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**The Church's Progress**

What I've tried to do for you on this section called eschatology is impress you with the overwhelming differences between Israel and the Church. If you don't see clearly the differences the waters will be muddy when you come to the subject of eschatology. So far we've been looking at Israel because Israel came first in God's plan and so we have looked at Israel's covenants, Israel's historical progress and Israel's prophetic terminology. Those are three basic areas we want to be able to clearly articulate because when we come to the Church the Church isn't defined by a covenant, its historical progress is not charted out and there is different prophetic terminology. It's not that the old terminology isn't used in the NT; it's just that a different set of terminology is introduced and we'll go through some of that today.

But thinking about Israel, Israel was defined by what? By the word of God in the Abrahamic Covenant. That covenant marked out their destiny in a particular land, as bringing forth a particular seed, the Messiah, and in being a blessing to the whole world. That is where Israel is headed. As far as their historical progress toward that destiny is concerned, she was given another covenant to monitor the progress. What's that covenant? The Mosaic Covenant. This covenant set out God's will for Israel's life, the blessing and the curse, it was all laid out beforehand, if you bless Me you will be blessed, if you curse Me, you will be cursed. This set in motion the progress Israel would make toward her prescribed destiny. She cursed God so she went into Exile among all the nations. But God promised via a New Covenant He would judge the nations and return Israel to Himself and finally bless Israel in her land.

Last time we touched on the special vocabulary that God developed in the OT to describe this judgment of the nations and restoration of Israel. So let's

review that. This is not too difficult; anyone with a concordance can do this. The terms we covered are very important because they do occur later on in the NT. Tribulation, we said, was a general reference to a time of distress coming upon Israel. Deut 4:30, a very important reference. It's where the concept of "tribulation" first occurs in an eschatological context and that is where it gets its flavor. The passage paints the picture that the tribulation is a time of extreme difficulty for Israel; they are out among the nations and the pressure is so great that the only solution is to return to the Lord. It's at that time that the Lord is remembering the Abrahamic Covenant and so He's working in the life of the nation at that time to bring them back to Himself.

But it takes tremendous horror to do that, this is not just your run of the mill tribulation people face. All people face hard times, some harder than others. And sometimes critics of the pre-trib rapture position will say, you just want to get out easy, you want an escape hatch from the tribulations of this world. Excuse me! That is not the way the word is being used here. The word is being used here of the universe ripping apart at the seams, a time of unparalleled difficulty in human history. So it's not that we're trying to avoid the normal suffering that other believers have faced. Other believers have faced some pretty intense persecution. What do you think about the Roman coliseum? What about the Reformation, burnings at the stake? What was that all about? It was tribulation, it was suffering to purify the Church, stimulate Church growth, that kind of thing. But the tribulation we're talking about is not to stimulate Church growth, it's to punish the nations for their treatment of Israel and purge Israel to faith in her Messiah. That's the purpose of this future time of tribulation, so let's not confuse this.

Another term we summarized was the day of the Lord. That is an OT expression that is used broadly sometimes for a period of intense judgment involving human armies and nature catastrophes that lead up to a narrow use of the term for the Second Arrival of the Messiah. It can also refer to the time of blessing which follows known as the kingdom. So understand that expression relates to what Israel must go through and what the nations must go through in order to get to the destiny of Israel and the nations in the kingdom.

Then we looked at the metaphor of birth pangs and this was the metaphor picked up to depict what the world must go through in preparation for the

kingdom; a period of intense and increasingly intense convulsions that result in the birth of the kingdom in the world. You see Jesus pick that one up in Matt 24, the idea that they start off small and then very rapidly they increase until the kingdom is born and the world is overflowing with joy. Incidentally what famous hymn by Isaac Watts do we sing every Christmas? *Joy to the World!* What's that hymn about? Is that hymn about the birth of Jesus Christ? No, it's about the return of Jesus in the kingdom and the rejoicing in all heaven and earth that comes about in the kingdom. Watts was a dispensationalist and he was writing about the future establishment of the kingdom on earth. That was Watts' desire as a Biblicist and a dispensationalist. That's when we get to the joy, after the world has faced the birth pangs, not before, just like a woman giving birth; she experiences the joy after intense pain.

