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The Rapture of the Church

ARTHUR B. WHITING, THD

To discuss any prophetic subject these days is to invite caustic criticism from many quarters. The fact is that the whole realm of eschatological teaching has been thrown into disrepute and discredited by speculative theories and prophetic forecasts which find no warrant in Scripture, but rather are condemned by divine revelation.

Anyone who seeks to get acquainted with the literature dealing with our subject soon realizes that there is a veritable maelstrom of theory, conjecture, disputation and exposition. It is fitting, therefore, that we approach our subject in the spirit of Moses before the burning bush. We must lay aside the garb of idle curiosity and the shoes of human speculation, and draw near to the burning bush of divine revelation with reverence and confidence.

That the Lord Jesus is coming again is generally admitted among all who accept the Word of God as authoritative. One would not expect it to be otherwise since the Scriptures are replete with references to it. Apart from the substitutionary death of Christ, there is scarcely a subject in the whole field of written revelation that has so much attention bestowed upon it. Arithmetic mention is not necessarily a sure indicator of the relative importance of any subject, but the frequency with which the Lord's return occurs surely is not altogether without significance.

No little confusion exists with regard to the Lord's second coming, because there has been a failure to distinguish things which differ. The Scriptures make it perfectly plain that there are two stages or aspects in which His coming may be viewed. Christ is seen as coming *for* His saints and *with* them, and it is quite evident that the two are not synonymous. With regard to the former truth, He is represented as coming to the atmospheric heavens where He shall meet and receive believers who are supernaturally caught up from the earth; with respect to the latter fact, He is portrayed as descending to the earth, accompanied by His glorified redeemed ones, to establish the long-promised and eagerly-awaited Messianic kingdom.

It is the first-mentioned aspect of our Lord's return which thus forms the subject of this present consideration. This great future event is frequently termed "The Rapture" in contradistinction to Christ's return to earth which is called "The Revelation." Like the word "trinity," the term "rapture" is not used in Scripture, but the absence of both words in no way militates against the plain and positive teachings which they represent.

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Of the several passages in the Word of God referring to this personal coming of the Lord Jesus, the one which supplies the greatest wealth of detail is 1 Thessalonians 4. Verses 16 and 17 are the ones usually quoted in this connection but verses 13–15, and 18, are so contextually linked with these that no apology need be offered for their consideration at this time. Thus 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 may properly be considered a unit of revelation concerning our present discussion, and because of its great contribution to an understanding of the Rapture, a detailed exposition of it would seem to be in order.

For a clear understanding of the full meaning of any Scripture, we need always to keep in mind the immediate circumstances with which it is connected. From Acts 17 we learn that for three sabbaths Paul reasoned with the Thessalonians out of the Scriptures, and it is very evident from Acts 17:5–7; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; and 2 Thessalonians 2:5 that the great truth of the Lord's return had been brought to their attention. The teaching gripped them, and so filled were they with the glorious expectation of the presence of the Lord that they evidently had not thought of the possibility of any of their number passing away before His arrival. Consequently, when death removed some from their ranks, they were greatly disturbed, fearing that these believers had missed participating in the fulfillment of the blessed hope of the Lord's return. To remove their ignorance and to relieve their anxiety these matchless verses were written.

But the word comes to them that they are not to grieve with the hopeless sorrow that characterized those without Christ in the presence of death. One reason for this lies hidden in the term used in verse 13 to describe the believer's passing from the earthly scene of action. For the Christian death is a "sleep." While it is true that this word had been used occasionally by non-Christian writers like Hesiod, it was the Lord Jesus Christ who clothed this representation of death with fulness of meaning (see Mark 5:39; John 11:11, 14). Lest it should be thought that the Bible teaches unconscious soul-sleeping, it is needful to remember that the Word of God is always careful to use the term "sleep" with reference to the body only (Eccl. 12:7; cf. Luke 8:52–55; Acts 7:59, 60). The body sleeps, but the spirit is released to go to its destined place.

