

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS: 3a
The Incredible Journey
Of The
Church Age Believer

INTRO: Where are we in the journey of the Church age believer? Well, we said the journey begins at salvation, it continues in life, and phase one ends either at death or the rapture. We spoke in our last message of what happens at death and what happens at the rapture. When the rapture occurs, our bodies are changed and phase two of the Church age believer begins. And so phase two, of the pilgrim's progress begins in the air. Let us look at it in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Now in verse 17 it says we will meet the Lord in the air. The literal reading is that we will be caught up "to a meeting of the Lord in the air".

So, phase two is commenced or begun at a meeting with the Lord in the air. The trumpet will sound, the bodies of Christians who have died will go up and immediately after them, living believers whose bodies have been changed will follow them and together they will go to a meeting with the Lord in the air. What an incredible moment this will be! 1 Corinthians 15 says it will take place in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. It will be an instantaneous event.

I am going to share some things that some of you will not understand this morning. I encourage you, if you cannot grasp this message, visit someone who has had this teaching and say, "Explain this teaching to me."

II. PHASE 2: THE BELIEVER'S INTERIM HEAVENLY JOURNEY

A. Commenced in the air - Doctrine of the Rapture

We will spend some time on the commencement of phase 2 of the Church age believer's journey. The question of the rapture directly and greatly affects the journey of the Church age believer. It is also one of the heavily debated sections of the journey. The debate is, will the rapture take place before, in the middle or at the end of the tribulation? Now it makes a very great difference if the believer journeys to heaven before the tribulation, in the middle or at the end. There lies shortly before us a period of time that will be the greatest tribulation period for all mankind in all of mankind's history. The horror of those days of the tribulation will make the Jewish

holocaust of the 20th. century seem small in comparison. That is hard to imagine.

In this message I am to define the meaning of the rapture and give evidence from Scripture for the rapture. In the next message we will consider the great debate of the timing of the rapture.

1. Definition of the rapture

I mentioned that in John Bunyan's story, Pilgrim's Progress, Pilgrim's journey ends at physical death. When Pilgrim and his friend came to the river of death they feared the river and asked if there were no other way into the city but by way of the river. The answer according to Bunyan was, "Yes; but there hath not any save two, to wit, Enoch and Elijah, been permitted to tread that path since the foundation of the world, nor shall until the last trumpet shall sound."

That is an interesting bit of eschatology from the year 1673, 110 years earlier than the writing of the Mennonite Catechism. Let me read some of what I have written some years ago in another message, "Our Mennonite Catechism, which was produced by our Mennonite forefathers at Elbing, Prussia in 1783, is an excellent tool to teach basic, fundamental, doctrinal truths. In its view of prophetic future events it reflects the common teaching in Evangelical churches of the 1700's regarding future events. The view given is that when Jesus returns all earthly events will come to a halt and all mankind will be brought to stand before God Almighty to be judged. This world will be destroyed and then all Christians will go to be with the Lord in heaven and all the unrighteous will go to hell.

Throughout Church history various doctrines have been in the limelight so to speak. Early in Church history such doctrines as the Trinity were the centre of debate. When a consensus was reached with regard to a certain doctrine a different doctrine came on stage. In most recent history it is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that has received a lot of attention.

Well a hundred years or so after the writing of the Catechism prophecy and end time events became the

central topic of the Church for a time. For the first time since about 300 years after the time of Christ prophecy received the attention which had long been its due.

It soon became obvious to students of prophecy that not all the references to the Lord's return fit into one neat category. A view emerged that He would return once for His Church, an event now known as the rapture, and once at the end of the tribulation period."

For those of you familiar with prophetic teaching in the church today you will understand that there are three major views of eschatology known as premillennialism, amillennialism and postmillennialism. I will not deal with those at length in this series. If you are interested in understanding these systems let me encourage you to get the tapes of our Wednesday night Bible study series on *Eschatology in the Olivet Discourse*.

Allow me to state very simply what those three positions mean: Amillennialism says there will be no millennium. Many prophetic passages are not to be understood literally but symbolically so when the Bible speaks of the 1000 year reign of Christ it is not to be understood literally. Postmillennialism says there will be a literal 1000 year reign of peace on earth. Man will bring this peace about by preaching the Gospel and putting Christians into politics and taking over the world. The world will become better and better until we reign in peace for 1000 years and then Christ will come. So it simply says Christ will return after the millennium. Premillennialism says there will be a literal 1000 year reign of peace on earth. Christ will come before that 1000 years and He will be the ruler of this reign of peace.

I personally hold to the premillennial position. The basic reason for this is that I hold to the literal or normal system of Bible interpretation. Premillennialism simply says that there will be a literal 1000 year reign of Christ on this earth and that Jesus will return to this earth before the millennium. Now premillennialists are divided into three camps. This has to do with the timing of the

rapture. The question is: will Jesus return before the tribulation, after the tribulation or in the middle of the tribulation? We will deal with that issue under point 3.

The word rapture comes from the latin word *rapere* found in 1 Thess. 4:17. It is the Latin translation of the words we have in English as "caught up." So it speaks of the catching up of resurrected and changed believers.