And then we looked at the Seventieth Week of Daniel. This one is very specific because it follows very closely calendar time, seven years, the years are 360 days each, for a total of 2,520 days. That begins with the Roman prince called Antichrist making a treaty with the national leadership of Israel to give them peace for seven years. He breaks the treaty in the middle of the seven years by stopping sacrifice and committing the abomination. These prophecies require certain stage setting to occur beforehand. There are preparations that have to be made. Israel has to be a nation; we've seen that, 1948. Israel has to control the temple mount, we've seen that, 1967, though they don't exercise their legal rights. Israel has to have temple vessels, temple furniture; they've begun to build that. They have to have priests to serve in the temple; they've tracked down the blood lines and started training priests, Cohen. So, all this stage setting has to occur and that's what we're seeing in our life time. And it's very exciting to watch because nineteen hundred years of Christians came and went without seeing this. So we live in very interesting times, we can see the pieces coming together for prophecy to be fulfilled.

So those are Israel's prophetic terms but we are the Church. And so when you see these terms in the NT know they are related to Israel's destiny. Now we come to the Church and the Church, unlike Israel, is not given a historical progress, there are no timetables, no covenants. Rather, the Church is defined by six themes. And we want to highlight and expand these six themes today.

Before we get to them when did the Church originate? This is a critical, critical question. If you don't answer this question right you're going to take a serious wrong turn. When did the Church begin? Did it begin with Adam? Did it begin with Abraham? Well, the word "church" means a gathering or assembly of people, and you had the assembly of Israel in the OT. Was Israel the Church in the OT? Well, if by church you mean an assembly of people then yes, Israel in the OT is a church. But the assembly of rioting pagans in Acts 19 was a church in that sense. So we're not talking about a mere assembly of people. We're talking about the Church as the body of Christ not as a mere assembly of people.

Let's turn to Acts 1:5 and ask the question, what is the body of Christ? Since a body has a head what the NT is talking about metaphorically is an organism; Christ and the Church makeup an organism. Christ is the head; the Church is His body. So there's a unity between Christ in heaven and the Church on earth and heaven. And this is the first theme: the union of believers with the risen, ascended, seated Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. So let's think about this. If there is this union how did this union take place? Somehow you have to come into union with Christ. How do you get into the body of Christ? You get into it by Spirit baptism. 1 Cor 12:13, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." So Spirit baptism is the mode of entry. It's not a wet baptism; it's a dry baptism, a real baptism when we come into living union with Christ in heaven. Well, when did this start? Obviously it couldn't start until Christ was resurrected and seated in heaven. You can't be united to an unresurrected, unascended Christ. So there are the historical Christ events that have to occur before you can get into this living union. Already you see you can't have the Church forming in the OT. There was no resurrected, ascended Christ in the OT. There was no Spirit baptism in the OT. The Spirit does other things in the OT, but He doesn't baptize. So when did the Spirit begin baptizing? What did the resurrected Christ say in Acts 1:5? At this point He is resurrected but what does He say? "John baptized with water, but *you will be baptized* with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Is the baptism of the Spirit a present or a future tense as of Acts 1:5? Its future, you *will* be baptized. So they weren't already baptized with the Holy Spirit. And therefore they couldn't possibly be in the body of Christ. But He says, not many days from now this baptism of the Spirit is coming. Well what happens not many days from now? The Lord ascends, He sits down at

the right hand of the Father and what do the Father and the Son do? That old *filioque* clause. Both the Father *and the Son* pour forth the Spirit. That's the only event in the Book of Acts that happens "not many days from now." So this must be the Spirit being sent to do His baptizing work, baptizing believers for the first time into the body of Christ.

