

*Years ago, the headline in an Austin, Texas newspaper read: MAN EXPERIENCES HEART ATTACK AFTER THE RAPTURE.*

*Herbert Washington, whom co-workers said was unduly concerned with the rapture and the Second Coming of Christ, suffered a serious heart attack when his co-workers pretended they were caught away without him.*

*The article reads, last Tuesday, they laid work outfits on their chairs and hid in a supply room, and when Herbert came back from the restroom, he thought the rapture had occurred. The janitor, an outspoken Muslim, pretended to have witnessed everyone disappear and ran around the office in a panic. Herbert fell to the ground clutching his heart screaming, “I knew you’d forget me, Jesus! **What did I do wrong?**” He was taken to a local hospital. The employees emerged from the supply room and gathered up their extra clothes.*

*“We didn’t mean to scare him to death,” said one woman. “He’s just always talking about it, so today we decided to turn the tables on him.”*

*Washington underwent bypass surgery and is recovering well and “digging into the Bible like never before,” says his wife.*

As you know, we have been working our way through the book of **Revelation** and for the last seven weeks, we studied letters from the Lord to seven churches in the western region of Asia Minor. These were seven real churches and as I said on a few occasions, these seven real churches also represented all churches throughout the entire church age – from the beginning of the church in the first century up to the present day.

Now if you recall, two weeks ago we looked at the church in Philadelphia, which was described as a faithful church, and in His letter to this faithful church, Jesus gave them a promise and He said in **Revelation 3:10**,

**“Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”**

As Jesus said, this **hour of testing** will involve the **whole world** – it will be global in nature, and this testing will be a period of great calamity and affliction upon those who **dwell on the earth** – specifically, the unbelieving inhabitants at that time. Most Bible scholars see this global testing as a reference to the Tribulation period which will impact the whole world, but Jesus tells the faithful church, He will keep them **from** this worldwide hour of testing, and this morning we are going

to explore how that happens. This morning we are diving into the very popular and mysterious, and often debated event called the Rapture.

Now, it will be difficult to explain the Rapture outside the context of the Tribulation period, so the first thing I want to do is to give you a brief summary about the Tribulation period – for this period really serves as the backdrop for the Rapture.

In a nutshell, the book of **Revelation**, from **Chapters 6** through **18** provide a description of the Tribulation period which is a seven-year period, broken in half – into two 3½ year periods. Both periods are terrible, but the second period, the second half is really terrible and it's called the "Great Tribulation." The Tribulation period is a horrible time, full of unimaginable cosmic and natural disasters, diseases and plagues, demonic deception and torment, and unfathomable death and destruction. It will be a time of God's judgment and wrath upon the world – literally it's hell on earth and that's no exaggeration, but it will serve a divine purpose – that being to turn people to God.

In my opinion, and this is going to sound crazy, the Tribulation period is an act of love by God towards people who have rejected the truth, rejected Jesus Christ – primarily the Jews and that's why this terrible period is also called the "*time of Jacob's trouble*". God is love, and in His love, God is giving unbelieving people a small taste of what hell is really like in a last-ditch effort to bring them to repentance, and many Jews and Gentiles alike will turn to God during the Tribulation period and be saved.

**So, where does the Rapture fit in all of this?** Although there are differing views about the Rapture, and that's totally okay – one's view about the Rapture has no bearing on one's salvation, I believe the Bible teaches that those who have genuinely placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and follow Him as Lord will be **kept from** God's judgment and wrath during the Tribulation period just as the church in Philadelphia was told by the Lord.

I believe this is confirmed by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the church in Thessalonica when he told them that Jesus **rescues us from the wrath to come**, and later he told them that **God has not destined us for wrath**, so I believe the church will not be present during the Tribulation period – it will be raptured, and let me explain why I believe the Bible teaches this.

If you have your Bible, turn to **1 Thessalonians 4**, and let me set this passage up. In the church of Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul was addressing the fears of some in this congregation that loved ones who had passed away would be left in their

graves and in some way miss out when Jesus returns for His church. That's what they feared, so, in his attempt to put them at ease and to encourage them, Paul gives this church a play-by-play preview of what will happen, and this is what he says beginning with **verse 13**. Listen to this.