In verse 14 we have the great statement that the certainty of the Christian's victory over death rests on two great foundational pillars of truth: Christ died and rose again. It is noteworthy that while the Bible speaks of the believer as having fallen asleep, it does not use the term with reference to Christ's death, but carefully records that He died. "He tasted death for every man" — death with all its sting and ugliness as a sin-judgment — and then rose again. "If we believe" this, says the record — and there is no implication of doubt at all, but rather an acceptance of the facts — "if we believe (as we assuredly do) that Jesus died and rose again, even so (we believe) also those who fell asleep will God, through Jesus, lead forth with Him."

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Here it will be noticed that the translation is at variance with that of the King James version and also that of the American Standard version where we read of those who are “asleep in Jesus.” There is no justification whatever for the use of the prepositional phrase “in Jesus,” since διὰ is commonly translated “through” or “by,” as the marginal reading of the American Standard version is careful to note; and, furthermore, the New Testament never speaks of the believer as being “in Jesus” but always refers to him as being “in Christ,” “in the Lord,” or “in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Our union with Christ is a oneness with Him in His Messianic and Mediatorial office rather than in His manhood or earthly life. Having said this, we are still faced with the grammatical problem of the correct association of the prepositional phrase “through Jesus.” Should it be connected with the words that precede it (“them that are fallen asleep”), or with those which follow it (“will God lead forth with him”)? If it is bound up with the former, it may point to the fact that those who died were martyred in persecution for His sake, or it may indicate that for them as Christians death had been robbed of its terrors through the triumph of Christ (1 Cor. 15:55), therefore it was to be conceived of as a sleep, and not for one moment would such an experience rupture, or even suspend, the indissoluble link that binds the believer to Him. On the other hand, to associate “through Jesus” with the finite verb which follows (ἄξει) supplies us with the thought that God will accomplish His further redemptive purposes on this occasion again through the agency of the Lord Jesus Christ. To so render it perhaps exposes us to the criticism that the language is somewhat redundant, yet such a construction is simple, and its teaching seems to find a parallel in 2 Corinthians 4:14. In the last analysis, however, it must be admitted that we do not know definitely just exactly what is the intended meaning.

Another question which apparently is not solved by the language used is that concerning the character of those who shall return with the Lord Jesus Christ. Are the saints of the Old Testament in view here? Again we confess our Christian agnosticism. When Scripture is silent, it is not for us to be dogmatically vocal. The terminology, “them that are fallen asleep,” seems to make a specific reference to those at Thessalonica, and since this whole advent-truth passage was primarily occasioned by the peculiar circumstances at Thessalonica, we are disposed to restrict the meaning to the believers of this present church age.

This fourteenth verse holds yet another debatable question. When it is said that God is going to “lead forth” believers “through Jesus,” do we have here a reference to what is commonly called the Rapture, or to that second aspect of our Lord’s return termed the Revelation? To take the former position is to say that the Lord will bring back the disembodied spirits of those who fell asleep in order that they may be united to their bodies when they are raised from the graves (see close of verse 16); while the latter view looks on to the time when the Lord shall come in the day of His glorious manifestation

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with the great company of glorified believers with Him (see Col. 3:4; 2 Thess. 1:10; cf. Matt. 25:31). We are inclined to accept this latter conception as being the more satisfactory, since it harmonizes so completely with the thought of the passage and the circumstances that produced it. The Thessalonian believers had been filled with confusion and dismay at the thought of their departed fellow-believers being robbed of their part in His return through the hand of death, but that they were going to return with Him in glory was exactly the thing they needed to know.

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Undoubtedly such truth would rejoice the hearts of these believing Thessalonians, but it is equally certain that it would raise a number of questions in their minds. They would re-echo the words of Nicodemus, “How can these things be?” The Apostle Paul seemingly sensed this, for in verses 15–17 he explains how all of the Lord’s own are to be provided for in relation to His return. So we take it that these subsequent verses present what will take place before Christ comes *with* His own, since they must have been “caught up” to “meet Him” before they can return with Him.

This explanation is made possible, Paul says, “by the word of the Lord” — a phrase which apparently points to a revelation made directly to him to meet a definite need, since nothing in the Gospel records can be regarded as the source of the tremendous truth we find in the following verses. There is no evidence for supposing that Paul is here referring to some unrecorded words of our Lord (cf. Acts 20:35), but the parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 15:51 affords confirmation of the view that here we have a direct and specific word given him for a definite need. But however we regard it, the important thing is that this is the *Lord’s* sure word and not the passing figment of Jewish apocalyptic imagination. It is not a matter of human speculation, but entirely one of divine revelation.

