

What Does Thief in Night Mean?

How It All Ends

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Bible Text: Revelation 16:15

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Sean: We're in Revelation 16, that's where we're at this morning for this podcast. If you have a Bible that has the words of Christ in red, a few people might have those Bibles, you find this verse kind of jumps off the page at you because it's in red. In the ESV rendering, please don't turn off the podcast because you heard those words, it actually has the verse in a parenthetical sense. Verse 15 says,

“("Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!")”

I think the King James rendering is, “Blessed is the one that watches,” I think is how it makes particular reference to it.

Someone might ask: Why in the world are we turning the mike on at Berean to talk about this verse? It's the strategic placement of the verse. What is it doing here? If I hear news reports of the Euphrates River drying up and being able to be used as a means of entrance into the Middle East, I know that the coming of Christ is drawing near. I don't have to be caught off guard. I'm not like the master of the house that wasn't watching for the thief and was clueless; I know what the signs are.

Bill: Should me mention that in verse 14, we have clear reference to Armageddon and then we have this promise of a coming like a thief. That does not fit the pre-trib scenario.

Sean: Look at verse 16, Bill. “And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.” Every pre-tribulation rapturist believes that the Battle of Armageddon occurs at the end of the tribulation.

Bill: And we agree.

Sean: Right, we concur. I'm drawing your particular attention to the fact that this verse is either just incredibly out of place there, completely out of left field like a mistake was made. Or, we've got Christ coming very near to the Battle of Armageddon.

Bill: And should someone say, “Well, this isn’t the pre-trib rapture.” We agree with that, too. The problem is that you can’t use post-trib lingo that Christ uses in Matthew 24, Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians 5, Peter uses in 2 Peter 3 and John uses in Revelation 16 and say that it points to a pre-tribulation rapture just because it says “thief in the night.” That’s ridiculous. You can’t do that. It’s not allowed.

Sean: That’s the bottom line. We are not suggesting to you that – I’m going to be careful here - that this proves that he’s not coming before the tribulation. That’s not what we’re saying. We’re saying: when you use that language and quote those verses in support of a pre-tribulation rapture, you are ripping the verses out of the context in which they were put.

Bill: Let’s take those in the order we just gave, other than Revelation 16 which we just looked at. It occurs at the end of the tribulation period. Matthew 24. You pointed out yesterday, verses 48-50, in the context you don’t get a chance to say there are two parousias. It is clearly one parousia in the context and it happens immediately after the tribulation.

1 Thessalonians 5, he says the Day of the Lord is synonymous or at least closely succinct with the wrath of God and we’re told that the Day of the Lord and the wrath of God and the thief in the night all occur, all of that stuff occurs, around the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord we’re told, does not happen until what is known as Revelation’s Sixth Seal which happens, we’re told, after the tribulation.

2 Peter 3, the Day of the Lord is seen as a thief in the night. Again, we’re not allowed to say that it occurs, as Peter pointed out at Pentecost, until after the sun is darkened, the moon is turned into blood which is Revelation’s Sixth Seal and Christ says in Matthew 24 does not happen until after the tribulation.

So, we are 4/4, Pastor Sean, with thief in the night language occurring after the tribulation.

Sean: The other thing that I want to point out, Bill, as we look at these seven references that the thief in the night is used in the sense of the coming of Christ, let me give them to the listener again so that he or she can study: Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39, those are parallel accounts; 1 Thessalonians 5, it is used twice, in verse 2 and verse 4; Peter’s reference to the Day of the Lord, that’s 2 Peter 3:10; and then twice in Revelation.

Bill: Right. One is to one of the churches.

Sean: Right, the church of Sardis and we want to talk about that in just a minute. That’s Revelation 3:3 and then the one we’re looking at here, Revelation 16:15.

Bill: Now, let me know when you’re about to go to 3:3 because before we go, I want to point one other commonality out in this verse and that verse.

Sean: Alright. The thing I want to bring to the listener's attention before we go there, is the fact that it's not a good thing that Jesus comes to me as a thief.