**<sup>13</sup> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Therefore comfort one another with these words.**

Now before we dig into this passage, I want to direct your attention to two words found in **verse 17** – the words are “**caught up**”. In Latin, it is the word “*rapturo*” and that's where we get our English word for “*rapture*”. In the Greek, it is the word “*harpazo*” and it means to *seize*, to *snatch*, or to *take away*. It can also mean to *claim for oneself*, or to *rescue from the danger of destruction*. That's what “*harpazo*” means, and in all of its meanings, there is always movement from one location to another, a movement that is both swift and forceful. It's done with power.

So, in this passage, Paul tells us Jesus will come down from heaven – not to the earth for this is not His Second Coming, but in the **air**, in the **clouds**. We are told there will be a lot of noise – a **shout**, maybe it's a command from the **archangel Michael** and there is a **trumpet** blast – but that doesn't necessarily mean unbelievers will hear any of this – it could be something only heard by the church.

Then Paul reveals that the believers who have **fallen asleep**, which is a way to describe believers who have passed away – will **rise first**. Just as **Jesus died and rose again**, so will deceased believers rise again. Right now, the souls of believers are in heaven with the Lord, but when the Rapture occurs, their bodies will be raised from the graves, raised from the oceans, and raised from the ashes – brand new, healed, restored, and glorified – never to die again. So, believers who have passed away get a head start so to speak, then the believers who are still alive on the earth will also be caught up – snatched away – raptured, and their bodies will also be changed as well.

**This sounds great, but how does this happen?** Well, Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 15**, beginning with **verse 50**. He says,

**<sup>50</sup>Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. <sup>51</sup>Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, <sup>52</sup>in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup>For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.**

The Rapture occurs in the **twinkling of an eye**, faster than you can blink your eyes. One moment you are walking in the rain and in a split second you are above the rain clouds doing the “Superman thing” at 60,000 feet with the Lord in new bodies. We are here one moment, and then poof – gone – planes have no pilots, busses have no drivers, small children are missing – you get the idea. **Can you imagine the chaos and the panic that will ensue?**

Now, some may say the Rapture defies all logic and it goes against common sense; however, the precedent for the Rapture already exists in the Bible. **How did Enoch die?** He didn’t. In **Hebrews 11:5**, the writer says,

**By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.**

God just took Enoch – snatched him away to heaven while he was alive.

**What about the prophet Elijah – how did he die?** Again, he didn’t. We are told in **2 Kings 2:11**,

**As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven.**

As Elijah and his replacement Elisha were walking and talking, God snatched up Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind.

**What about the Apostle Paul?** Speaking in third person, he related his own experience in **2 Corinthians 12**, beginning in **verse 2**. Paul said,

**<sup>2</sup>I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. <sup>3</sup>And I know how such a man—whether in the**

**body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows — <sup>4</sup> was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.**

Paul went to heaven, he saw and heard things, but he wasn't allowed to share it. So, the biblical precedent for the Rapture is clearly evident, and one of these days, it will happen to the church.

Okay, I want to share something with you that I think might be helpful to connect all the end times pieces together, including the Rapture, and I want to do this by using the ancient Jewish marriage process as a guide. Now, let me say, the Bible does not make this connection, so don't chase me out of here as a heretic, and I am not suggesting in any way that the ancient Jewish marriage process is representative of the end times – I am merely using it as a venue – as a means for sharing information in a way that flows.

So, as you might imagine, weddings in the time and culture of Jesus' day were nothing like they are for us these days. Jewish marriages in biblical times were usually arranged by the fathers of the bride and the groom and that would begin an engagement period or what the Jews called the *betrothal*.

The betrothal was an important part of the marriage process and it was as binding as the actual marriage itself. Those initiating the betrothal, along with witnesses, would sign a marriage contract that outlined the terms and the conditions of the marriage arrangement, it would spell out the responsibilities and the obligations of both parties to include the dowry, and once this contract was signed, the bride and the groom were considered legally married, but the marriage could not be consummated – they could not live together and function as husband and wife.

The Apostle Paul tells us that the church, in a like manner, is betrothed to Christ. We are the bride of Christ. In **2 Corinthians 11:2**, Paul writes as if he is the best man, and he states,

**For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.**

Later in **Ephesians 5:25-27**, Paul describes this special relationship between a husband and wife as being a picture of Christ's special relationship with the church. Paul says,

**<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> that He might present to Himself the**

**church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.**

So, the church is the bride of Christ. We are betrothed to Him, set apart for Him.

