

THE PROPHETIC SCRIPTURES:

What Lies Before Us?

Scripture Reading:

Message 6

INTRO: In our last message we asked what event closes the Church age, the age we are living in. The answer is? ---the rapture. And the rapture will be signaled by a trumpet sound. The dead in Christ will rise first and then those who are alive will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (1 Thess. 4 and 1 Cor. 15). 1 Corinthians 15:52 says it will take place in a moment. The original word is *atomos*. No doubt we get our word 'atom' from this word. The word *atomos* means it cannot be cut in two. How quickly will the dead rise? How quickly will the bodies of living believers be changed? In a time so short, it cannot be cut in two! This verse further describes it as the time of the twinkling of an eye. Well, that was the smallest time unit known at that time.

The rapture will be one of the most significant events of all time. After the last message I was questioned whether preaching on such a topic was profitable. I ask you, is this most significant event, spoken of over and over again in the NT profitable to preach on? David Hocking, in his latest news letter writes, "Pastors of large churches are making many mistakes in these days and drifting away from the authority of God's Word in their ministries. Some have said that we should not preach and teach Bible prophecy because it is so divisive!"

Well, in the last message we saw that the rapture and the second coming are actually two separate events, but we have called Christ's return for the Church the rapture and His return at the end of the tribulation the second coming.

Then I began to give you the reasons I hold to a pretribulational return of Christ. First, because it is called the blessed hope, in the NT. If it were not pretribulational it would not be a blessed hope. If it is pretribulational, then we eagerly await it. If the rapture should happen in the middle or at the end of the tribulation, now His return would be something to dread because what we can expect is almost certain death. Second, we argued for the pretribulational return of Christ because if He comes at the end, there is no one left to inherit the

millennium and repopulate the earth, as the Scripture teaches will happen.

This morning I want to give you 5 more reasons why I believe in the pretribulational return of Christ. So we begin with reason #3.

3) Wife of God verses bride of Christ

The third reason why I believe the rapture will occur before the tribulation. Turn with me to Daniel 9:24-27 (read). Here we find that 70 weeks are determined upon the Jewish people and the city of Jerusalem. Sixty nine of those weeks were fulfilled when Christ died. The 70th week is the tribulation to come. So the 70th week is determined, not upon the Church, but upon Israel.

Israel is pictured as the wife of God over and over in the OT. Let me give you an example from Jeremiah 3:14, "Return, O backsliding children," says the LORD; "for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion." Then again in verse 20, "Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, So have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel," says the LORD."

However, the Church is clearly presented as the bride of Christ in the NT (Eph. 5:22-27). Now the wife of God and the bride of Christ are never mixed up in their biblical presentation. If the Church goes into the tribulation then the Israel and the Church are mixed up. In the Church age, Jew and Gentile become one body (Eph. 2-3). If the Church goes into or through the tribulation, is she the bride of Christ or the wife of God? But the tribulation is God's 70th week which is determined on Israel, not the Church.

We find support of this in the book of Revelation. Revelation 2-3 deal with the Church, and I believe the view is correct that this pictures the Church age in seven specific time periods. Then in chapter 4, John is caught up into heaven to see what happens after this. And so chapters 4-19 speak of the tribulation. Not once do we find the Church on earth in those chapters. Now turn to a significant passage in Revelation 19. This chapter gives us an account of the closing time of the tribulation. In this chapter, the destruction of Babylon is the topic of verses 1-5. So let us read 19:6-14 (explain as you go).

Now here we have a scene in heaven, and the bride of Christ has already become the wife of Christ. The tribulation is not yet over, and the bride has become the wife of Christ and she is in heaven. So, this makes me believe that the rapture will happen before the tribulation.

The view that the bride of Christ is not on earth during the tribulation is further strengthened by the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is a very chronological book. The first chapter introduces the book. Chapters 2-3 deal with the Church. Some view these chapters as including a prophetic panorama of the Church age. I think this may well be correct. Then in chapter 4, John is taken to heaven. Some have speculated that this indicates that the rapture happens right after the Church age. That may also be correct. In chapters 4-5 John describes what it is like in heaven and then 6-19 deal with the tribulation. So we have the Church age and then the tribulation. Chapter 20:1-6 deals with the millennium. 20:7-15 speaks of the short season the devil is loosed at the end of the millennium. Chapters 21-22 deal with the

new heavens and the new earth. Now you cannot get more chronological than that.