So we conclude that the Church began in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost, not before that, not after that. Now those who believe in Him on earth, from the day of Pentecost forward are placed in union with Jesus Christ in heaven. Let's turn to Eph 2 because Ephesians is the central NT epistle that explores this new thing called the Church. Certain things are said about this Church; one of them that I'm talking about is in 3:6. Paul is going on about the mystery of Christ. A mystery is something never revealed before and now revealed. So Paul has received new revelation, verse 6, "to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs" fellow heirs with who? With Jews, "and fellow members of the body," fellow members with who? With Jews, "and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." notice he doesn't say the Gentiles become Jews, he says they become fellow heirs *with* Jews, they become fellow members of what with Jews? *The body*, Jewish and Gentile believers are all in one "body," that's the body of Christ and it's not Israel, Israel is never referred to by the metaphor of a body. Israel is a nation. Here's a big difference you want to catch. Israel is not a body, it's a nation. And what do you have among all nations on earth? You have social laws. God gave social laws to Israel. Do you find any social laws given to the Church on loans, public health and latrines? I haven't found any yet. This is one of those striking differences between OT Israel and the NT Church. Try going through and finding social laws for the NT Church and there's this rather large gap. Why do you suppose that is? Because the Church isn't a nation. If the Church was a nation then God would give the Church social laws. But there aren't any. So when the Church wants to find some principles of social laws they have to get those out of OT Israel. Why didn't God give some to the Church? Because the Church is supra-national, it's composed of people from every tribe, tongue and nation. There are people who have believed the gospel inside of every nation and some of those nations are democracies and some are dictatorships and some are oligarchies, all kinds of various governments, various sets of laws, etc...The Church can't be identified with one nation and one set of social laws. We're embedded in every nation with various sets of

laws. So can the Church be Israel? No, it's a new thing - Jew and Gentile in one body.

Now back up to Eph 2:6 for another stunning thing: if you've ever thought about it, you can think about this one for the rest of your life, wondering how this happens. Look at what verse 6 says about the Church. He has "raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus." That's our first theme, the union of believers with the resurrected and seated Lord Jesus Christ. And notice, where is this union? Is it on earth or in heaven? It's in heaven. We are seated with Him in the heavenlies right now. That is why our citizenship is said to be where? On earth or in heaven? Our citizenship is in heaven. Why? Because we are in union with the Lord Jesus Christ who is seated in heaven. So that's the first theme, our union with Christ.

Theme two is growth. You find this in the NT, it talks about the growth of this body to maturity. Stay in Ephesians and look at Eph 4:11. In the metaphor of the head and the body the head throughout the NT is the risen, ascended Lord Jesus Christ. He is complete, so far as His substitutionary work is done He is finished, that's why He sat down at the right hand of the Father, the priests in the OT would never sit down because their job of sacrificing was never finished. So when the Lord Jesus sat down at the Father's right hand that is very significant because now a high priest has sat down, signifying it is finished, there is no more sacrificial work to do be done. That's our head and the head is complete, it is full grown, but the body is in development, it has to grow to maturity. It's like a baby, when a baby is born it has this big old head and if you ever get to play with a baby just try to stretch the babies arms over it's head and you'll see they just reach up to the ears. Imagine how funny we would look if our proportions remained that way into adulthood. But see, that's just the point, the body grows to maturity and these proportions get worked out, there's development. Notice verse 11, Paul is going on about spiritual gifts; this is another thing the Church receives that OT Israel didn't receive, spiritually gifted people are given to the body. "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness

of Christ.” There’s a whole lot packed in there but what’s the main idea? That Christ has given to His body spiritually gifted people for what purpose? Spiritual growth. The body has to grow to maturity; it has to grow in proportion to the head, Jesus Christ. One means by which that growth occurs is spiritually gifted men. And we’ve gone through that in the prior section, the historical maturing of the Church. And what do you see if you look at Church History? A progress in doctrinal understanding. In the first five centuries what was the doctrinal progress? The source of authority, the canon, the person of Jesus Christ as God and man in hypostasis and the Trinity. In the next ten centuries what was that progress all about? Understanding what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross and understanding how what He accomplished on the cross comes to me. Is it by works, is it by faith or is it by works and faith? And in the last five centuries what has the progress been about? Understanding the nature of the Church and understanding the destiny of the Church and how this all synchronizes with the destiny of Israel. So that’s doctrinal advance or growth and I’m convinced that Christians who have accepted these core Christian truths are really the only ones who are prepared to go into all the details of the Christian faith. In other words, Church History is like a train going down a railroad track and there are these stations along the way. The Church was going down the track and they came to the issue of authority, is the Scripture the authority or is human reason the authority and if you didn’t go along with the clarification that the Scriptures are the authority then you got off the train at that station and now you can’t really advance any more because if you don’t hold to the authority of Scripture how are you ever going to advance? Then the train went down to station two, the person of Christ, and all kinds of people got off the train there and the rest of their theology is screwy. Go read the literature of the Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Mormons and geez, they are really out there. If you wonder why they are really out there understand these people got off the train a long time ago and the whole thing has developed in some very strange directions. So my point is that you want to stay with the historic orthodoxy because otherwise you get way off track. So theme two is: growth or progress toward maturity down through church history despite the fact that lots of people jump ship.