Now in those days, it was a common custom for the bride to eventually join the groom's father's household, rather than the groom and the bride establishing their own household. So, if the bride and the groom were of a marriageable age, after the betrothal ceremony, the bride would return to her parents' home and the groom would return to his father's house to build a place for them to live – typically, it was an addition built onto the father's house.

One day, Jesus told His disciples He would be leaving them soon, for He knew the cross was just days away, and the disciples did not take this news very well, so to encourage them, Jesus says this in **John 14** beginning with **verse 1**.

**<sup>1</sup>“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. <sup>2</sup>In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. <sup>3</sup>If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”**

Just like a groom who leaves his bride to prepare a place to live in his father's house, we are told by Jesus that He too was leaving to prepare a place for His bride – the church. **And where is Jesus?** In heaven, and please don't miss this. Jesus is not coming down here to be where we are, rather, He's going to take us up to where He is – to His Father's house. This is the Lord's promise to come back for His church.

Now, back to the Jewish marriage. This process of adding on a new addition traditionally took a year or two, and the length of time was determined by the groom's father, and when the addition to the house was complete, and the father was satisfied with it, the groom would be given permission to go get his bride from his in-law's house.

In his excitement, the groom heads out to get his bride, with his best man and other escorts with him, but the bride would not know the exact time of his arrival, typically it happened at night, so the groom usually announced he was coming with the blowing of a trumpet and a lot of shouting along the way so the bride had some forewarning that the groom was on his way. **Didn't Paul already tell us in 1 Thessalonians that when the Lord descends from heaven to meet us in the air it will be with a shout and the trumpet of God?**

So, the groom fetches his bride and brings her back to his father's house for the wedding ceremony. There is music and dancing and rejoicing. It's a day of great celebration with friends and family, and once the wedding ceremony is over, the bride and the groom enter into the bridal chamber that was prepared by the groom.

For seven days, the bride and the groom are in the bridal chamber – it's called the *seven days of chuppah*, *chuppah* being a Hebrew word which means canopy or chamber. It's a time for intimacy where the marriage is finally consummated – it sounds like our version of a honeymoon, and understandably for the sake of privacy, it's a time where the bride and groom are secluded. Then at the end of seven days, with all the guests in attendance, the door is open and the bride and groom come out of their seclusion and make their public appearance as husband and wife and the wedding feast in their honor begins.

Now, the Bible tells us nothing about this “*seven days of chuppah*” and that makes me a little nervous and cautious, but I think it is interesting to bring it up and let me explain.

We just finished **Revelation Chapters 2 and 3** where the Lord addressed seven real churches in Asia Minor – seven churches which also represent all churches during the church age – from the early first century church to our present day.

Beginning with the very next chapter, **Revelation 4** and all the way through **Chapter 18**, with the overwhelming majority of it devoted to the Tribulation period – the church is not mentioned. After the Lord spoke extensively about the churches in **Chapters 2 and 3**, the church is not mentioned at all until we get to **Chapter 19**, after the Tribulation period has come and gone, and then the church – identified as His bride, takes part in the marriage supper of the Lamb.

It seems to me, that prior to the Tribulation period, a time of worldwide calamity and affliction, a time of God's wrath and judgment, literally hell on earth, a time primarily reserved for the unbelieving Jews who have rejected Christ – the church has been caught up, raptured to heaven with the Lord – like a bride that has been secluded, only to reappear for the wedding feast after the Tribulation period is over. That's the only conclusion I can make.

Now, you might completely disagree with everything I have said, and that's okay. You may be convinced that the church will go through the Tribulation period or at least a portion of it – I know there are people who believe that, but I would challenge anyone to answer these questions:

Why would the church need to experience a taste of hell when we are not going there? Why would the church go through a period called the “*time of Jacob’s trouble*” which is primarily intended for the Jews? And, why would the church need to experience God’s judgment and wrath when Jesus has taken God’s judgment and wrath upon Himself for our behalf?

I can’t get past those questions and that is both encouraging and hopeful to me, just as this message on the Rapture was meant to be encouraging and hopeful to you, and whatever your view of the Rapture may be, I hope we can all agree that as believers in Jesus Christ, we don’t face death like those who do not know Christ, because we know we pass from this life to an unimaginable life, a life spent with the Lord – for where He is, that’s where we shall be. And while we wait for that day, while we wait to go home to the Father’s house – a place prepared for us by Jesus Himself, we need to be looking and living for Him like a bride set apart for the Lord.

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