

THE PROPHETIC SCRIPTURES

What Lies Before Us?

Scripture Reading:

Message 5

INTRO: This Sunday we are picking up again on our series on prophecy. Between the last message and this message a number of weeks have passed and Israel has been engaged in war with a terrorist group known as Hezbollah, "Army of God". From those events we recognize again the momentous days in which we are living and that we are in the closing days of the Church age.

Because it has been some time, let me briefly review where we are. In the first message we considered various things related to prophecy in general. We defined what prophecy is, the importance of studying prophecy and we looked at major historical events. In the second message we considered the major prophetic views known as premillennialism; amillennialism and postmillennialism. An understanding the difference between these is very important to our topic.

In messages 3-4, we looked at what the closing days of the Church would be like. We saw that the spiritual climate in the Church would be suffering; in the political world, a major effort would be to bring peace to a war-torn world. In the news we would be hearing of wars and rumors of wars and deadly diseases and earthquakes. In general, the world would be going on as usual, not suspecting that at any moment Christ would come. And last, we saw what life would be like in Israel. I said that in order for the tribulation to begin, Israel would need to be a nation and with their temple in place or an agreement to get it in place very quickly. Well, all of these things indicate to us that we are indeed in the last days of the Church age.

Now let me comment briefly on the Lebanese war that has just taken place. A number of people asked me what I thought of it. I said that I see this war as just simply contributing to the already great desire for peace in that region.

This morning we will ask and seek to answer what specific event it is that closes the Church age. Is the signing of the peace treaty we spoke of in the last message the event that closes the Church age? The event that began the Church

age was the baptism of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. What event closes this time period?

The answer to that question depends on which view one takes on the timing of the rapture. I take the view that the Lord will take the Church home before the tribulation. So I will answer this question in light of that view. So let me spell out the event I believe closes the Church age and then we will look at that event in greater detail. (Trumpet sound.) The trumpet sound will signal the event that closes the Church age. It is the rapture of the Church that closes the Church age. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the trumpet, the Church will be gone from earth.

Now in this message I want to seek to answer three questions: What is the rapture? Is the rapture the same as the second coming? And last, we will begin to look at when will the rapture happen?

B. The Rapture

1. What is it?

What is the rapture? Let me briefly explain the word *rapture* before we go on. People sometimes say, "The word rapture is unbiblical. You cannot find this word anywhere in the Bible." Well, that may or it may not be true. But we can say this as well, that the word 'Trinity' cannot be found in the Bible either. Yet we know it is a biblical concept.

The word *rapture* comes from a Latin word *rapere*, meaning *to be caught up*. The word *rapere* occurs in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in the Latin Bible and we have taken that Latin word to refer to this event. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is a key passage on the teaching of the rapture (read). The original word translated 'caught up' in verse 17 is *harpazo*. My dictionary gave these three meanings of the word rapture, 1 to seize, carry off by force. 2 to seize on, claim for one's self eagerly. 3 to snatch out or away. So the standard translation of this word in English is 'caught up'. So, what is the rapture? It is the *catching up* of all believers, or the Church, to a meeting place with Christ in the air.

Now let's consider from this passage what happens. The Thessalonians were concerned because they expected the Lord to return at any time and now some of the believers among them had passed away and had missed out on the rapture. They are spoken of here as *sleeping*. And Paul says, "I do not want you to sorrow like those who have no hope" (13). Then in verse 14 he says, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus." What does that mean? Well, those who sleep in Jesus, are those who have died and their bodies have been buried. But their soul and spirit has gone on to heaven. When the Lord returns, He will bring the soul and spirit of these believers along with Him. Then their bodies will be resurrected and body, soul and spirit will be reunited in the air.

Therefore, in verse 15 Paul says that at the rapture, those who are alive will by no means leave out those who have died. As a matter of fact, those who have died, their bodies will be resurrected and they will be reunited with their soul and spirit which Jesus has brought with Him (read 16). This will happen a split second before those who are alive are raptured. And so, after the dead have been raised, then those who are alive and remain will be caught up, raptured, together with those who have been resurrected. After this, we will forever be with the Lord wherever He is (17).

So, how long will all of this take? We turn to 1 Corinthians 15 (read 51-52).

That is the rapture. In verse 18, we find that the teaching of the rapture is to be a comfort to believers. We will find later why the rapture is a comfort to believers.

Our next question is:

2. Is the rapture the second coming?

Pre millennialists often distinguish between the rapture and the second coming of Christ. The second coming, they say, happens at the end of the tribulation. So the question may be raised, "Does Christ come once or twice?" The usual answer given by those who hold to a pre-tribulational or mid-tribulational view is that He comes once, but in two phases. At the rapture He does not come down to earth. He comes into the air, the believers are caught up to Him and He returns to heaven with them. However, at the second coming He comes down to earth to set up the 1000 year kingdom.

Now I think there is good evidence for this view. And so I want to give some of the differences between the two phases of Christ's return. I will distinguish between them by calling them the rapture and the second coming.

(Put on back of bulletin.)

1. At the rapture, Christ's coming is unexpected. It is life as usual, and then in a split second, all Christians are removed from earth and caught up into the air (Matt. 24:36-44). At the second coming, life is anything but as usual (read Luke 23:28-30; Rev. 6:12-17; Matt. 24:21-22, 29-31).

2. The second difference I want to give is at the rapture the Lord comes into the clouds and air, but not to earth (1 Thess. 4:17). But at the second coming He comes all the way down to earth (Zech. 14:4; Matt. 25:31-46).

3. And again, at the rapture, the righteous are taken to heaven (John 14:3; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). At the second coming, the righteous inherit the millennial kingdom on earth (Matt. 25:34).

