

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Matthew 24:26-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

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A pleasant-looking grandma awakens from a nap in her seat on a jumbo jet. She begins looking around in dismay. She calls out to a young man sitting across the aisle and down a few seats: "My husband! Can you help me find my husband?" The young man goes over to her, a concerned look on his face. She repeats her plea. "My husband has gone off and I don't know where he has gone. Can you find him?" They look down at the plane seat and the old man's entire suit of clothes and glasses are lying there as if he has just disappeared and left them behind. Soon the whole airplane is filled with the cries of people looking for lost loved ones of every age. Somehow, in complete silence and with no warning, people have just disappeared. No one has any idea what has happened.

Down on the ground cars are crashing with no drivers, buzzing electric razors are falling into the sink, and televisions are playing with no one to watch them. The cries of the bereft are heard everywhere. Confusion reigns: "What has happened? Where have all the people gone?" Neither the news media nor the government has any answers. Gradually the idea begins leaking out that this was, in fact, the first part of the second coming of Jesus Christ. The prophesied tribulation begins to unfold, the Antichrist comes on the scene, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse begin their deadly work. Chaos, death, wars, disease, earthquakes, and famine stalk the planet. Some people become Christians. As they study the teachings of missing Bible scholars they learn that after seven years of suffering Christ will return, set everything right, and begin a thousand-year reign.

1. THE FACT OF THE RAPTURE

This scene is from a popular book and film series on the end times. It describes an event we have come to call the rapture. It is part of the blessed hope of every believer in Jesus Christ that if we are alive when Christ returns he will grab us up off the earth before the wrath of God falls upon the sinners who are left behind. Paul explained this to the Thessalonians who had become afraid that they had somehow missed the rapture and return of Christ: **"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord"** (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

This is one of the sweetest doctrines of the whole Bible. Strangely, it was lost to the church for many centuries, only having been recovered about 150 years ago. The rapture of believers is necessary because this is God's world, and we have irreparably befouled it with sin. Isaiah described how God is going to judge the whole earth and the sinners left behind on it in an event called the day of the Lord: **"Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, /Cruel, with fury and burning anger, /To make the land a desolation; /And He will exterminate its sinners**

from it.../Thus I will punish the world for its evil /And the wicked for their iniquity (Isaiah 13:9, 11a). All the delusions of humankind being in charge of the earth will be dashed. All personal ideas of running our lives our own way will be burned away. The rule of every king and government will be overturned. This is God's earth, he created us, and he will levy the judgment mankind deserves for rebellion against him.

It is therefore with great thankfulness that we read Paul's explanation to the Thessalonians: "**For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him**" (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). The rapture is part of our Lord's wonderful design to bless every single person who repents of his or her sins and trusts him for eternal life. If you have not yet trusted Christ you are on schedule for the flaming earthly punishment described by Isaiah, and much worse in eternity.

2. OUR SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT CHRIST'S RETURN

The fact of the rapture is a Biblical certainty. But is the itinerary described by the opening story true? Do you think that the rapture is going to be silent? That the people who are left behind will not know what has happened? Do you think that the rapture means you will not have to suffer for your faith? That you, as a believer, will not face the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse? Have you believed that no genuine Christian from the church age will have to endure the rage of the Antichrist?

I went to seminary as a young believer to prepare for God's calling. You get stuffed there with so much information that you cannot process it all at the time. Neither can you do the most important thing, which is to do a proper Biblical evaluation of what you have been taught. Seminary also trained me to do sound exegesis and systematic theology. I learned the theology of the end times which is taught in that popular book and film series, but I also knew I would have to go through a long process of studying it out for myself.

One day in the mid-eighties I was studying the Bible in the early morning as is my habit, and I slammed into a set of Bible verses which set me off on a quest to study the end times from the Bible for myself. Hundreds of hours later I was forced to conclude that the idea that believers will be raptured off the earth before the final seven-year period is not what the Bible teaches. All of the facts I presented you are true, but I am confident that the sequence of them is not what has been taught for a hundred and fifty years as the pretribulational rapture of the church (cf. chart).

Where do you get your information about the return of Christ? I was sharing Christ with a wonderful neighbor years ago and ran into a roadblock. He would not accept what I was showing him in the Bible because, as he said: "I don't study the Bible. The priest studies the Bible and he tells me what it means." We are all in that position on every subject we are not willing or able to study for ourselves. My question for you is: Do you believe the Bible? Is it possible that you have believed an honest error taught to you by good people which will leave you horribly unprepared for what is actually going to happen?

3. ITINERARY FOR THE SECOND COMING

The first fact is that the return of Christ will not be silent, but extremely noisy. Remember that famous verse about the rapture: **"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord"** (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). The rapture described here is accompanied **"with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God..."** There is nothing secret about a shout, trumpets, and a voice from heaven.

Secondly, when Christ returns for his church at the rapture everyone will see him. Jesus clearly explained the itinerary for his second coming to his disciples in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew: **"For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be"** (Matthew 24:27). Just as one bolt of lightning illuminates the whole sky the return of Christ will be viewable by all. He said this to prevent his disciples from being drawn away by false messiahs who are unable to present such a sign.

Later in this same teaching he said: **"And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory"** (Matthew 24:30). Our Creator does not see us primarily in our national political boundaries but in our networks of human relationships. He sees clans or tribes. His promise is that every tribe will see him at his return, they will know who he is, and they will mourn for not having believed.