The first disclosure is that those believers who are alive at the time of the Lord’s return to the air shall have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep. But before proceeding to the unfolding of this gracious truth, it is necessary to pause at the words “we that are alive,” for they have been a veritable storm-center of controversy as to whether or not Paul indicated that he himself expected to be alive at the Redeemer’s return. To us it seems extremely unfair to say, without careful thought, that these words imply that the apostle expected to see Christ’s coming. It is patent to all that the words neither affirm nor deny it. When we examine two other Pauline passages (1 Cor. 6:14 and 2 Cor. 4:14) we find that his use of “us” could, on the same basis of such specious reasoning, be regarded as implying that Paul certainly expected to be among the *dead* when the Lord returned! It is, therefore, best to take the words “we that are alive” in the corporate and representative sense of “we Christians” — words which each generation of Christians can use—for if the “we” were to be pressed to the very limit, it would mean that all of the Thessalonian believers would be kept alive on earth till the Lord came back!

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Besides, for Paul to class himself with the living was only the natural thing for him to do, so long as he was alive. A conclusion, therefore, concerning his personal expectation certainly cannot be justified merely on the basis of his language here.

Another word in this fifteenth verse also has been the focal point of much discussion. We refer to *παρουσία* which our English version translates “coming.” There are three different words used in the Greek New Testament with reference to the Lord Jesus Christ’s coming: *παρουσία*, *ἀποκάλυψις*, and *ἐπιφάνεια*, and an attempt has been made by some to make each word descriptive of a certain aspect of the Lord’s second advent. But can this clear-cut distinction be adequately sustained? What are the facts?

The following is a brief summary of the three words in the various New Testament uses so far as we have been able to discover from personal investigation:

1. *παρουσία* meaning “presence,” occurs 24 times, 16 of which refer to our Lord’s return. In 8 of the 16 it is used in connection with the coming of the Lord in judgment (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Thess. 5:13; 2 Thess. 2:8; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4), while the remaining 8 describe that aspect of His return connected with rewards, commonly called the Rapture (1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1; James 5:7, 8; 1 John 2:28).
2. *ἀποκάλυψις*, meaning “revelation,” or “manifestation,” occurs 18 times, 4 of which describe the second advent. 3 times it is used apparently of the Rapture (1 Cor. 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7, 13), and once in connection with the judgment aspect (2 Thess. 1:7, cf. Rom. 2:5; 8:19).
3. *ἐπιφάνεια*, meaning “appearing,” occurs 6 times, 1 referring to the Lord’s first coming (2 Tim. 1:10), and 5 to His second advent. Of these 5, 3 references are to the first aspect (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:8; Titus 2:13), and the remaining 2 to the second, or judgment, aspect (2 Thess. 2:8; 2 Tim. 4:1).

It is thus very obvious that no one word is restricted to one phase of His return, but instead there is an interchange of the three words which together give us a well-rounded out picture of the second coming.

It is of special interest to note how appropriate is the Holy Spirit’s use of the word *παρουσία* in the passage now under consideration. In the Greek papyri we find that this word has a semi-technical sense in that it is employed of the arrival of a royal visitor to a certain district, and includes the thought of the preparation occasioned by the visit. How suggestive of the arrival of our Savior and Sovereign from “the ivory palaces” to court-

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reception His subjects, and of the necessity of our being adequately prepared lest we be ashamed before Him at His coming (1 John 2:28; cf. 3:1–3)!

Following the announcement in verse 15 that those living at the time of our Lord's return will in no wise gain an advantage over those believers who have departed this life, we are introduced by the word "for" in verse 16 to a more detailed statement of this sublime truth. We are impressed immediately with the emphatic position, in the Greek, of the words translated "the Lord Himself." The terminology furnishes indisputable proof that our Lord's return will be personal, and further suggests the thought that when He comes for His own, He will do so without any attendant, just as Isaac alone came forth to meet Rebekah when she came to be his wife. There will be no ethereal phantom, nor even a delegated representative, but the Lord *Himself* (cf. John 14:3). The Savior is the One for whom the saints long, and He alone can meet their heart-hunger.

