

8. The Rapture Of The Church

Chuck Smith:

**"Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."
Titus 2:13**

The Rapture refers to that time when Jesus is going to come, without warning, and take away His church from this earth. After the Rapture, the Lord will pour out His wrath upon this sinful world. There are many pastors who claim an ignorance of the Rapture or say that they are not certain whether it will precede the Tribulation. They say they don't really know where they stand on this issue. I don't believe there is any excuse for not having a position on this issue. We have our Bibles and we're capable of studying this subject thoroughly. I believe that your view of the Rapture will have a significant impact on the success of your ministry.

First of all, we know that Jesus promised He would come again. In John 14 we read, "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." (John 14:1-3). The Lord promises to come again and to receive His disciples unto Himself, that where He is we might be also.

Paul, in writing to the Corinthians declared, "Behold, I show you a mystery." (I Corinthians 15:51). A mystery in the New Testament means something that has not yet been revealed by God in His progressive revelation of Himself, His purposes, and plans to man.

Paul, for instance, spoke to the Colossians about, "What is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27). The Old Testament prophets did not comprehend what it meant that Christ would be in us. Even the angels desire to fully grasp these things. (I Peter 1:12). In the I Corinthians 15:51 passage we are introduced to another never before revealed truth, "Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump."

When the Bible declares that we will "all be changed," it means there will be a metamorphosis. "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." (I Corinthians 15:53). All believers will go through a glorious change at the coming of Jesus Christ for His church.

The Thessalonians were having a problem with this issue. Paul only ministered there for a couple of weeks, but in that short time he taught them many things. One of the things he taught them concerned the Rapture of the church. The Thessalonians were looking for the coming Kingdom.

I believe it is God's intention that every church age be convinced they are the last generation. I also believe that God's divine design is for the church to live in constant expectancy of the Lord's return. Jesus, talking about His return, said, "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing." (Matthew 24:46).

The early church believed that Jesus would set up the Kingdom immediately. In the first chapter of Acts, the disciples asked, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). "Are we just a few days away?" They were excited because they were expecting the Lord to set up the Kingdom at any time.

Jesus responded by saying, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you." (Acts 1:7-8).

There was a rumor in the early church that the Lord would come back before John died. Every time John got a cold or sore throat the whole church would get excited. So John wrote in the Gospel to clarify what Jesus had said. Jesus was telling Peter how He would die, and then Peter, in his typical manner, said, "But, Lord, what about him?" Jesus responded, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me." (John 21:22). John took note of the point that Jesus didn't say that He was going to, He said, "If I will." So John sought to correct the mistaken notion that Jesus would come before he died.

The Thessalonians were looking for the Lord to come, but some of their dear brethren in the church at Thessalonica had died, and still Jesus had not returned. They believed that because they had died before Jesus came back, they would miss out on the glorious Kingdom. In I Thessalonians chapter 4, Paul corrected this

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mistaken idea that if a person died before Jesus came back, they would miss out on the Kingdom. So he said, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope." (I Thessalonians 4:13). Paul went on to say, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." (I Thessalonians 4:14-15) Paul believed that he would probably be alive and remain until the coming of the Lord. He emphasized that we would not precede those who sleep. "For the Lord himself shall 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 together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words." (I Thessalonians 4:16-18).

There are people who say, "I don't believe in the Rapture of the church," because they have looked through the Bible and have never found the word "Rapture" in the Bible. But in I Thessalonians 4:17 we read that, "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 word translated 'caught up' in the Greek is 'harpazo,' which means 'to be taken away by force.' It's usually used as a military term related to the taking of hostages. The Latin Vulgate translates 'harpazo' as 'raptuse,' and that's where we get our English word 'rapture.' Jesus will return to rapture His church. That's the first event.

