **saw** Jesus. Equally visible in their glorified form were Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-4). Appearing with Jesus, Peter, James, and John saw them and were amazed by their appearance leading Peter to suggest constructing a tabernacle for each one.

In relationship to His visibility, though, Jesus possessed a very interesting characteristic. He could disappear. For example, when He showed Himself to the two disciples who were walking on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31) the two men did not recognize Jesus for most of their visit. When He finally opened their eyes so that they would know who He was, the Bible says He *vanished out of their sight*.

Similarly, the celestial nature of angelic creatures makes it possible for them to be visible or invisible to the human eye. When Elisha's servant feared the enemy army that had surrounded them, Elisha prayed and God opened the servant's eyes so that he could see the wonder of a mountain full of angelic soldiers with their horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17).

Since we will be like Christ (1 John 3:2) and have a nature similar to angels (Matthew 22:30), we can expect to have the ability to appear and disappear before men who still live on earth.

In addition, our appearance will be one of brightness and glory. Remember how the glory of God was absorbed by Moses' flesh when he visited with God on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35)? Angels also at times appeared to men with great brilliance (Daniel 10:5-6). The obvious reason for this is because they dwell so closely to the glory of God all the time. When we dwell in God's presence, we will undoubtedly absorb His glory as well and have the privilege of bearing His glory wherever we go. The mystery of this particular matter is how some angels were able to appear to men and camouflage the glory of God (Judges 13:16; Hebrews 13:2).

2. Tangibleness

Not only was Jesus visible to His disciples after the resurrection, but they were also able to touch Him. Of course, Mary Magdalene, who was the first person to see the risen Christ was not allowed to touch Him, as Jesus explained that He had not yet ascended to His Father (John 20:17). But shortly after this, Jesus appeared to the other women on their way to talk to the disciples and they held Him by His feet (Matthew 28:9). The implication of this is that between His appearance to Mary at the tomb and to the women on the road Jesus ascended to the Father, presented Himself there and returned to earth. (Travel across the universe for the Son of God is very quick, which suggests another unique characteristic we may obtain in our glorification. Travel across the universe for angels, though, is not necessarily instantaneous. It was possible for one angel to be delayed in making the trip – Daniel 10:12-13.)

When the disciples first saw Jesus, they were frightened by His appearance and supposed that He was not tangible, but a spirit or an apparition (Luke 24:37). Had we been there, we may have had the same reaction, because the door to the room where the disciples were assembled was shut and Jesus stood in the midst of them without opening the door (John 20:19). Jesus had to explain to them that he was very real and tangible, possessing flesh and bones (verse 39). This statement is very interesting, possibly suggesting that Jesus' glorified body, though of tangible substance, did not include blood flowing through veins. In fact, the Bible tells us that the nature of celestial bodies is very different from the nature of terrestrial bodies (1 Corinthians 15:40). It was in this same course of events that Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection. The other disciples informed Thomas that they had seen the risen Savior, but Thomas declared that he would not believe until he had physically touched the wounds in Jesus' hands and feet. Jesus gladly accommodated Thomas (John 20:27). The mystery in this matter is how a physical body of flesh and bones can pass through a solid wood door.

With this physical body of flesh and bones, Jesus was able to eat earthly food. Luke 24:42-43 says that He ate a piece of a broiled fish and an honeycomb. There is no indication that it was necessary for Him to eat to sustain His glorified body, but it was certainly possible for Him to eat. At the last supper, Jesus told His disciples that they would eat and drink at His table in His kingdom (Luke 22:30). Obviously, at that point, the disciples will be in their glorified bodies. Also, fruit trees will be available in the New Jerusalem and the tree of life will be available for our consumption in eternity future (Revelation 2:7; 22:2,14). It may be of interest regarding this subject that the Bible tells us angels also have food for their consumption (Psalm 78:25).

3. Communication Skills

After His resurrection, Jesus talked with His disciples (John 20:26-29). He also had a

conversation with Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:3). Our ability to communicate will be intact and we can only wonder how it will be enhanced in our glorified form.

C. Our Future Responsibilities In Our Glorified Bodies

1. Spiritual Responsibilities

As members of the body of Christ, we are already royal priests (1 Peter 2:5). This role will continue and be enhanced in eternity future (Revelation 1:6; 20:6).