Bill: No, it means you're not ready.

Sean: That's right. Paul, in Thessalonians, says that he doesn't come to you like a thief, he comes to those in the darkness like a thief. He clearly distinguishes the language. Now, Bill, if the thief is making reference to a imminent pre-tribulation rapture, then, Bill, he would come to everyone as a thief.

Bill: You know, Jesus compares the time of his coming with the time of Noah. Do you remember when Noah – it's not every day you see a boat being built that's 450 feet long. To say that the coming of Christ is like that of the coming of Noah and then to say that it's signless is ridiculous. Are you trying to tell me that there were no signs that a flood was happening? How about preaching for 100 years? How about building a boat for close to 100 years? How often do you see animals approaching 2 x 2 and in groups of seven for the clean animals? How often do you see them all coming to a ship.

Sean: That's a normal occurrence, right? Everyone was building arks in that day. No.

Bill: So Jesus says his parousia, which Paul says is the same thing as our gathering together unto him in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, right? Alright, so it's one event: the gathering of the saints and the parousia are one event. So, we're waiting for the parousia, Christ says we're waiting for the parousia and he says his parousia, the days preceding his parousia, are just like the days preceding the time of Noah.

Now, this is great: right before the flood starts happening, right before the door is shut, Noah and his family are done building the boat, the animals are in the boat. Remember how much time passed? Seven days passed between the time that the ship was built, the animals were in the ark, everything is ready to go and God waited seven more days before the floodwaters came. Seven days. Isn't that something?

So, all these signs. It's so amazing. How can you preach pre-tribism through typology. The types don't preach pre-tribism. They say, "Well, Enoch is a picture of the rapture of the church." Enoch was raptured 200 years before the flood. That hardly qualifies as a pre-trib rapture symbology, hardly qualifies. But to say that Noah had seven days before his coming where God allowed people to get into the ark, it sounds a lot like a post-tribulation rapture that coincides with a post-tribulation coming of Christ. Jesus made the comparison, I didn't.

Sean: Right, Matthew 24. So, let's get ready to move over to Revelation 3, Bill.

Bill: Alright. So, along with the coming as a thief, I want us to pay special attention as well to the garment talk because when we turn back to 3, this is going to look really familiar. He said, "Blessed is he that watcheth and keeps his garments lest they walk

naked.” So, we’re looking for the thief and we’re looking for the garment talk. I just wanted to point that out before we go there.

Sean: And this garment talk of being caught naked, Bill, this is with your pants down. That’s the idea.

Bill: You’re probably not supposed to laugh on a recording, but that’s funny. Ok, I gotcha. That’s today’s cliché.

Sean: That’s how ill-prepared I am that I’m clueless as to what’s going on here. That’s the idea. So, let’s look at – we’ve got seven churches in the Book of Revelation and the church at Sardis is mentioned here in chapter 3. It’s just before the church at Philadelphia.

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.”

Bill: Alright, look at verse 4. “You have a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled.” What? Look at here, “have not defiled their garments and they shall walk with me in white for they are worthy. He that overcomes, the same shall be clothed in white raiment.” Garment talk.

Sean: Particular reference to garments.

Bill: That go hand-in-hand with particular reference to the thief in the night.

Sean: Right. We are to connect them. We need to make this connection here.

Bill: So, what kind of pre-tribber ever uses Sardis? Never. They jump to Philadelphia, but what about this?

Sean: What are you going to do with this?

Bill: Are you going to really say that John wasn’t writing to a real church in Turkey? He was writing to the – get this now – the post-mid-trib basically is what we’re talking about. He’s talking to people who are going to live, saints who are going to live in the last half of the tribulation period? Is that what we’re going to say Sardis is? Sardis isn’t a real church of real believers who could expect to be persecuted?

Sean: That’s ridiculous. We can’t even go there.

Bill: No. You have to play gymnastics like Scofield does and say these are seven church ages but then that doesn't even go well because after Sardis we still have Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Sean: Right. Two church ages. So, are you going to have the church age before the final church age getting raptured?