The third theme of the Church in the NT is global evangelization. This, of course, is the Great Commission, Matt 28:19-21, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son

and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” Did Israel have a great commission? Were they to go out to all nations? No, they were to stay separate from all nations; they had political borders, separate laws, separate diet, all kinds of barriers between them and the nations. So this great commission thing is quite different. The Church has been given a commission of missions. Things started off quite interestingly in the early church did they not? What happened after the day of Pentecost? Did Peter and the apostles dash out of Jerusalem to go evangelize Gentiles? No, these barriers were still up and it took persecution to blow the Church out of Jerusalem. After it got out they got the picture and things progressed rather rapidly. But interestingly the progress died off after the early centuries and became politically entrenched in Rome. It kind of remained that way until the last 300-400 years, particularly until the rise of Dispensationalism and literal interpretation. Missions were always second rate, low priority. It’s only when you had literal interpretation with a dispensational clarity that you have the rise of the modern missionary movement. There’s a reason for that - global evangelization is one of the themes of the Church’s reason for existence. And if you’re not clear on the Church-Israel distinction you can’t get clear on the mission of the Church. So dispensationalists, looking at the Scriptures said, hey, the Church has to get completed. How is the Church going to get completed if the gospel never penetrates every people group? The body is said to be composed of people from all tribes, tongues and nations, so who has evangelized that tribe, that tongue, that nation? Well, we better go do it.

The fourth theme of the Church is suffering from the onslaught of Satan. Satan hated Christ and so Satan is going to hate Christ’s body; if you hate the head you’re going to hate the body. Satan is opposed to the Lord Jesus Christ but why can’t he get to the Lord Jesus directly? Where is the Lord Jesus? At the Father’s right hand, He’s sitting where Satan wanted to be. Satan got outmaneuvered. This is characteristic of evil. This is kind of a guideline to pray. When you get in certain kinds of situations in life where you have to pray these kinds of prayers, where you find yourself confronted with a strong evilness, we’re confronted nationally with Islam, strong evil, so what’s a good way of praying about this? Here’s the strategy to pray. Pray that evil oversteps its bounds and does something stupid.



Satan tends to do this down through history; he'll overplay his cards and make a mistake. I'm not saying he's stupid, he's a genius, but he is so arrogant that his arrogance causes his genius to make mistakes. Satan so hated the Lord Jesus Christ that he wanted to kill Him. And when the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross Satan thought he had aced the Lord Jesus Christ. But the very fact of killing the Lord Jesus on the cross did what to Satan's dream of a kingdom? It pulled the rug out from under it, didn't it? And that's the way this chess match between God and Satan works. If you watch, again and again in Scripture, it's as though Satan is getting ahead in the game and just when it seems Satan is going to finish things off he makes a move that blows the whole thing and God just counter moves and now Satan is back to square one.

Take for example Saul on the Damascus Road. Here Satan has been working through this fierce opponent of Christ's body. He's been arresting Christians, he's been imprisoning Christians, he's been murdering Christians. And here comes Saul down the Damascus Road. What's he going to do? He's going to kill more Christians. But how does the Lord Jesus clarify what he's really doing on the way to Damascus? "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" Not why do you persecute the Christians?" "Why do you persecute Me?" Why? How is Saul persecuting Christ? I thought He was persecuting Christians? Because Christians are in union with Christ. So to attack the body is to attack the head. Jesus warned us that in this world we would have tribulation and that the world would hate us because it hated Him. The reason the world hates Christians and makes fun of Christians is not that they have a personal thing against us, it's because we're identified by Satan as Christians and so we have to take flack. We are the targets. Knowing that we don't walk around with a big bull's eye painted on our chest like a bunch of idiots. If you know you're going to be shot at you put on some armor. That's Eph 6, we've got a helmet of salvation and a belt of truth and so forth. The church has to be prepared with it's armor at all times. And it's primarily a defensive war we're fighting. We're protecting captured ground, ground that Christ has already conquered.

But it is a situation where we get beat up from time to time. We suffer because of our identification with the Lord Jesus Christ. And in this Satan always oversteps his bounds, even here. How many times have you read or heard testimonies by believers where they went through a struggling period.