2. Political Responsibilities

Not only will we be priests, but we will also be kings, sitting with Christ in His throne and reigning with Him (Revelation 1:6; 3:21; 20:6). Suffering in this present environment is part of our preparation for this future responsibility (2 Timothy 2:12).

3. Judicial Responsibilities

Christians in this present age are admonished to refrain from taking their personal, civil disputes before unbelieving judges (1 Corinthians 6:1-8). The reason for this is as follows. In eternity future we will judge angels. Apparently, angels have personal disputes just as we do. It will be our responsibility in the future to sit in judgment of these things. We will also serve as judges in the world. If we are capable of this as members of the body of Christ, then we have the ability to make reasonable judgments between ourselves now.

4. Praise Participation

We have the wonderful prospect of joining in chorus with heavenly creature to sing the praises of God (Revelation 5:11-14). We can only try to imagine what congregational singing will be like in heaven, but we will have to wait until we are there to fully appreciate how grand that will be.

Conclusion

We have a lot to look forward to. In our glorified bodies there will be no death, no sorrow, no crying, no pain, no curse and no night (Revelation 21:4; 22:3,5). This is our hope. We wait for the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23). We might be groaning now while we wait, but one of these days, when the trumpet sounds, our groaning will all be over. We will be given a new, immortal, incorruptible body to go along with the new person we have already become by faith in Jesus Christ. It will only be a little while. Life on earth is but a vapor. It appears for a little while and then vanishes away (James 4:14). But in eternity future there is no end, no dimming of our light, no tarnishing of our life – only fulness of joy and pleasures for evermore (Psalm 16:11)!

There will be much to do. Eternity future will be filled with activity and purpose, all to the glory of God. It will be so very different from anything we can possibly experience now, so that it is extremely difficult to describe what it will be like in human terms. One thing we know for

sure, though. It will be so much better.

Listen for the trumpet; it won't be long – *for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed* (Romans 13:11)!

Christ Is Coming
by William Macomber

In the glow of early morning,
In the solemn hush of night,
Down from heaven's open portals
Steals a messenger of light,
Whispering sweetly to my spirit,
While the hosts of heaven sing:
This, the wondrous thrilling story –
Christ is coming, Christ my King.

Oft me-thinks I hear His footsteps
Sealing down the paths of time;
and th future, dark with shadows,
Brightens with this hope sublime.
Sound the soul inspiriting anthem;
angel hosts, your harps attune;
Earth's long night is almost over –
Christ is coming, coming soon.

Long we've waited, blest Redeemer,
Waited for the first bright ray
Of the morn when sin and sorrow
At Thy presence flee away.
But our vigil's nearly over;
Hope of heaven, oh, price-less boon!
In the east the low appearing –
Christ is coming, coming soon.

Why Is The Rapture Such An Important Issue?

Doctrine has been pushed back into a corner in the modern church. It seems as though many Christians just do not care about the particulars of what the Bible teaches on most doctrinal issues and particularly about the chronology of future events. The experience of worship is the big item on the ecclesiastical table right now and the subjects of ever shorter sermons consist primarily of social issues, relationship matters, and generalized feel-good topics. The attitude toward things like the rapture and the tribulation period and the second coming is one of indifference. "Does it really matter whether one comes before the other, or if they happen at all? There are so many different interpretations of biblical issues like these and even if I could sort them out, how could it make me a nicer person?"

God, however, has a great interest in the future. Almost from the very beginning of time, He began to open the door to the future for mankind. In Genesis 3:15, He said to the devil, *And I will (in the future) put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.* Noah was told what would happen 120 years into the future (Genesis 6:3). Abraham was told of many future generations that would descend from him (Genesis 12:1-3). And Joseph interpreted dreams about the future (Genesis 37 through 40).

Then came the prophets and the door to the future opened wider. There were prophesies about the Messiah (Daniel 9:25-26), the kingdom (Isaiah 9:7), judgment (Isaiah 11:4), and new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17). Details were added and time tables were suggested – some specific, some vague (e.g. Daniel chapters 7 through 12).

The grand finale of prophecy came in the book of Revelation. John was told about *things which shall be hereafter* referring to events that would come after the church age expired (Revelation 1:19; 4:1). These events project us more than 1007 years beyond the rapture of the church and give us a glimpse of eternity in the future (Revelation 20 through 22).