The second event is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, when He comes again with His church to establish His Kingdom upon the earth. The Rapture then is distinct from the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. We're told, "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen." (Revelation 1:7). And, "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." (Colossians 3:4). The Second Coming of Jesus will be to establish God's Kingdom upon the earth. But prior to that Second Coming there will be an event when the church will be caught up to be with the Lord. The thing I love most about this event is that, "so shall we ever be with the Lord." (I Thessalonians 4:17).

There is a distinct difference between Jesus coming for His church and Jesus coming with His church. He will be coming for His church at the Rapture. But at the Second Coming of Jesus, He'll be coming with His church. "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear," (at His Second Coming) "then shall ye also appear with him in glory." (Colossians 3:4).

Jude 14 speaks of the Second Coming when it states, "Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints." Zechariah also spoke of this when he wrote, "And his feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south. And ye shall flee to the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the mountains shall reach unto Azal: yea, ye shall flee, like as ye fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah: and the LORD my God shall come, and all the saints with thee." (Zechariah 14:4-5).

The Rapture can take place at any time. There are no prophecies that have yet to be fulfilled before the Rapture occurs. It could happen before you're through reading this chapter, and we would be thrilled if it did!

There are some prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled before Jesus comes again. The Antichrist must be revealed, and the earth must go through a time of great tribulation and judgment. These prophecies relate specifically to the Second Coming of Jesus. Jesus spoke about the signs of His coming in Luke 21:28, "And when these things begin to come to pass, (the signs of His Second Coming) then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh."

Last year, towards the end of October, just before Halloween, I was going by a major mall in Southern California and saw them putting up the Santa Claus, the reindeer, and other Christmas decorations, but it was still October. I said to my wife, "Look at that! They're putting up Christmas decorations! That's great! I love Thanksgiving!" She responded, "Those aren't Thanksgiving decorations! They're Christmas decorations!" I said, I know that! But, I also know that Thanksgiving comes before Christmas. So if the signs of Christmas are up, Thanksgiving's getting close!" And, in the same way, when we see the signs of the Second Coming, we know that the Rapture's getting close.

Jesus had given His disciples the signs of His coming in response to their question, "Tell us, 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 had just walked through the temple with His disciples and they were remarking on how huge the stones were. Jesus said, "There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." (Matthew 24:2). When they got over to the Mount of Olives, they asked Jesus, "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3). So they weren't asking for just one set of signs. They were asking for signs of the destruction of the temple, and they were also asking about the signs of the end of this current age of human government and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

They didn't ask about, nor did they probably even understand, the Rapture of the church. But Jesus proceeded to give them the signs of the destruction of the temple and the signs of His coming again. When He speaks about the signs of His Second Coming, He naturally speaks about the Great Tribulation. "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be." (Matthew 24:21). Jesus also warns them, "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)" (Matthew 24:15). When you see that abomination standing in the holy place, you'll know it's time for you to get out of Jerusalem and flee to the wilderness. And then, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: 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." (Matthew 24:29-30).

Prior to the Second Coming, there are many prophecies that must be fulfilled. There must be the revelation of the Antichrist and the establishing of Satan's kingdom in full power during the Great Tribulation. These events must occur before the Second Coming of Jesus. But there is nothing that must occur before the Rapture of the church. That is why we are told to watch and be ready, "for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." Therefore, "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing." (Matthew 24:44,46).

Jesus then began to tell them a series of parables. The point of each parable in the series is to watch and be ready for His return at any time. Each parable focuses on the key point that the Rapture is imminent, that is, it can happen at any time.

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins we read, "And five of them were wise, and five were foolish." (Matthew 25:2). Those "that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh." (Matthew 25:10-13). The emphasis throughout is to watch and be ready, because you don't know when the Lord is coming for His servants.

In Matthew 24:42-44 we read, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh."

I firmly believe that the church will not go through the Great Tribulation. Talking about the Tribulation in Luke 21, Jesus said, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." (Luke 21:36). Now if Jesus tells me to pray for something, believe me, I will do it! I pray, "Lord, I want to be accounted worthy to escape these things that will come to pass upon the earth." This is in the context of the Great Tribulation.

