

THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

Over the years of conducting funerals, I've heard people say a number of things about the deceased. Some of the more memorable: "I just know he's up there fishing with Saint Peter on the lake with a six pack hanging over the side of the boat." "God must have needed another angel in heaven." "God must have had work for him to do in heaven." Probably the most common thing I hear is, "I know she's in a better place."

We all understand that folks are trying to find something encouraging and comforting to say to those who are grieving and to assuage their own grief. We want to be gracious and kind in those settings. But our hearts desire is to help people come to know Jesus and know for certain what awaits them beyond the grave.

Can we really know anything about what lies beyond the grave with certainty? As you can imagine, this is one of those ageless questions that has been pondered and debated since the beginning of human history. Each of the major religions of the world have their own unique answer to what happens to a person when they die. Even within Christianity itself there are various beliefs about what lies beyond the grave for the Christian.

Our answer to this question is deeply affected by what we have studied in the previous nine lessons in this series on Biblical prophecy. We have been studying the unique relationship that God has with the nation of Israel. God made four unconditional covenants with Israel that have not been completely fulfilled. The Bible teaches that in the future, through Jesus the Messiah, God will fulfill all His covenant promises to the nation of Israel. There is a future for Israel that is different and distinct from the future of the Church. This is not some dry, theological detail; it is important to understand. It explains why your future beyond the grave will be different than the afterlife experience of an Old Testament saint. You and I are church age saints.

When I speak of the Church, I am referring to all Jews and Gentiles who through faith in Jesus Christ have been born again and indwelt with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:1-22). You'll remember that God made a New Covenant with Israel (Jeremiah 31:31-34) in which He promised to forgive their sin and indwell them with His Holy Spirit. We discovered the wonderful news that God extended these two spiritual blessings to Gentiles who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Accordingly, we discovered that the New Covenant was inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost (33 A.D. ?), when the Holy Spirit first began indwelling believers (Acts 2). That was the day that the Church was born. All those of us who are trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation are partakers of the New Covenant and are church age saints.

Some of us are from a Catholic background and when you hear me speak of saints you may be thinking about individuals who have been canonized by the Church. But we discover that in the New Testament, believers like you and me are called saints (Colossians 1:2). The term *saint* means *holy one* or *one set apart*. You have been set apart to God and have been made holy through the blood of Jesus Christ. You are a church age saint.

As I mentioned before, the things that happen to a church saint when he or she dies are different than the things that happened and will happen to an Old Testament saint when they died. What I am teaching you this morning happens only to church age saints.

And what will happen to us is based on a promise that our Lord Jesus made to His disciples on the night that He was betrayed.

THE PROMISE OF THE RAPTURE

(John 14:1-3)

The night Jesus was betrayed by Judas was also the night that Jesus prepared His disciples for His impending death and eventual ascension to heaven. As you can imagine, Peter, John and the other disciples were dismayed to be separated from Jesus. Recorded in John 14:1-3 is Jesus' promise to come for them.

John 14:1-3 (ESV)

¹ "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Clearly, Jesus reveals that, after His crucifixion, burial and resurrection, He was returning to His Father's abode to prepare a place for His disciples. This refers to the third heaven which is the abode of God the Father.

In verse 3, Jesus makes clear that if He goes away to prepare a place for His disciples in His Father's house, He will come again to the earth to gather His disciples to Himself to bring them to His Father's house so that they will be with Him where He is. Jesus was using a picture that His disciples understood very well.

When a Jewish man betrothed himself to a Jewish woman, their betrothal usually lasted about a year. During the betrothal year, the man was busy building a home for himself and his future wife. Often, the man would build on a wing to his father's house. When the house was complete, the man would then come to fetch his wife from her parent's home. This was all part of the Jewish wedding ceremony.¹

This is what Jesus is describing to His disciples. While He is in heaven, in His Father's house, He is preparing a place for His Bride, the Church made up of born again believers like Peter and John and you and me. Like the Jewish husband, when things are complete, Jesus will come again and take His Bride, the Church, to her new home in heaven.

This is the promise of the Rapture. Jesus does not explain to His disciples how or when He will return for them; just that He will return for them and take them to be with Him in heaven where He is now.

Now many commentators take this promise in John 14:1-3 to simply refer to the Second Coming of Christ. But as we will study in the weeks to come; the Second Coming of Christ involves Jesus coming to the earth at the end of the Tribulation period to rescue Israel and to set up His Kingdom on earth. The promise in John 14 is that Jesus will

¹ See *The Jewish Wedding System and The Bride of Messiah*, MBS 113 of [Come and See](http://www.ariel.org/amds.htm) @ <http://www.ariel.org/amds.htm>.

come from where He has been in heaven, in His Father's house, to earth to gather His disciples and take them to His Father's house in heaven to be with Him where He is. John 14 is not referring to the Second Coming of Jesus to earth to establish His Kingdom. The Second Coming of Jesus is to the earth with church saints to set up His kingdom on the earth (Revelation 19:11-16, 20:4-6).

Therefore, what we have in John 14:1-3 is the promise of the Rapture. Jesus will come again in order to fetch His Bride, the Church, to be with Him in His Father's house.