A full one fourth of the Bible consists of prophetic material. Some has been fulfilled; much is yet to come. If God talked so much about the future, it sure seems like it should be a subject of great interest to us. What was God's purpose in letting us know something about things to come? How does the study of prophecy affect our daily Christian walk? And is the rapture in particular an important doctrinal issue?

God wants us to live with an attitude of anticipation.

1. He blesses those who consider prophetic scriptures.

Revelation 1:3

Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.

Revelation 22:7

...blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.

Daniel 12:12

Blessed is he that waiteth...

2. The New Testament is full of anticipatory statements.

Acts 1:11

...this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.

Romans 8:23

And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

1 Corinthians 1:7

So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ:

2 Corinthians 5:2

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven:

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:20-21

For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body...

Colossians 1:5

For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel;

1 Thessalonians 1:10

And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

1 Timothy 6:19

Lay up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

2 Timothy 1:12

For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.

2 Timothy 4:1

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick

and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom;

2 Timothy 4:8

Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

Titus 2:13

Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ,

Hebrews 9:28

So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

1 Peter 5:4

And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

2 Peter 3:12-14

Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless.

This is not an isolated concept. Most of the New Testament books written to the church contain anticipatory statements about things that are going to happen in the future. God certainly wants us to live with an attitude of anticipation of things to come. And in this attitude of anticipation, God has a broader purpose also.

**God gave prophecy to the church as a means of motivation
unto godly living and active witness.**

The book of Revelation is full of information about such horrible things as the judgments and catastrophes brought about by God's wrath, the doom of the devil and the antichrist, and the condemnation of the unsaved in the eternal lake of fire. But the book of Revelation was not written for the lost to read. It was written for saved people.

Revelation 1:1

*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, **to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass**....*

Revelation 22:6

*And he said unto me, **These sayings are faithful and true**: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel **to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done**.*

Revelation 22:16

*I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things **in the churches**.*

God did not give prophetic information like the book of Revelation to unbelievers because it would mean nothing to them anyway. They do not accept the truthfulness of God's words and therefore they would refuse to heed any warnings issued by them. Instead, God gave prophetic information to believers because they can be motivated by the truth; and the truth of what is certain to come in the future provides considerable motivation for believers both to godly living and to faithful witnessing.

1. Knowing the future motivates believers to godly living.

Peter asked the poignant question in this regard. Since we know these things are coming, he said, *what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?* (2 Peter 3:11). The word "manner" suggests a certain characterization that should be part of our testimony. For example, people from one nation are distinguished from people of all other nations by particular characteristics such as physical appearance, language, clothing, cultural habits, etc. Peter suggests that Christians ought to be distinguished from everyone else by certain characteristics such as holy conversation, godliness, being found in peace, without spot, and blameless (cf. verse 14). He also explains that a Christian is motivated to be this manner or kind of person by his knowledge of what is to come.

Paul wrote similar things in the book of Philippians. He said that a Christian's present manner of life ought to conform to or match that which we anticipate in Christ. *For our conversation*, he said, *is in heaven* (Philippians 3:20).

Heaven is a place where we are going to be some day. In heaven there are no tears, no death, no sorrow, no crying, no pain (Revelation 21:4). In heaven there are no fearful, unbelieving or abominable people. There are no murderers, no whoremongers, no sorcerers, no idolaters, no liars (Revelation 21:8). Heaven is a perfect place, free of sin or anything else that is wrong or sad or upsetting. Since that is where we will be, it is reasonable for us to prepare for that environment now by our manner of living on earth. The Bible teaches us that knowing what is coming should have a definite effect upon our present approach to life. In fact, the grace of God that brought the hope of salvation to our hearts also teaches us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world while we look for the blessed hope to come (Titus 2:11-13).

2. Knowing the future motivates believers to an active witness.

Peter also referred to the influence of the believer's conversation upon unsaved people in light of what is coming for them.

1 Peter 2:12

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

The "day of visitation" is obviously a day in which unsaved people will be required to give some kind of response to God. Believers ought to be motivated by knowing that the unsaved face eternal condemnation in the day of visitation. We ought to be motivated to deliver as many as possible from this day by winning their souls to Christ. We ought to be motivated at the very least to live such Christlike lives before unsaved people that when they find themselves in the

day of visitation, our conduct, as a reference point, gives them no alternative but to glorify God in admitting that He is right and they were wrong after all.