What do you often hear along with those testimonies besides the suffering? The results; and what are the results? Spiritual growth, edification of other believers, evangelism of unbelievers. How well we suffer is a stimulant to evangelistic encounters. And even here when Satan attacks he usually winds up causing the church to grow. Tertullian said “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church!” What does that mean? It means every time Satan persecutes the Church the Church grows more. So suffering is the fourth theme in the Church.

The fifth then, and here we’re getting into our destiny, is the church is immune from the wrath to come. When we looked at Israel did we see that Israel was immune from the wrath to come? Quite the opposite, she’s destined to go through a time of wrath before her kingdom. It’s that wrath that stimulates her to repent. So this theme is the diametric opposite of Israel’s theme. For this look at 1 Thess 1:10. The Church immune from the wrath. The word “wrath” here refers to the day of the Lord and it says we are “to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.” There are people who are of post-tribulational rapture persuasion, and we’ll get into all these views later on, but their argument is that this doesn’t mean anything more than that Christians will be protected through the wrath. The problem with that, one problem, is that first of all, this wrath in the Thessalonian epistles is the day of the Lord wrath. We already went through that term and that term is specifically related to Israel and the nations, not the Church. Another problem is this word “deliver” in verse 10 means “to keep away from” something, not to let us enter into it and keep us safe through it, but to keep us away from it altogether. And why should there be wrath against the body of Christ anyway? That doesn’t make sense does it? The Father executing wrath on Christ? The Church is identified with Christ. See, there are some radical problems saying the Church is Israel. Israel is going to go to a time of wrath as are the nations. But the Church is not destined for wrath. There are other passages on this. But the point we want to make is the Church’s immunity from the future wrath of God. And this isn’t trying to get out of a little suffering. We already said in the fourth theme that the church suffers at the onslaught of Satan. That has as its purpose on spiritual growth. But this wrath to come is the Lord’s wrath and it has a different purpose; to judge the nations and purge Israel to repentance. Why would the Church go through this? They’ve already trusted in Jesus Christ.

Finally, a sixth theme is not only is the Church immune from the future wrath of God, but the Church is commanded to look for the imminent return of the Lord Jesus to be delivered from that time. That's what we call the rapture and I want to define this word "imminency." It's not quite what some people think it is. The term imminency means that the rapture can occur at any moment, a prophesied event may occur before the rapture but it doesn't have to. For example, some people believe that the battle of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39 could occur before the Church is raptured. That doesn't violate imminency because it may not, it may occur after the Church is raptured. All imminency means is that it can happen at any moment. There are no prophesied events that must occur before the rapture.

The point is well made here in 1 Thess 1:10, what are we waiting for? What are we expecting? "His Son from heaven," that very clearly communicates that the thing we are watching for is not wrath, it's not the antichrist, it's not a ten nation confederacy, it's the Lord Jesus Christ coming for us from heaven. That's what we're watching for, that's the next thing so far as the Church is concerned. Remember what I said about the book of Acts? In the beginning of Acts even though the Church exists is it clear that it's existing? No, because what's going on throughout the first half of the book of Acts? Peter is offering the kingdom to Israel again, repent and return so the times of refreshing can come, so they can have their Kingdom. The Church doesn't become clear until decades later, so a lot of these things really aren't a problem for imminency. We'll get into that.

Turn to 1 Cor 15. People who quibble about imminency will all tell you well, the world has to be evangelized before the rapture so it can't happen yet. Peter had to die so the rapture couldn't come before Peter died and they go through all these things, and there are explanations for these things, but a point I want to make is that the doctrine of imminency doesn't show up until the Church is in existence. Here Paul is talking about the resurrection and he says, "Behold, I tell you a mystery," something that is new revelation, "I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." This is new; you don't find this in the OT. They knew about resurrection but what they did not know was that there would be people who never died but were just instantaneously changed; an instantaneous transformation of a mortal body into an immortal body is an utterly new revelation from God's mind.