We're told in Revelation 1:19 that the book is divided into three sections. "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter." In chapter one, John was told to, "Write the things which thou hast seen", and he wrote about the vision he saw of Christ walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, holding the seven stars in His right hand. He wrote about the glorious description of Jesus in His glorified state.

In chapters two and three, he writes about the "things that are." This refers to messages of Jesus to the seven churches of Asia. I believe that these were seven actual churches of that day, but I also believe that they refer to seven periods of church history. I also believe they are representative of churches that you can find today.

There are churches today that have left their first love. There are churches today that have embraced the

doctrine of the Nicolaitans. There's a suffering church of Smyrna in the world today such as those suffering persecution in China, Sudan, and other places. I believe that there's the church of Thyratira that has embodied the doctrine of "Mariology." We can see the church of Sardis portrayed in dead Protestantism, "thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." (Revelation 3:1).

I believe that there is the Philadelphian church, that church which is staying true to the Word. It may not have much power, but thank God that He has "set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name." (Revelation 3:8). We may not be big or earth shaking, but thank God we are making a little impression!

But there is also the Laodicean church, the one that has put Jesus outside. He's standing at the door and knocking, and saying, "If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20).

So I believe that you have a three-fold application for the messages to the seven churches. In chapter four, verse one, when He's finished with the messages to the churches, He introduces a new section with the Greek word, 'metatauta' (after these things), that He also used in 1:19. We need to ask, "After what things?" After the things of chapters two and three. The things of chapters two and three are the things of the church. So after the things that pertain to the church we read, "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." (Revelation 4:1).

After this command, John said, "Immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and One sat on the throne." (Revelation 4:2). He then describes the throne of God with its emerald rainbow round about and the cherubim as they are worshiping. He sees the twenty four lesser thrones with the elders sitting on them and watches and observes the heavenly worship as the cherubim are declaring the eternal character, nature, and holiness of God. "They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come." (Revelation 4:8). As they are declaring the holiness of God, the twenty four elders fall on their faces, take their golden crowns, cast them on the glassy sea, and declare, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." (Revelation 4: 11).

Then John's attention is drawn to a sealed scroll with seven seals, with writing on the inside and the outside. An angel proclaims with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?" (Revelation 5:2). And John writes, "And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon." (Revelation 5:4). It is my belief that this scroll is the title deed to the earth, according to the Jewish Law of Redemption. There was an established time when you could redeem forfeited or lost property provided you fulfilled the requirements within the deed, represented by the scroll. We see this illustrated in the story of Ruth when Boaz redeemed the field that belonged to Elimelech in order that he might obtain the bride. We also see this illustrated in Jesus who purchased and paid the price to redeem the world in order that He might have His bride, the church.

Back in heaven, we find John weeping because, under Jewish law, if you don't redeem property at that appointed time, it goes to the new owner perpetually. You have one opportunity, after that it permanently belongs to the new owner. The thought of the world being forever under Satan's power and control was more than John could handle, and he begins to sob convulsively, until an elder says, "Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof." (Revelation 5:5). John says that he didn't see Him as a Lion of the tribe of Judah. He saw Him as a Lamb that had been slaughtered. Isaiah says, "For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him... But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:2,5).

In Revelation chapter five we read, "And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne. And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sang a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:7-10).

As you look carefully at the lyrics, we realize that only the church can sing them. When the Lord is in heaven

receiving the title deed to the earth, we will be in heaven watching Him as He takes the scroll out of the right hand of Him who is sitting on the throne. We will join in a glorious chorus singing, "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof. for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation." (Revelation 5:9). In Luke 21, Jesus told His disciples about the signs of His Second Coming and the Great Tribulation that would precede the end of the age. He said, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." (Luke 21:36).