In order to find out more about the Rapture and how it will occur we need to turn in our Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

THE PROGRESSION OF THE RAPTURE

(1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

This is the historical background to the letter of 1 Thessalonians: during the Apostle Paul's second missionary journey Paul and his associate Silas came to Thessalonica and were used by God to plant a church in Thessalonica. It appears that Paul taught the church congregation about the coming of the Lord Jesus, but his teaching was cut short by persecution and Paul was driven out of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). Paul ended up in Athens, but he sent another of his ministry partners, Timothy, back to Thessalonica to check on the church. Timothy returned to Paul and reported that the church had survived the persecution and was remaining steadfast in the faith of Jesus Christ. But they did have some questions and one of those questions had to do with the future of Christians who died before Jesus' return for the Church. Let's pick up with the Apostle Paul's answer in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (ESV)

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

We don't know exactly what the confusion was for the Thessalonian believers, but this passage implies that they thought that the members of their church family who had already died were going to miss out on the coming of the Lord. Paul referred to these dead believers as those who had fallen asleep. This is a figure of speech called a euphemism which is a gentler way of describing something that is unpleasant. Paul is not teaching soul sleep. In fact, this would be a good point in our study to clarify what happens to a Christian when he dies.

The Bible reveals that when a Christian dies, their soul separates from their physical body. The physical body decays in the grave. The Christian's soul continues and goes to the third heaven to await the resurrection of the body and the Rapture of the Church.

In 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 we read:

2 Corinthians 5:6–10 (ESV)

⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

The Apostle Paul wrote the Philippian church when he was in prison. There was a possibility that he might be executed by the Roman government. He wrote the Philippian believers:

Philippians 1:21–23 (ESV)

²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

So when you and I die, our soul goes to be in the presence of Christ where we are waiting for the resurrection of our bodies and the Rapture of the Church. Our hope of the resurrection of our bodies is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what Paul means in 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

So the first picture we need to get firmly in our minds is that at the time that Jesus comes from His Father's House to earth to fetch His Bride, the Church, He will be bringing the souls of the church saints with Him. These are the souls of every man, woman and child who has been born again and died from the Day of Pentecost to the moment of the Rapture. Jesus will be coming to the earth with the souls of every church age saint who has been in His presence awaiting the resurrection of their bodies and the Rapture of the Church.

God tells us that at the time of the Rapture there will be Church Saints alive on the earth.

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

The living saints will not precede the deceased saints in experiencing the Rapture of the Church.

Here is how the Rapture of the Church will proceed:

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.

When the Lord Jesus descends from heaven He, like a military commander, will give a command for the resurrection and rapture of His Bride to commence. His command will then be repeated by His next in command, an archangel.

This was standard military protocol in first century warfare as it is today. The commanding general issues an order and that order is communicated down the chain of command. In ancient warfare, troop movements and actions were controlled by the use of trumpets and certain trumpet cadences. The command of our Lord Jesus will also be forcefully communicated through the use of a trumpet.

All told, these first three elements of the Rapture picture a military operation, an invasion and rescue operation. In a sense that is exactly what it is. Satan is the prince of the power of the air. The Rapture is an invasion of Satan's territory and the liberation of the Church from the bonds of death. That victory over Satan, sin and death will dramatically unfold in the resurrection of the church saints who have died.

And the dead in Christ will rise first.

The souls that Jesus will bring with Him from heaven will be reunited with a physical body. That these are church age saints is proven by the fact that they are referred to as *the dead in Christ*. That is terminology that is only used of believers. This is important because it teaches us that Old Testament saints are not resurrected at this point in history. Only church saints will be resurrected at this point in history. The resurrection of departed saints will take place first. And once resurrected, they will ascend to meet the Lord in the air before those who are alive at the time of the Rapture.

¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

If we are alive at the time of the Rapture of the Church, we will follow our resurrected brothers and sisters in ascending to meet the Lord in the air.

Some of you might be wondering what happens to our bodies if we are alive at the time of the Rapture. Well, there is a passage in the Bible that explains what will happen to our bodies at the Rapture. We'll study that next week.

Finally, Paul concludes his answer to the Thessalonians with an admonition to encourage one another with these words about the resurrection and Rapture of the Church.

¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

CONCLUSION

I have had the privilege of conducting dozens of funerals over the years. I can tell you without exaggeration that there is a profound difference between the funeral of a church saint and the funeral of an unbeliever.

There is sadness at both funerals, but for unbelievers there are no answers; there's no hope, there's no peace. For believers there is sadness that is tempered by peace and the hope of the resurrection and rapture of their loved one. The difference is palpable.

I challenge you to go back and study these passages in detail. The truth of the Rapture should be deeply ingrained in your mind and heart so that when death comes into your life you have a solid foundation of truth to carry you through your grief.

On December 12th, 1998 we held a funeral here at Grace Church for Bob Eifler. Bob died on Sunday evening, December 6th, 1998 at the age of 43 from a heart attack. Bob came into our lives here at Grace in 1996. He was saved shortly after coming here and he became a big part of our family. We were devastated by his death as were his wife Carol and their twin daughters Erica and Elysia. I wrote in my notebook:

“My close friend and spiritual Timothy. Died suddenly of heart attack in attic of home. I am full of sorrow, but trusting in God’s goodness. Tremendous outpouring of love all week long. Memorable service with 350 in attendance.”

There are many men and women like Bob that I have had the privilege of laying to rest whom I love dearly. It is the hope of the resurrection and rapture of the church that has helped me to continue in ministry. It is the hope of the resurrection and the rapture of the church that has helped cut the hold of this world on my heart. Because of Jesus we have hope in the midst of our sorrow.

If you were to die today, do you know with certainty where you will spend eternity? Why not settle that today; trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin and for eternal life.