But the idea here is that you have these themes that define the church; the union of believers with Christ in the heavenly places. Israel didn't have that. The growth of the church doctrinally is not political growth, it's not kingdom growth, it's spiritual growth, doctrinal understanding. Third, global evangelization, the great commission, go forth to all nations. Israel did not have that. They were placed at the crossroads of the earth so nations would come to them. Fourth, suffering at the hands of Satan, you could argue Israel has this but the emphasis is on the nations that warred against them, the earthly enemies, the emphasis in the Church is on Satan, the heavenly enemies. Fifth, the Church is immune from the wrath to come. Israel is destined to go through the wrath to come. And imminency, the return of Christ for His Church can occur at any moment. No prophesied event is standing in the way of Christ's any-moment arrival. Do you see a difference between Israel and the Church? Where in all these themes do you see any kind of an Exile mentioned? Where do you see any kind of return to the land mentioned? Where do you see any kind of we're going to bring the Kingdom on earth mentioned? These are themes that are particular and peculiar and aimed at the Church. The idea to come out of this is that the Church and Israel are two distinct entities.

Let's turn to 1 Thess 4:13 and introduce formally a prophetic term unique to the Church. The term rapture; some people will say, well, the word "rapture" isn't in the Bible so I don't agree with it. Well the word Trinity isn't in there either so I'm not particularly impressed with that argument. It is in the Latin Vulgate, it's referred to as the *rapio* in 1 Thess 4:17, the passage we use at funerals and it's also in Acts 8:37 where Philip is raptured from one place to another place several miles away, so we have an example of a rapture in that a person is moved from one place to another and the basic idea of the word is to snatch away to another place. Verse 13, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep," do you see how practical Paul was. You hear people say well, prophecy is too hard and I don't want to bother with it, Christians disagree about it, etc. Well, why did Paul bother writing two whole epistles that deal with it? In the context what was the problem? This church was under persecution, they were facing an onslaught of attacks, members were being killed. And what do you need when you are facing one black day after another? You need hope. So Paul doesn't want them to be uninformed "about those who are asleep," that's your metaphor for

physical death, they're just asleep. That's comforting already; just the term asleep is a soft one that communicates eventual resurrection. So prophecy is to give hope, it's to comfort, to give us the strength to endure. "I don't want you ignorant about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope." There were people that had no hope of resurrection and that would be intense grieving indeed. But it's a different story for the Christian.

Verse 14, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Look at that and think about it! Let's read verse 14 literally, "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him, when He comes, bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." So is there going to be a reunion? If Jesus were to come today, what does it say? He would bring with Him those Christians who have died. You can think in your own family, in your own congregation of somebody that has died, you're going to see them again. That's what it says here in my Bible. It says "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Verse 15, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first." Verses 14-16 are dealing with the details of the event. So let's diagram this. Here's the ground, here's some rotted body with a few molecules left. Jesus comes down from heaven and He brings with Him, it says "those who have died" but their bodies are in the ground because when we die we don't get resurrection bodies right away. So along with the Lord Jesus Christ come Christians who have died before us. They come with Him and at this point they receive their resurrection bodies, because what else does it say in verse 16? He "will descend ... and the dead in Christ shall rise first." So all of a sudden there's an assembling of material transforming into bodies and these spirits are all of a sudden back in a body, a resurrected one.

Talk about something mind blowing here, try putting this in a physics class; what's going on, because obviously bodies who have died centuries ago don't exist, is the molecules have been incorporated in all kinds of plants, worms, all kinds of things after the body decayed in the ground. But somehow God creates this resurrected body and He does it instantly. It doesn't take a

million and a half years to do this. You don't have to go through a hundred transformations. This is something that happens instantly when Christ returns, an amazing thing.

Then he goes on and he gives another detail in verse 17. "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord." You get the added detail over in 1 Cor 15 of how rapidly this happens. But basically here you get what happens. Here's a Christian on earth, he has a mortal body and the Christians in heaven don't have mortal bodies, they're just spirits. What happens is, these spirit people get their bodies and then, suddenly, when they get their resurrection bodies those of us in mortal bodies get changed in a twinkling of an eye into a resurrection body without ever having to go through the death process. So these people, they died, their spirit departed from their body, their soul is in the presence of the Lord. Then they are reunited with their bodies. But the people who are alive at this fantastic instant in history don't have to die. There will be one generation of Christians and one only who never die, but instantly go from this body to the next one. At this point everything changes, a radical thing. That's what we call the rapture and it can happen at any moment.

So we've defined a key term that relates uniquely to the church. It was a mystery in the OT and now revealed. Next time we'll go on and start talking about the Church and its destiny and how it relates to Israel's future destiny.

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