When the Great Tribulation occurs on earth, I expect to be in heaven standing before the Son of Man and singing of the worthiness of the Lamb. Only the church can sing this song of redemption. If we follow the timing, we see that the church singing the song of redemption occurs in chapter five, before the opening of the scroll in chapter six, and that precedes the Great Tribulation on the earth. Again we read that He has "redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:9-10).

We see the church standing before the Son of Man and Jesus, talking about the Great Tribulation, saying, "Pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:36). Believe me, I want to be in that company up there!

Revelation chapter six begins the description of the Great Tribulation. As the Lord opens each seal of the scroll, a corresponding judgment is released upon the earth. As the first seal is opened, John writes, "And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer." (Revelation 6:2). I believe this is the revelation of the Antichrist. Some believe this rider on the white horse is Jesus Christ! But, as we examine the passage, we see that it's followed by war, famine, bloodshed, and a fourth of the people being killed. That doesn't sound like the Kingdom of God and the glorious coming of the Lord! I believe it is the Antichrist.

I do believe that the forces and the power of the Antichrist are in the world today and that the only thing keeping them from taking over is the presence of the church. We have a little strength, not much, but enough to keep back the powers of darkness from taking complete control. I don't believe that the Antichrist can take over until the church is removed.

Paul tells us in II Thessalonians chapter 2, "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. 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:" (II Thessalonians 2:7-8). This lines up with the Revelation chapter six passage where the church is in heaven as Jesus takes the scroll. As He begins to loose the scroll, the corresponding judgments are released upon the earth. It is the time of the pouring out of God's wrath.

In Romans 5:9, Paul tells us that, "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him." He repeats this in I Thessalonians 5:9, "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ."

We, the church, are not "appointed unto wrath." In Romans 1, Paul writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;" (Romans 1:18). It simply isn't consistent with the nature of God to judge the righteous with the wicked.

Now it is true that in the world we Christians will have tribulation. The world hates us, so we shouldn't be surprised at persecution. Jesus said, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18), and "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33). So, in this world you will have tribulation. But what is the source of the tribulation against the church? It's not God! Satan is the source of the tribulation.

When Satan is the source of tribulation, you can expect the children of God to be those who will be persecuted. But when God is the source of the judgment, it's a different story. God has already judged our sins on the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus bore the judgment of God for all of our guilt.

Remember when the angels were on their way to destroy Sodom? They stopped by and visited Abraham. They said, "Should we tell Abraham what we're about to do?" And they decided, "Well, why not?" So they told him that the sin of Sodom had ascended up into heaven and that they were on their way to check out the reports and destroy the city.

Abraham asked them to wait because his nephew Lot was living there. He said, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it?" So the LORD said, 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sake.' Then Abraham answered and said, 'Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for lack of five?' So He said, 'If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy it.' 'Suppose there should be forty found there?' So He said, 'I will not do it for the sake of forty.' 'Suppose thirty should be found there?' So He said, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.' 'Suppose twenty should be found there?' So He said, 'I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty.' 'Suppose ten should be found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it for the sake of ten.' (Genesis 18:23-33).

And what happened? When the angels came to the city of Sodom, they found one righteous man, Lot, sitting at the gate. Lot knew what the Sodomites were like. We're told by Peter that his righteous spirit had been vexed by the way the people were living. Lot, not knowing these individuals were angels, invited them into his home. That night the men of Sodom came and began to beat on the door, saying, "Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them." (Genesis 19:5). They literally wanted to rape them. Lot replied, "I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly." (Genesis 19:7).

The angels pulled Lot back as the crowd began to beat down the door. Then the angels smote the men with blindness. We're told that they continued all night trying to find the door. In the morning, the angels had to actually carry Lot out of Sodom because they couldn't destroy it until he was gone.

Lot was a type of the church that is to be delivered. Peter tells us that the Lord "delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;). The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished:" (II Peter 2:7-9). God will deliver the righteous, and He'll also reserve the ungodly for the day of judgment.