And when you study the tribulation in chapters 6-19, you do not find the Church on earth at all. But in chapter 19 you find the Church in heaven at the close of the tribulation, prepared to come down with Christ to set up the millennium on earth.

4) Jewish weddings

There is yet another reason why I believe the rapture is pretribulational. The return of Christ is likened to a wedding in various Scriptures. In Jewish weddings, the betrothal, somewhat like our engagement, usually was arranged by the parents. The betrothal took place, usually about a year or so before the wedding, although it could be longer as well. After the agreement, the son would begin to prepare a place at his father's house for his bride. Then, when all was ready, he and his attendants would make their way to the bride's place of residence. She was expecting him, but she did not know when he was coming. However, when he came she was ready because she knew he would come. After his arrival, he would take her back to his father's house where the marriage celebration would take place.

Jesus has been betrothed to the Church, which is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-27). He has gone back to His Father's house to prepare a place for His bride, and wife to be (John 14:1-3). Although the Church knows He is coming soon, as He promised, no one knows the precise time (Matt. 24:36-44). Then one day a shout will be heard, "Behold the bridegroom is coming" and then the Church will be taken to the place He has prepared for her.

The Jewish wedding perfectly presents the pretribulational return of Christ.

5) Return like in days of Noah

There is a fifth reason I believe Christ will come before the tribulation. Matthew 24:36-39 teaches that when Christ comes, on earth it will be life as usual (read). We have discussed this already. However, if the return of Christ is posttribulational or even in the middle, I think it will not be life as usual. In the middle of the tribulation, the number 666 is going to be put in place at that time. So it will not be life as usual for believers.

But what will life be like just before the end of the tribulation? Will it be life as usual? It will be the most catastrophic time to ever happen! You might jot down Luke 23:28-30; Matt. 24:21-22, 29-31; but we want to read Rev. 6:12-17 (read).

6) One taken the other left

Read Matthew 24:40-41 (Note also Luke 17:34-36).

These passages are somewhat controversial even among those who believe Christ will rapture the Church before the tribulation. As I view it, Jesus is saying that Christians are always to be on the watch because no one knows when He is returning. So it is imperative to be ready at all times. I view this as a passage referring to the rapture, not Christ's coming at the end of the tribulation.

Others however, say that this passage refers to the end of the tribulation and that the one taken is the one taken in judgement as it was in Noah's day and that the one left is the one who is left on earth to inherit the kingdom of God. One

of the pillars of that argument is the context which has made reference to the days of Noah and the days of Noah, it is argued, was a time of judgement. However, Jesus makes no connection between Noah and judgment. That is to read into the text. The purpose of the illustration of the days of Noah is to show that when Christ comes for the Church it will be "life as usual".

So which view is right? There are three words that one must deal with. The first is the word, "took" in verse 39. Those who hold that this refers to Christ's coming at the end of the tribulation say the word took in verse 39 refers to those 'taken' in verses 40-41. But that is not so. The word 'took' in verse 39 and the words 'taken' in 40-41 are different words. The original word in verse 39 is *airw*.

But the word, 'taken' in verses 40-41 is *paralambanw* which means to receive. The use of these two words, *airo* and *paralambano*, is interesting in John 10:17-18. Jesus said, "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down my life that I may take *labw* it again. No one takes *airie* it from Me but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take *labein* it again..." (The words *labw* and *labein* share the same root as the word *paralambanw*).

Interesting also is the use of this word *paralambano* in Jn.14:4. Here Jesus promises to the disciples, not to come and set up a kingdom in which they will rule at this time but to come and *paralambanw*, receive them to Himself that they might be where He is, which is heaven of course.

But the biggest evidence that this passage in Matthew 24 refers to the rapture and not the second coming is the word "left" in 40 & 41. This word is not used in a

positive sense when it is used literally. It has the idea of *to abandon* or *forsake*. The word *aphieme* comes from the words *apo* = from and *hieme* = to send. So the one that is left, is forsaken or deserted.

Thus I conclude this refers to the rapture and not the second coming. The one taken is taken to heaven. The one who is left is forsaken to go through the tribulation. It is for this reason that verse 42 says, "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming."

7) Imminency

The last and biggest reason of all why I believe that Christ will come back for the Church before the tribulation is that it is a general teaching of the NT that the return of Christ is imminent. When we say His coming is imminent, we mean it could happen at any time.