Why is the rapture, in particular, an important issue?

The disciples of Jesus were a curious lot, anxious to know the timing of future events. At one point they asked, *When shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?* (Matthew 24:3). Another time, just before Christ's ascension, they asked, *Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?* (Acts 1:6).

We present day disciples are not much different. Those of us who believe in the rapture and other biblical prophesies of things to come could just as easily be seen gazing up into heaven as the disciples of Acts 1:11, wondering breathlessly when Jesus will return. And so it is that God would have us live our lives with a daily expectancy of the sounding of the trumpet and Christ's appearance in the clouds even as we occupy until He comes (Luke 19:13).

God has the times and seasons in His own power (Acts 1:7). He determined them before creation and set their boundaries (Acts 17:26). The secret things belong to God and only the revealed things belong to us (Deuteronomy 29:29). Therefore, God says it is not for us to know the timing of future events (Acts 1:7). God will surely bring them to pass in the fulness of times just as He has promised (Ephesians 1:10), but the timing of what is to come remains a complete mystery to all of us.

While much of what is to come is vague enough to leave room for considerable speculation, there is sufficient specificity about the future in Scripture that such events will be easily recognized once they begin to unfold. It is of particular note, however, that Scripture nowhere prepares the church to watch for signs of the beginning of these events, nowhere prepares it for enduring the progression of such events. In fact, it does just the opposite. The church is told that it is delivered from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). God said He would keep us from the hour of temptation which shall come upon the whole world (Revelation 3:10). He gives a thorough description of tribulation upon the earth without one mention of the church (Revelation 4:1 through 18:24). The early church was shaken at the thought of being in the tribulation period (2 Thessalonians 2) which was contrary to what they had been taught. And the church is prepared for the momentary deliverance from our present human form by the transformation that will take place in the rapture:

1. We groan with creation, but wait for the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).
2. We groan with earnest desire to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven
(2 Corinthians 5:2).
3. We hope in the mystery that in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, this corruption shall put on incorruption (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).
4. Our wait is for the Son of God to come for us in the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Acts 1:11; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philipians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Timothy 4:8; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:28).

Many people want a specific verse of Scripture that says the rapture is imminent and happens before the tribulation period begins in order to be convinced that these things are so. For some reason, however, God has presented certain subjects in the Bible with vague descriptions rather than specific ones. For example, the word "trinity" never appears in

Scripture and some are able to debate the existence of the tri-unity of one God in three persons using Scripture to support their position. Yet any Bible student who interprets Scripture literally believes in the trinity. Some also question the existence of a rapture in biblical eschatology because the English word rapture never appears in Scripture. And so goes the argument against an imminent pre-tribulation rapture. It is not specifically stated, and therefore many cannot accept it as true. But simply because the word imminent is not used in the Bible and the concept is not clearly delineated in the text does not mean the concept cannot be substantiated by assembling appropriate pieces of biblical prophecy. The discussions in the previous chapters on the various pieces to the pre-tribulation rapture puzzle have, in fact, provided such substantiation.

In addition, the idea that we can be raptured from the earth at any moment without any event or sign to prepare us ahead of time for the occurrence is from a logical point of view the most sanctifying influence a Christian could have in his life. It is difficult enough to stay focused in our faith in this world filled with the groaning of carnality and the influence of contrary spirits. If we can sit back and wait for the signs to begin, telling us to start watching for the appearance of Christ some years hence, there would be much less motivation for the average Christian to walk in the Spirit consistently on a daily basis. With the prospect that at any moment, we could be changed in a moment and be face to face with the King of our lives, I for one am much more determined to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. The imminent rapture is the believer's goad, stopping us from turning aside to worldly affairs, and keeping us on the path of sanctification. It is therefore one of the most important biblical subjects we can talk about and believe. It is discussed far too much in the Bible to be shelved as non-essential. It is far too necessary to the edification of believers for us to think that God would plan the future otherwise. It fits far too well into the chronology of biblical prophecy for us to accept any other interpretation.

Shhhhhh! Listen! Do you hear the trumpet?