The basic principle is that the Lord of the Earth is righteous. He's fair and He won't destroy the righteous with the wicked. When God is the source of the judgment, then God will deliver the righteous out of judgment. Earlier, God judged the world because of its wickedness with the Flood. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5). But among all of the unrighteous of the world there was one righteous man, Noah. And God protected and sheltered Noah as His judgment was unleashed. Noah was sealed by God and safely taken through the Flood, just as the One Hundred and Forty Four Thousand in Revelation chapter seven were sealed by God so they would not be harmed by the Tribulation judgments. Noah is a type of the One Hundred and Forty Four Thousand that are sealed and taken through the judgment.

During this same period, there was also one other righteous man, Enoch. "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him." (Genesis 5:24). Enoch is an interesting picture of the church. He was translated, or raptured.

I do not believe that the church will go through the Great Tribulation. But there are certain Scriptures that people use to try to show that the church will be there. One argument is based on the interpretation of the 'last trump.' In I Corinthians 15, Paul speaks about the Rapture and says, "Behold, I show you a mystery; 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." (I Corinthians 15:51-52). Some try to link this with the seven trumpet judgments of Revelation and say that the seventh trumpet is the last trump. They see this as proof that the Rapture will not take place until the last trump occurs, which is the final judgment.

I see a couple of problems with this. First, the seven trumpet judgments in Revelation are given to the seven angels to sound and to bring in the corresponding judgments upon the earth. When we examine who is blowing each of these trumpets we see that they are all angels. In I Thessalonians 4:16, Paul is speaking of the Rapture, "For the Lord himself shall 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:" (I Thessalonians 4:16). The trumpet of the Rapture is not that of an angel. It's the trump of God!

After the fourth angel sounds his trump, there's a voice that shouts, "Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!" (Revelation 8:13). After the fifth trumpet sounds, again the voice says, "One woe is past; and, behold, there come two woes

more hereafter." (Revelation 9:12). It's clear that it's a woe that is pronounced to those on the earth. But our being caught up isn't a woe. It's glory!

Another argument that is often given is presented in Revelation chapter 20, as John views the various groups in heaven. Beginning with verse four we read, "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection." (Revelation 20:4-5). The point they make is that at the first resurrection John sees those who were beheaded for their witness of Jesus, who didn't worship the beast or take the image and receive the mark. They lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. Some believe this is solid proof that the church will go through the tribulation and be martyred.

But we need to go back and read it again. In verse four we see thrones, and that to those who sat upon them judgment was given. Let's look back at who these overcomers are. In the message to the overcomers to the church we read, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." (Revelation 3:21). John sees the church as a part of the first resurrection. Then he sees those who will be martyred during the Great Tribulation period for their refusal to take the mark of the beast. This is the great number that you find in chapter seven where the elder said, "What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:13-14).

But notice they stand in His holy temple and serve Him day and night continually. The church is the bride of Christ. Jesus said, "Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." (John 15:15). So, we have this second group comprised of the martyred saints during the Great Tribulation period. They will become a part of the kingdom, but the church will have already been raptured. And that's a far better way to go than through martyrdom in the Great Tribulation period!

In Revelation 10:7 we read more about the seventh trumpet. It says, "But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets." (Revelation 10:7). 'Days' is plural, but the Rapture will take place in a moment, in the 'twinkling of an eye.' Therefore, we really can't relate the last trump with the seventh trumpet of Revelation. The seventh trumpet of Revelation will take place over the 'days' of the sounding of the seventh trumpet. In contrast, when the trump of God sounds, we will be changed in a moment.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: 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 24:29-31). We see here that immediately after the tribulation of those days, Jesus appears to the whole world.

Then He gathers together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. But some say, "Isn't the church the elect?" Yes. The church is the elect, but Israel is also the elect. This is a reference to Israel, and you can cross reference it with several passages of the Old Testament where the same thing is declared. God will gather together the Jews from all over the world. In this passage, Jesus is speaking about His elect, the Jewish nation, not the church. Isaiah said, "And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." (Isaiah 11:12). Israel will be regathered.