Now the second coming is not imminent. It is at least 7 years away, for that seven year time period has been prophesied as Daniel's 70th week has not yet happened and it will happen before Christ returns. But it is my earnest belief that the rapture is imminent; Christ could come for His Church at any moment.

Now one cannot hold to a mid-trib rapture or a post-trib rapture, and still believe that Christ could come at any moment. Ask someone who holds to either of those positions and then ask if Christ could come today or tomorrow, and the answer will be a resound, "No!" If that is so, we know that He cannot come for at least 3 ½ more years because the tribulation has not begun and the middle comes 3 ½ years after it begins. If the rapture is to occur at the end of the tribulation, then we know that won't happen for another 7 years at least!

But how do the Scriptures portray the rapture? Well, let's read Matthew 24:32-44. If Christ's coming is in the middle or at the end of the tribulation, then we know that He cannot come at any moment. Only if His return is before the tribulation can He come at any moment, and that is the consistent presentation of the rapture in the NT.

CONCL: So in conclusion to this morning's message I want to give an illustration from an event that happened some years ago as recorded in Billy Graham's book, "The four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Some of you may remember this from some years ago when I read it.

Mt. Saint Helens belched gray steam plumes hundreds of feet into the blue Washington sky. Geologists watched their seismographs in growing wonder as the earth danced beneath their feet. Rangers and state police, sirens blaring, herded tourists and residents from an ever-widening zone of danger. Every piece of scientific evidence being collected in the laboratories and on the field predicted the volcano would soon explode with a fury that would leave the forests flattened. "Warning!" blared the loudspeakers on patrol cars and helicopters hovering overhead. "Warning!" blinked battery-powered signs at every major cross-road. "Warning!" pleaded radio and television announcers, shortwave and citizens-band operators. "Warning!" echoed up and down the mountain; and lakeside villages, tourist camps and hiking trails emptied as people heard the warning and fled for their lives.

But Harry Truman refused to budge. Harry was the caretaker of a recreation lodge on Spirit Lake, five miles north of Mt. Saint Helens smoke-enshrouded peak. The rangers warned Harry of the coming blast. Neighbors begged him to join them in their exodus. Even Harry's sister called to talk sense into the old man's head. But Harry ignored the warnings. From the picture-postcard beauty of his lakeside home reflecting the snow-capped peak overhead, Harry grinned on national television and said, "Nobody knows more about this mountain than Harry and it dare not blow up on him..."

On 18 May 1980, as the boiling gases beneath the mountains

surface bulged and buckled the land-scape to its final limits, Harry Truman cooked his eggs and bacon, fed his sixteen cats the scraps, and began to plant petunias round the border of his freshly mowed lawn. At 8:31 A.M. the mountain exploded.

Did Harry regret his decision in that millisecond he had before the concussive waves, traveling faster than the speed of sound, flattened him and everything else for 150 square miles? Did he have time to mourn his stubbornness as millions of tons of rock disintegrated and disappeared into a cloud reaching ten miles into the sky? Did he struggle against the wall of mud and ash fifty feet high that buried his cabin, his cats and his freshly moved lawn - or had he been vaporized (like 100,000 people at Hiroshima) when the mountain erupted with a force 500 times greater than the nuclear bomb which leveled that Japanese city?

Now Harry is a legend in the corner of Washington where he refused to listen. He smiles down on us from posters and T-shirts and beer mugs. Balladeers sing a song about old Harry, the stubborn man who put his ear to the mountain but would not heed the warnings.

We have put our ear to the Scripture this morning. Warning, says the increase in false Christs. Warning, calls the increase in wars. Warning, cries the increase in famines. Warning blares the increase in AIDS epidemics, and now the new strain of tuberculosis etc... Warning Screams the fast increase in earthquakes.

The earth itself is preaching a message day by day of some great event about to happen, and yet we go merrily on our way. With all those warnings, still millions will not be ready when the Christ comes for His own. They will not be vaporized. They will not be covered in mud. They will not simply die. They will enter a time known as a time such as has never been before, nor will ever be again; a time of darkness, of pain, of the wrath of God Almighty. And all the while, they might have believed in Him and been delivered from the wrath to come!

If there is one conclusion to be made from these truths, it is this: If You are not yet saved, today is the day! If you are a Christian and are afraid to face Jesus Christ today is the time to get right with God. What must you do? You must agree with God you are a sinner and repent. Then you

must believe that He has forgiven you. Then you must receive Christ as your Savior by faith. You can do that by yourself, but I encourage you to talk to someone who is a Christian and have them help you. Today is the day.