And when He comes, it will be with the symbols of monarchial majesty, for the record reveals that three things accompany His return: (1) a shout, (2) a voice, (3) a trumpet. The Greek word translated "shout" occurs only this once in the New Testament and denotes any sounded signal. According to Thayer's lexicon, in classical Greek it is used of the huntsman calling his dogs, of a chariot-driver speaking to his steed, and of the cry of the captain to the rowers in a vessel. This signal-shout apparently indicates that all the Lord's own will hear and understand it, though there seems no reason for believing that this will be true of the unbelieving world. The Lord's people alone are in view in this passage, and it is evident that the summons concerns them only. It is possible, of course, that unbelievers will hear this signal-shout, but, like those described in John 12:28, 29, they will not understand the significance. Of this, however, we cannot be sure.

Then, again, we are told that He will come with "the voice of the archangel." The Greek word for "archangel" occurs in only one other place (see Jude 9), and while attempts have been made to identify the archangel as the Lord Jesus Christ, it appears from Jude 9 that this cannot be for two reasons: (1) the archangel is specifically called Michael, and (2) Satan is represented as being originally higher than Michael. The important thing to notice is that the absence of the article in the Greek before either "voice" or "archangel" serves to attract attention to the quality of the voice rather than to the person connected with it, so that discussion concerning the person of the archangel is really beside the point here.

The third accompanying feature of our Lord's return is that of "the trump of God." As Ellicott points out, the genitive is best regarded as possessive,¹ and this, together with the fact that the definite article is omitted, indicates that it is such a trumpet as is employed

¹ Charles J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 77.

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in God's service. The trumpet was frequently associated with the Old Testament theophanies (e.g., Exod. 19:16, 19; cf. Heb. 12:19), so that it is not surprising that we should meet with it here on this transcendent and epoch-making occasion. This trumpet is regarded by some as the one mentioned in Revelation 11:15, while others identify it with the one referred to in 1 Corinthians 15:52. There is really a deeper question: Do we have here three separate particulars following each other in rapid succession, or the first feature with the other two affording an appositional explanation? If we have three individual features described, then we can speak of a threefold work being performed: a commanding shout of the Lord Himself calling for His own, the summoning voice of the archangel, and the awakening trumpet arousing and gathering believers. But we much prefer to regard these striking phrases as descriptive of the great signal-summons from heaven that shall be the glad concomitant of His return.

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Continuing the vivid description of this breath-taking event, the inspired record declares: "The dead in Christ shall rise first." The phrase "the dead in Christ" undoubtedly has primary reference to the sleeping ones of verse 13, though it certainly embraces all such throughout the church age. In a striking way it reveals the strengthening fact that even the monster of death cannot break the bond that binds us to our Lord. The great family of believers whose bodies are sleeping will rise "first." The apostle is showing how unfounded is the despairing grief of those in Thessalonica, for instead of being at a disadvantage, the sleeping believers will be the first to experience the power of resurrection life.

"Then"—and by the use of ἔπειτα we are reminded of the immediacy of the event, this thought being further accentuated by ἅμα ("at the same time")—"we, the living, who are remaining shall be snatched away." We are not told here that the bodies of the living—or of the dead, for that matter—will undergo any specific changes, but 1 Corinthians 15:42–44, 52–54, to which reference will be made later, makes it crystal clear that such will be the case. All believers are to be equipped with bodies that will be eminently adapted to their new environment.

We pause to note the interesting use of the word rendered "caught up" in the English and American versions. It is a Greek verb meaning "to take away by force" as a wild beast carries off its prey. The word occurs thirteen times in the New Testament, and is used, for example, of one being pulled out of the fire (Jude 23); of Satan catching away the seed (Matt. 13:19); of Philip being caught away (Acts 8:39); and of Paul being caught up to paradise (2 Cor. 12:2). As a magnet attracts the scattered steel filings to itself by its great drawing power, so when our Redeemer returns for His own will they at once be gathered to Him, irrespective of every obstacle and the impeding law of gravitation.