What about the Scriptures that speak about the Antichrist making war against the saints? Daniel tells us in 7:21, "I beheld, and the same horn (the Antichrist) made war with the saints, and prevailed against them." In Revelation 13:7 we read, "And it was given unto him (the Antichrist) to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations." Who are the saints? They can't be the church because Jesus said to Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). The fact that he makes war on the saints and prevails against them means that they are the Jewish saints, not the church.

8. The Rapture Of The Church

I do not believe that the church will see the Antichrist empowered upon the earth. I would not be surprised if the Antichrist is already one of the main figures on the world scene. But I do not believe the church will see the Antichrist display his full power on the earth.

In II Thessalonians 2, as Paul is talking about this man of sin, the son of perdition, he declares, "And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. 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:" (II Thessalonians 2:6-8).

I do not believe that the Antichrist can take over the rule and authority of the earth while the church is still here. I believe that the Holy Spirit within the church is the restraining force that is holding back the powers of darkness from completely engulfing and overwhelming the world right now. But the moment the church is removed, there will be nothing to hinder or hold back the powers of darkness from taking total control. That which restrains shall restrain until he is taken out of the way. Then shall the man of sin, the son of perdition, be revealed. This is the reason why I'm not looking for the Antichrist. This is just another subtle and deceitful device of Satan, that leads people to be looking for the Antichrist rather than looking for Jesus Christ.

The reason some people get their prophetic scenarios confused is because they spiritualize and make the church Israel. They say, "God is through with the nation of Israel because they rejected the Messiah." They believe that God has discarded Israel and replaced it with the church, and the church is now "the Israel of God." They take those prophecies that refer to Israel as a nation and make them apply to the church. When you do that, it confuses the whole prophetic picture!

If the sun came up this morning, then God's covenant with Israel still stands. He said, "As long as the sun comes up, My covenant with Israel shall stand." God is not through with Israel. In the book of Hosea, God says, "Go back and get her again. Wash her off, clean her up, and take her back." Daniel chapter nine says that God still has a seven-year pact to fulfill with Israel, during which He will deal with them again in a direct way.

You do find the Rapture in type in the Old Testament. Enoch is a type of the church who was translated before the judgment of the flood. Daniel, I believe, is also a type of the church. Remember when Nebuchadnezzar built his great image and demanded that everybody bow down. I believe that this is a type of the image that the Antichrist will build, set in the temple, and demand that everyone worship. Nebuchadnezzar required everyone to bow down to the great image at the sound of the music. So when the music sounded, they all bowed down, with the exception of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. The Chaldeans reported to Nebuchadnezzar, "Hey there are three Hebrew boys over here who didn't bow. The music sounded, and they're just standing there!"

So he called in the three Hebrew boys, and said, "What's this I hear? You didn't bow? We'll give you another chance, but if you don't bow you'll be thrown into the burning, fiery furnace!" They said, "King, we're not even careful how we answer you in this matter, because the God that we serve is able to deliver us out of your burning, fiery furnace, and even if He doesn't, we still won't bow!" I love that kind of grit! You don't stop men like that!

Nebuchadnezzar was so angry that he had the furnace heated seven times hotter than it had ever been heated before. The three Hebrews were thrown in and the men that threw them in were burned to death, just because they got close to the fire! But the only thing that burned with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were the ropes by which the Chaldeans bound them. Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace and asked, "How many did we throw in there?" They answered, "Three, O king." "But how come I see four? They're walking around in the middle of the fire! And the fourth one looks like the Son of God. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, come out of there!"

When they came out, not a hair was singed. There wasn't even the smell of smoke! Everybody was amazed, and Nebuchadnezzar, great at making proclamations, said, "I proclaim there's no God in all the earth like the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego who was able to deliver from the burning, fiery furnace!"