With that bit of background, let me now define the rapture to you, "The rapture is the catching up of the Church to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17).

2. Evidence for the rapture

a. It clarifies a Biblical problem

There are several difficulties raised if one does not hold to the teaching of the rapture. The first is the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. Let me explain. When I grew up, I was taught two views, that I later came to see as conflicting views. I came to the point where I could no longer hold to both unless the rapture was correct. First, I was always taught that Jesus could come at any moment. And as I read the Scriptures I saw that the Bible teaches that. And I was further taught that when Jesus came, this present world would come to an end. All the trials and difficulties of this life would be over.

Second, I was taught that some day the prophecy of the number 666 would be fulfilled, and I saw from those who taught this, that it was a very scary event. One that should be avoided if at all possible. So many of our people moved to places they thought they would be safe.

Now consider those two views. Can they both be true? The answer is no. Not unless there is a rapture. Let me explain. Let us say that Jesus came today, and that is possible. Then the number 666 would never come because until now it has not come. And if the number 666 never comes, then the Bible is wrong. It says it will come and if it does not,

the Bible is wrong. I was taught, and I am thankful for it, that the Bible is never wrong.

But if there is a rapture, then both those lines of teaching can still be true. If Jesus' coming at any moment is the rapture, and the saved are taken to heaven and the world continues, then the number 666 can still happen.

So let me describe this for you from what is called the pretribulational rapture view, which I believe to be the most consistent view today. One of the strongest pillars of this view is that Jesus could come at any moment. Let me read but one passage on that (Matt. 24:36-44).

Shortly after the rapture, the time called the tribulation time or the wrath of God time, or the time of Jacob's trouble begins. This is a time period described as 7 years long by Daniel. It is described as two periods of 1260 days in Revelation and that is seven years according to the Jewish calendar. This time period will be the most horrible of all time periods ever experienced on this earth. Right in the middle of that time period is when the number 666 takes place.

And so, the teaching of the rapture clears up this Biblical difficulty. There is a second difficulty that is cleared up as well. That is the difficulty of harmonizing all the passages that refer to Christ's return. They are almost impossible to harmonize if not impossible, without the rapture. I have given you a sheet with these. Look at it.

b. It is clearly taught in Scripture

Not only does the teaching of the rapture clear up several difficulties, it is clearly taught in Scripture.

1) 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Read 4:13-18. Now notice carefully verse 17. There, very clearly, is the rapture.

2) Matthew 24:36-41

There is in our day an ever increasing number of scholars who see this passage as speaking of Christ's coming at the end of the tribulation and not at the rapture. This is true, even of a good number of pre tribulational teachers. The argument runs like this. Those who are taken, are taken in and sent to hell, and those who are left are left on the earth to inherit the kingdom of God. They point out that the people in Noah's day upon whom the flood came were taken in the flood (see took in verse 38).

It is my own understanding that here the Lord Jesus Himself makes clear reference to the rapture of the church. The evidence that I would give for my position is threefold. Notice first the words *taken* in verse 40 and 41 are the Greek word *paralambano*. Now those who say this is speaking of Christ's coming at the end of the tribulation say this word *taken* is in the same sense as the word the word *took* in verse 39. As those in the flood were taken in judgment, so these in verses 40-41 are taken in judgment.

Now let me say first that the word *took* in 39 and *taken* in 40-41 are two entirely different words. The word *took* in 39 is *airo*. In the NT it is always used in an evil sense (see John 15:2). But the word *taken* in 40-41 is *paralambano* and is almost always used in a positive sense (See Jn. 14:3 "receive" =*paralambano*).

There is yet one more bit of evidence that this passage speaks of the rapture. The words translated *left* are always used in an evil sense and speak of *abandonment*. If verses 40-41 teach that those left are left on earth to inherit the millennium, then they are abandoned. There is no possible way that those who remain to go into the millennium can in any possible way be referred to as abandoned!

No! This passage speaks of the rapture, Jesus' coming for His Church. Therefore we have the

verses immediately following exhorting believers to watch for they know neither the day nor the hour of the rapture.

CONCL: And so in conclusion, in this series, we are looking at the journey of the Church age believer. We have viewed the believer's life from the point of salvation until death or the rapture as phase one. Our point this morning is to show that phase two begins with the rapture of the Church, which I believe will be before the tribulation begins. There is much I would like to say here to give evidenc for this but a detailed defense of that is not the purpose of this series.

In conclusion let me say that the rapture is the catching up of the Church to meet Christ in the air. The evidence that there will be a rapture lies in at least two facts. If there is no rapture one has a problem of unifying the events spoken of as taking place at the coming of Christ. Finally, the Bible plainly says that the Church will be caught up to meet Christ in the air and so shall we always be with Him. Jesus Himself told us what it would be like. Two would be in the shop, one would be taken and the other left. Two women would be cooking, the one would be taken and the other left. We might easily add, two men will be combining the one will be taken and the other left. Two will be sitting in school, the one will be taken and the other left.

How does phase two of the Church age believer's journey commence? It commences at a meeting place in the air with Christ! It will be a phenomenal moment or second!