Bill: Yeah, how are you going to have – now get this now – Sardis is before Philadelphia and Philadelphia proves the pre-trib rapture so you're going to have sort of a mid-trib body of saints in Sardis and then after that have a pre-trib body of saints?

Sean: It doesn't work, Bill.

Bill: Of course not.

Sean: What we need to understand were these were seven local particular regional churches that John knew about. These were real bodies of believers in particular locations with a geographical association and he was writing to each of them in the Spirit of the Lord, with particular knowledge, through Christ, of what their issues were and what they needed to do.

Bill: So, if you're in Sardis and the Book of Revelation is to you – six other churches, yes – but to you and you get to chapter 16 of Revelation, are you going to think that Christ and John are talking about a separate group of people after you've just been told, at the salutation of the letter, that if you don't watch, Christ will come upon you as a thief and you'll be caught with your pants down? Are you going to think he's talking about two different groups?

Sean: You are going to make the connection immediately, Bill, because he wrote that particular thief language to you and then reinforced it one more time in chapter 16. You're not going to think, "Oh, I'm the church at Philadelphia and I'm getting raptured."

Bill: "I'm a member of Sardis but I'm pictured by Philadelphia."

Sean: That's ridiculous. Or, "I'm part of John and I'm getting taken up into heaven." That's not what you, as a reader for the very first time, are going to connect. You're going to realize that you better repent because that's the word that he uses right there. That they need to repent.

Bill: Or they'll be caught like a thief.

I pointed out yesterday in Sunday School and, you know, a lot of people wonder if you and I are just on this tangent or hobbyhorse of prophecy because I happened to be teaching through Revelation the same time you're getting to the Olivet Discourse in Mark and that was certainly not our plan at all. I was done with Genesis 1-11 early last fall and

I started Revelation because everyone thought, “Well, we’ve done Genesis, let’s do Revelation.” I thought, “You know, this might be a good time.” And I was a little nervous about how to approach part of it because of the pretty stalwart pre-trib teaching that had occurred in years past here at Berean and so I was a little nervous because I didn’t want to make it a fight. And so, here we are. You’re getting to the Olivet Discourse about the time that I’m in Revelation and people in my class are eating it up because they’re getting it in Sunday School and then they go and get preached to out of the Olivet Discourse on Sunday morning. So, you talk about a treat.

So, we, in my Sunday School class, are in chapter 15 now of Revelation. Yesterday, we read that those who are found in heaven in Revelation 15, have overcome the beast, his mark, his name, his number – they’ve overcome the beast. In chapter 12, we’re told that the saints overcome the dragon by the blood of the Lamb. That’s the same verbiage, overcame and overcame. So, they overcome the beast and they overcome the dragon.

All seven of these churches are given a promise if they will overcome. Now, what kind of sense does it make for John to address – Jesus through the pen of John – to address seven churches, tell each and every one of them that you have a special blessing if you overcome and then remove them before they overcome anything?

Sean: Before they have an opportunity to overcome.

Bill: Blessed are you if you overcome and you’ll get this. Blessed are you if you overcome, you’ll get this. He does it seven times and then removes them before anyone overcomes.

Sean: Give us a particular verse of this promise so that we can study it for ourselves.

Bill: Let’s take the church we’re in. How about verse 5 of Revelation 3? “He that overcomes the same shall be clothed in white raiment. I will not blot out his name out of the Book of Life but I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.” That’s one of seven churches.

Sean: So, the scenario that you’re painting for us, Bill, is that “I’m going to give you a promise of a particular blessing if you overcome and then I’m going to remove you before the tribulation so there’s no opportunity for you to battle.”

Bill: Right. A person might wonder, “Well, what do they have to overcome?” Chapter 12 says they overcame the dragon. Chapter 15 says they overcame the beast. Now, granted, all of these believers are dead now but they were expecting it to shortly come to pass, chapter 1, that John said that these things could happen at any moment, they would start happening. Jesus used the same language in Luke 21, “When you begin to see these things look up.”