But where was Daniel when this was happening? Do you think Daniel bowed before the image? If you do, you know a different Daniel than I know! Remember back in the first chapter, Daniel had purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself, even with the king's meat. I don't believe that the man who had such purpose of heart would ever bow. Daniel was probably away doing the king's business. Daniel becomes a type of the church which will have been removed when the Antichrist sets up his image and demands everybody to worship. We, the church, will be taking care of business elsewhere, in the heavenly scene!

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When you realize that the source of the tribulation is God, it automatically precludes God's people being involved. It wouldn't be just, or consistent, for God to judge the righteous with the wicked.

Peter said that God "spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly;" (II Peter 2:5). God spared the righteous but brought the flood upon the world of the ungodly. That's what the judgment is about. It's targeted at the world of the ungodly. "And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example unto those that after should live ungodly;" (II Peter 2:6). But He "delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;) The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished:" (II Peter 2:7-9). This declares the clear purposes of God.

I believe that through the Old Testament types, such as Lot, Noah, Enoch and Daniel, we see the truth that the church will not be here during the Great Tribulation. Scripture plainly states, "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ," (I Thessalonians 5:9). "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him." (Romans 5:9). And "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;" (Romans 1:18) - but this doesn't describe the child of God.

I believe that God wanted every church age to believe that it was the last. Believing this has a three-fold effect. First, it gives us an urgency for the work that we are doing, to get the Gospel out. We don't have much time, so we should "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us." We need to "run with patience the race that is set before us," (Hebrews 12:1). What we're called to do we need to do quickly. There's an urgency to our work. We need to get the message out because we don't have much time. The Lord is returning soon!

Second, it gives us a correct perspective of material things. The material world is going to burn. We put all of our investments in the things of this material world, but they will all be lost. Jesus said, "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." (Matthew 6:20). He said, "Use the unrighteousness of mammon for eternal purposes." If God does bless you financially, that's great. But we need to use it for eternal purposes. Jesus' imminent return gives us the correct balance between the things of the Spirit and the material things of the world. We recognize that the material world is rapidly passing away and only those things that are eternal will last. Knowing that we have only one life which will soon be past, we recognize that only what we do for Christ will last. This gives us the proper perspective.

The third reason why I'm convinced that Jesus wants every generation to believe it will be the last is that it maintains a purity in our lives. Jesus said, "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing." (Matthew 24:46). I don't want the Lord to come and find me watching an X-rated movie or cruising pornographic sites on the Internet. Imagine! Believing that Jesus will return at any time keeps a purity in our lives. The Lord could come today! "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing." John said, "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. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." (I John 3:23). It gives us a purifying hope. That's why I believe it's important that we keep this distinctive of believing in the imminent return of Jesus Christ and not compromise it.

I am looking for the Lord of heaven to come and snatch me away that I might be with Him. As He said, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." (Luke 21:36). That is my prayer, and it is my expectation to be there, and the exciting thing is that it could happen at any time! I do believe that the Lord intended us to live in this anticipation in every age of the church.

And I believe that the hope of the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ is the spark that God has used to bring revival throughout the church. This is what is sparking revival today, the fact that we don't have much time. The Lord is coming soon. We are living at the very edge, and it is as Paul said, "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." (Romans 13:11).

May God help us to maintain that blessed hope and bring it to all people in order that:

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- 1). They might know the urgency of living for Jesus Christ fully and completely;
- 2). They might have the right priority concerning the things of the world which so easily grasp onto us and hold us back;
- 3). They might live lives of purity; and
- 4). They will keep their hearts and lives pure in serving the Lord knowing that He might come at any moment.

I want to be watching and I want to be ready to meet Him when He comes. I don't want to be doing anything that would be dragging me down or holding me back. I want to be ready for my Lord!

I believe it is so important that we proclaim this teaching of the Rapture and keep the people watching and hoping because, without that, what hope do we have in the world today? We need to keep people focused on the truth that a better day is coming very soon. Be ready! The Lord is coming for His people, and He is going to take us to be with Him.