If you happen to be on an airplane when the real return of Christ takes place you will all be drawn to the windows by signs in the sun, moon, and stars. The light of all heavenly bodies will go out and in the darkness the shining of the sign of the Son of Man will burst across the sky. Then, accompanied by heavenly trumpet blasts and shouts, you will see Christ himself coming on the clouds with power and great glory.

Then the real Christians will be raptured out of their airplane seats or wherever they are: **"And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other"** (Matthew 24:31). It is at this time that copilots will have to take the controls of their unguided planes, pancakes being flipped will land with no cook to catch them, and doctors sitting in on surgeries will have to finish suturing patients when surgeons disappear. But no one will be confused about what is happening.

Do you believe the Bible? Jesus taught that his return would not be secret, that it would be visible and noisy, and that everyone would see him just in time to notice that he was taking all of his children off the earth.

4. TIMING OF CHRIST'S RETURN, THE RAPTURE, AND THE DAY OF THE LORD

The question we have not yet answered is when the return of Christ and the rapture take place in relationship to the seven-year period at the end of the age commonly called the tribulation or seventieth week of Daniel (cf. Daniel 9:24-27). That period contains the Four

Horsemen, the Great Tribulation brought by Antichrist, and terrors of which we have only dreamed. Most Christians desperately hold to the idea that God will remove them before any of it happens. If that is wrong, then most Christians who are alive at that time will go into those seventieth-week terrors unprepared, both spiritually and materially.

The passage which forced me to reconsider my view of these events is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians: **"Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come"** (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2). Notice immediately that three events will all happen at the same time, namely, the coming of Christ, the rapture, and the day of the Lord. Remember that the day of the Lord is the time when God vents his wrath on the earth and its inhabitants because of sin.

When will they occur? No one knows the day or the hour, as Christ says, but we can know the general sequence, as Paul went on to write: **"Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God"** (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). A great deal of additional study would be necessary to identify the events described here, but they are not in great dispute among most end times students.

First, the return of Christ, rapture, and beginning of the wrath of God do not happen before "the apostasy." This could be a reference to the compromising church. It is more likely to be a reference to Israel as she abandons the last vestiges of her faith in Messiah by signing a deceptive covenant of "protection" with the Antichrist. Though it has been suggested recently, the definitive Greek lexicons do not permit the use of the word "apostasy" to mean rapture. The term, which means rebellion, was simply not used that way in the ancient world.

Second, what is clear and uncontroversial is the time when Antichrist--the "man of lawlessness"--sets himself up in the temple of God and is revealed as the enemy of God and all God's people. That event occurs at the halfway point of the prophesied final seven-year period and is called "the abomination of desolation.". From that moment on the Antichrist, as the instrument of Satan's wrath, will attempt to track down, kill, or starve out all people of Israelite descent and all believers in Christ. It will make the Holocaust seem small by comparison.

So I have good news and bad news. The return of Christ and the rapture will take place before the wrath of God is poured out on the earth, but not before the rage of Satan is vented on God's people: **"...Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time"** (Revelation 12:12b). The church will indeed be present for the signing of the covenant between Israel and the Antichrist, for the terrors of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, for the unveiling of Antichrist, and for the worst suffering the world has ever seen in the Great Tribulation when Satan takes his vengeance.

It will be so terrible that the Bible says: **"Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short"** (Matthew

24:22). The elect are seen on earth in only one way. They believe in God, and since the first coming of Christ they believe in him. There is no way to escape this truth. The church will be present for the worst trouble the world has ever seen, but then we will be snatched away by our Savior before the even greater wrath of God is released on the earth (cf. chart). This itinerary for the return of Christ is currently being called the prewrath rapture theory.

5. TIME TO GET SERIOUS

If these things are true then it is time for us to get serious with the King of Kings, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. First, we need to make sure that we are following him and not a religion. No religion, no matter how beloved, will get you through the Great Tribulation. Religion has no power to help you overcome the sins which bind you. You need the real Jesus for that. If you know the Holy One of God is coming back for you, you will deal with those remaining sins in your life.

Secondly, we need to get serious about studying the word of God itself, not taking someone's word for what it says. Giant churches across America are being filled by teaching people an edited Bible with all the suffering and commitment taken out. As we enter the last days are you willing to trust an edited Bible with your eternal life? I am confident that many who think they are Christians will face the Antichrist with nothing but happy thoughts. Peter Pan cannot save you. Study the words of the Almighty God for yourself.

Thirdly, we need to be telling people that Jesus Christ will return in glory with blessing for those who believe and retribution for those who do not. No one will be able to escape him. Western Christians who think they have tamed Christ the tiger are in for a rude awakening. Fourthly, in view of the coming persecutions and return of Christ, we need to be leading individuals and groups to salvation in Christ. Jesus is their only hope! This will require every person to slay the chief idol of our time which is self-worship. Many churches have compromised with this false god in order to build attendance, so many who think they are Christians are yet to be converted. That may even describe you. If it does, I advise you not to wait for the rise of Antichrist to trust the real Christ.

Finally, we need to make every sacrifice to plant new churches and build up existing ones. This is the primary way Christ builds his kingdom during this age. The time is growing short. There are many people who are not in the church because we have not sacrificed, we have not reached them, and we have chosen not to become what they need in a local church. This is a matter both for repentance and great hope. Christ will multiply the effect of every act of obedience we make. He is eager to move with fresh power on his church. Are you ready? Jesus is coming soon!