Sean: Right, and the reality is, Bill, that we don’t know to what degree in the same way, many of the things in the Olivet Discourse occurred in 70 AD. We don’t know that that

wasn't exactly some of the same things that were occurring and this letter was a great strengthening letter to these believers who lived during that time and saw things that were very similar and used the encouragement that they received from the Apostle John to persevere and overcome.

Bill: Granted. That's, of course, if you believe Revelation was written before AD 70.

Sean: But to me it doesn't even matter in the sense of: all I'm saying is that in the same way that Matthew 24 has a dualistic message, there is nothing saying that Revelation can't have it even if it is post 70 AD. Things that were happening...

Bill: It was a comfort to them.

Sean: Yes. Persecuting things that occurred.

Bill: Right. But what does not make sense is that the letter concerning Daniel's 70th week is written not to Jews, it's written to churches and these churches are given a forecast of a time when they would, as saints, need to overcome the dragon and the beast. They are told, "Be ready to overcome," and then they're raptured out before there's even any need to overcome? That's ridiculous.

And then to, on top of it, the Scripture we're dealing with today, warn Sardis, "Be ready so that you're not caught naked and so that the coming doesn't come upon you as a thief," and then he's warning a whole separate section called trib saints in chapter 16? No, I'm afraid I don't buy it.

In other words, the warnings in the seven letters to the seven churches have absolutely nothing to do with chapters 4-19.

Sean: It's almost as though there are two books, Bill.

Bill: Right. We're going to warn you about a tribulation period that you're not going to experience.

Sean: We're going to tell you about it.

Bill: We're going to tell you about it, we're going to warn you about it. In fact, we're even going to tell one of the churches, "If you don't repent, I'm going to cast you into great tribulation." So, we're going to warn you about it, we're going to tell you about it and then before you ever need to worry about it, we're yanking you out of here. That doesn't make any sense. That's like me addressing the letter to my wife addressing someone else, introducing the letter to someone else and then turning my attention to my wife for the rest of the letter without telling anybody...

Sean: ...that there was a transition. That there was any kind of a transition because we go to chapter 4 and, "After this I looked and behold a door." There is nothing that gives us any indication, Bill, that he's not still writing to the seven churches.

Bill: Right. Moreover, John, you might notice in verse 2, is not in the body. Well, if he's not in the body, that hardly counts as a rapture of the church because the rapture of the church are people being translated in their bodies. They have bodies; they are glorified bodies. So, if John is a picture of the church at the rapture, it's a lousy picture because...

Sean: ...there are several reasons. The lack of the body, peace, the fact that he has to come back.

Bill: The fact that he comes back in chapter 9. So, all of a sudden, if he's the church when he goes up in chapter 4, is he the church when he comes down during the trumpets half way through the tribulation period? I don't think so.

So, there are just so many reasons why it doesn't work but probably the most pronounced is that John the Apostle is God's last canonical word and we're supposed to believe that John believed that the next event on the calendar for the church was a pre-tribulation rapture and he didn't even care enough about it to tell us. Think about that. He even says the purpose of this book is to tell you about the unveiling of Christ and he doesn't even mention something that happens seven years before that that is the next event on the calendar?

Sean: That just doesn't work, Bill. It just doesn't work. It's not much different than suggesting that the Olivet Discourse is not for Christians, it's for Jews.

Bill: Right. And why did we baptize last night if it's the Jews? Because like you pointed out, Matthew 28 is to the same group of disciples minus Judas.

Sean: So if you have to have those disciples, Bill, representing two different groups. Sometimes they represent Israel and sometimes they represent the church and we have no idea when is when. Because in Matthew 18, it's the church. We get our passage for church discipline from this very idea, "tell it to the church."

Bill: How about when they're giving the Lord's Supper in chapter 26? All of a sudden it's not a church ordinance. You can't be Baptist and be pre-trib.