4. At the rapture only the saved are gathered to the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; John 14:1-6). At the second coming the righteous and the wicked are gathered before the Lord (Matt. 25:31-46).

5. At the rapture there is no judgment before the righteous reach their destination (1 Thess. 4:13-18). At the second coming the righteous are first judged (Matt. 25:34-36).

6. At the rapture the unrighteous remain on earth and go into the tribulation (Matt. 24:40, 41; Luke 17:34, 35, 36). At the second coming the unrighteous are removed from the earth and cast into hell (Matt. 25:46).

7. At the rapture the righteous are removed from the earth (Jn. 14:3), while the unrighteous are left on it (Matt. 40-41). At the second coming the righteous remain on earth while the unrighteous are removed from it and cast into hell (Matt. 25:31-46).

8. At the rapture the bodies of the righteous are changed (Phil. 3:21; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 5:13-18) and they do not reproduce any more (Matt. 22:30; Mk. 12:25; Lk. 20:35). At the second coming the bodies of the righteous are not changed and they repopulate the earth (Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:7-9).

9. At the rapture Christ comes from heaven **for** the Church (1 Thess. 4:13-18). At the second coming He comes from heaven **with** the Church (Rev. 19:6-14)

10. At the rapture, only the righteous are judged (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). At the second coming the righteous and unrighteous are both judged (Matthew 25:31-46).

11. At the rapture the righteous are taken to heaven and then judged (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). At the second coming, the righteous are judged on earth and then told to come inherit the kingdom (Matt. 25:32-34).

Now from the above cases, it seems to me that it is hard to argue that all the references of

Christ's return refer to the same event. In one scene it is life as usual, in the other they are begging for the rocks to fall on them and kill them.

When Christ came to earth through the conception and birth of the virgin Mary, the Jews understood from prophecy that He was coming once and that was to set up His kingdom. The error they made was that they did not see that He would come and suffer and die and that He would come a second time as King.

May it be that we make the same error today in thinking He is coming once, when in actual fact He will come for His own first and then come again as King?

3. When will the rapture happen?

When will the rapture happen? It is a matter of great debate among Christians whether Christ will come before, in the middle or at the end of the tribulation. I might add that this is an important question. I mentioned to you when we considered the major views of end time teaching that some believe Jesus will come before the tribulation; others believe He will come in the middle and yet others, that He will come at the end of the tribulation. If you missed that message you may wish to order the CD in order to understand those views.

It is my view that Christ will come before the tribulation. You might well ask, what is your case for believing in a pre tribulational rapture and you would be justified in asking that question? So I want to present to you the case for the pre tribulational view as I see it. So, I want to present my case from some general teachings of Scripture and then some specific verses and then from one key passage.

a. In some general teachings

- 1) The blessed hope (Titus 2:11-14)

This passage teaches us that the return of Christ is a blessed hope. Paul had taught the Thessalonians much about the return of Christ. To them, it was a blessed hope (read 1 Thess. 1:9-10). Now let us say for a moment that Paul had taught the Thessalonians that there would come a time of great tribulation. During this tribulation time period, most Christians would die. And in the middle or at the end of that time period, after the antichrist had had his fling and most Christians had been killed, then Christ would come.

Now I ask you, would you call that a blessed hope? If I told you that Christ is coming to receive His own but first Christians must suffer, and most of them will die, would you anxiously wait for the return of Christ? Or would you dread the nearing of that day? Would you not rather wish it did not happen during your lifetime?

But now, let us say Paul had taught them that the tribulation time was coming; antichrist was coming; great trouble would befall this world. But before that time, Jesus would rapture the believer to glory and then the believer would go to those mansions Jesus was preparing. Would this be a blessed hope? Would this not account for the new Thessalonian believer's wishful expectation of His soon return?

Now I want you to notice something special. Verse 10 says, "...and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from **the wrath to come.**" What is this wrath to come? Sometimes this is viewed as hell, but I never read of hell as referring to the wrath to come. But the tribulation is referred to as the wrath to come. Notice with me in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, which takes place in the context of the day of

the Lord, that God has not appointed the believer to wrath (read).

Is that not a blessed hope? Is that not something to look forward to? But if we are to half of the tribulation first, or all of the tribulation first before Christ comes, would you await His coming with anticipation or with dread?

2) Occupants of the millennium

There is a second reason why I believe the rapture happens before the tribulation, or at least before the end of the tribulation. When Christ sets up His kingdom on earth, people will repopulate the earth during the millennium. We know that relatively few people enter the millennium. During the tribulation most Christians die. At the end of the tribulation all unbelievers are cast into hell. That leaves but a few people. However, look at Revelation 20 (read 7-9). Here we find the number of people as the sand of the sea. So the earth has been repopulated.

Now let us say the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation. All unbelievers are cast into hell and the bodies of all believers are changed into their immortal state. Turn with me to Luke 20 (read 34-36). If all unbelievers are cast into hell after the judgment at the end of the tribulation and all believers are changed, who brings about this vast group of people during the millennium? There is no answer.

So this at least rules out the post tribulational view.

CONCL: So we conclude with this question: What event will close the Church age? Because I hold to the pretribulational view of premillennialism, I believe the rapture will close this age. It is such a crucial question that I want to give three messages to this topic. No matter

what position you prefer, you do not want to miss any of these messages, unless you do not like to deal objectively with the information that is available.

This morning we asked: Is the rapture the second coming? No, it is the first phase of the second coming of Christ. And then we looked at two pieces of data from the general teaching of the NT that indicate a pretribulational rapture, indicating that it is the event that closes the Church age. We saw that the fact that it is described as a blessed hope, indicates a pre tribulational rapture. Then we saw that the occupants of the millennium argue for a pretribulational rapture. We will look at at least five more reasons, with the greatest reason of all coming last.