Sean: You're really struggling in that sense because you're all over the map in this.

Bill: Because all of a sudden, we're not baptizing and we're not doing the Lord's Supper. It's Jews.

Sean: But no one believes that, Bill. So, what you have is this selective application of particular texts to particular groups without any legend to tell me when to do what. That's, in essence, what we're dealing with here. Unless you understand that the seven

references to thief in the night in Matthew, Luke, Thessalonians, Peter and Revelation are all making reference to the Second Coming of Christ that comes after the tribulation. Once you see that, then it just makes perfect sense. It all falls right in place and you don't have to do gymnastics with the text. And that's what we're trying to achieve here.

You know, Bill, our goal is not to take away the blessed hope from somebody. That's not what we're trying to do. We're not trying to throw people into tribulation and make their life hell. That's not our objective. Our primary objective is to properly handle the Word of God.

Bill: Think about the intricacies of 2 Thessalonians 2 where we're told before the coming of Christ, you have to have a falling away and a man of sin being revealed. Let me tell you what we have in America and you've said this to be true and I believe this to be true. We have churches full and I'm going to describe them in two ways: full of unsaved pre-tribulation rapture believers. Now, combine those two and I think you have a great scenario for a falling away. What are we doing here?

Sean: Absolutely clueless. I really don't understand, Bill, why a church that is so committed in that sense would even care what's in the Book of Revelation.

Bill: Well, that's pretty sensational. It makes good movie material. It's sensational. It's good fiction. I mean, how in the world do you in a nation where you have legalized gay marriage in 13-14 states or whatever the count is now, legalize baby murder, how in the world do you account for the fact that you have sold tens of millions of copies of the Left Behind Series in a nation like that?

Sean: Because people like to read sensational stuff.

Bill: So, how can you get any more sensational than a massive, almost alien-like abduction prior to any such thing?

So, you're right, we're not trying to take away blessed hope but we are trying to prepare people who are born-again because I want you to know if 1 John 2:19 describes anyone. Because let's remember, along with 1 John 2:19 saying "they went out from us because they were never of us," combine that with what he says about the spirit of the antichrist. Well, the spirit of the antichrist is ready to swipe away believers that were really not believers, people who are part of their assembly. That's in the same five chapter epistle, Pastor Sean. The spirit of the antichrist that deceives non-believers who are part of the assembly of believers.

Sean: Right. In there.

Bill: Yes. So, when you realize that, you make a great storm when you deal with people who are under the sway of an antichrist who claimed to be believers, weren't believers and are surprised that they're still here during the rapture. Now, don't hear what I didn't say: I didn't say that if you believe in a pre-trib rapture you're not saved. I'm saying that

the church is already full of non-believers who are fans of Jesus, they're pop culture Jesus Christians but they've never put repentant faith in Christ. They're not saved and then you add to that that most of them are pre-trib rapture and then stick them under the age of the spirit of the antichrist, watch them fall away.

Sean: As described by Paul.

Bill: In 2 Thessalonians 2.

Sean: Right. A great falling away.

Bill: So great that it was so unique that it would be seen on the level as the man of sin being revealed.

Sean: That level.

Bill: That level. Or else, why mention them as a couplet?

Sean: Well, we started off the podcast because we wanted to make sure that you understood that the references to Jesus' coming as the thief in the night are not references to a pre-tribulation rapture but instead are references to the coming of Christ that occurs after the tribulation. That was our main point and we started it in Revelation 16 and we called to your attention the particular location of that verse. Look at it in the context of the seven bowl judgments and the verses placed after number six and just before seven and there's the particular reference to the Battle of Armageddon right there. Think about that before you make a conclusion that thief in the night equals pre-tribulation rapture. That's what we want you to do. Think about that and then study Matthew 24 and study 1 Thessalonians 5 for yourself and see what you come away with, with regard to the thief in the night concept.

Last thoughts, Bill, before we turn the mike off?

Bill: No, sir.

Sean: Thanks for listening and have a great day.