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This passage further indicates that the living, “together with them” (the dead), will be snatched away. It will be “together,” the raised not preceding the living, nor the living the raised. It will be at the same time and in the same manner. And we are evidently not straining language when we say that “with them” indicates re-union and implies recognition. Such a blessed event, we are informed by the record, will take place “in the clouds,” or literally, “amid clouds.” We much prefer to regard the ἐν as locative and thus pointing to the clouds of heaven as the sphere, than to give it the unusual and strained descriptive connotation which makes it equivalent to ὡς and picturing believers ascending in cloud formation. Ellicott exactly expresses our viewpoint when he says, “The glorified and luciform body will be caught up in the enveloping and upbearing clouds.”² It was so when our Lord ascended (Acts 1:9), and we believe it will be so when we go up.

And when we do ascend, it will be “to meet the Lord.” The Greek word for this meeting is used in the papyri to describe the welcome-meeting given by residents to a newly-appointed dignitary, and thus carries with it the idea of an important gathering. It occurs only four times in the New Testament, and in each case it is strikingly significant that it is used in the sense of not only meeting a person, but of meeting him in order to come back with him. Once it is used in recording the coming of brethren from Rome to meet Paul as he and his companions were journeying to the metropolis. From Acts 28:15 and 16 it is clear that they met him at Appii Forum, and then returned with him to Rome. Twice the word is used in connection with the ten virgins who “went forth to meet the bridegroom,” and later were roused from their slumber by the cry, “Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him” (Matt. 25:1–6). Thus, by the use of this word, we have an apt designation of the two aspects of our Lord’s return: *for* and *with* His saints.

We are not left in doubt as to the meeting place when the Lord comes for His own: it is “in the air,” terminology which very plainly points to the atmospheric region surrounding the earth. But to suppose that this locality is to be the final residence of the redeemed is, as Ellicott truly and tersely puts it, “surely monstrous.”³ How long that meeting will be we do not know; and many other questions must go unanswered, since we have no further specific revelation. But we *do* know that in this way (“so”) “shall we ever be together with the Lord.” Thus will be finally fulfilled the prayer of our Lord recorded in John 17:24, “Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me.” To quote the

² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³ *Loc. cit.*

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appropriate words of Hutchison, "Less than this can never satisfy Christ's saints; more than this they cannot desire or conceive."⁴

The closing verse of this section, speaking as it does of the comfort to be derived from such a gracious and glorious unfolding of divine truth as we have been considering, stands in striking contrast to the notes of despair and utter hopelessness struck by the unbelieving who are without Christ and therefore without hope. Advent-truth may be a nightmare to some, but to every blood-bought believer it is the great consolation in suffering and the glorious expectation in service.

Before leaving this Thessalonian passage it should be noted that the essential truths here presented are found to be in exact agreement with our Lord's own teaching as recorded by John. This is important, since in many quarters it apparently is the fashion to depreciate the Pauline doctrine because of a supposed variance from the teaching of Christ. The striking correspondence between the teaching of Christ and that of Paul in relation to the Rapture is at once manifest in the following extended parallel:

<i>John 14:1-3, 27</i>	<i>1 Thess. 4:13-18</i>
1. "Let not your heart be troubled."	1. "Sorrow not, even as the rest, who have no hope."
2. "Believe in God, believe also in me."	2. "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep through Jesus will God bring with him."
3. "If it were not so, I would have told you."	3. "This we say unto you."
4. "I will come again."	4. "The Lord Himself shall descend."
5. "And I will receive you unto myself."	5. "We ... shall ... be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air."
6. "That where I am, there ye may be also."	6. "So shall we ever be with the Lord."
7. "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."	7. "Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

⁴ J. Hutchison, *Lectures on the Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 186.

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This is the kind of harmony which Bible believers know is so characteristic of the infallible Word of God. Evidently carping critics have eyes but see not the things which should be seen.

From the foregoing exposition of the central passage of revelation concerning the rapture, it will be observed that a number of features characterize this great event. First, it will be sudden. There seems to be a disposition on the part of some expositors to interpret certain events of Scripture as processes, a weakness usually revealed in explanations of prophetic subjects. This Thessalonian passage, like the rest of God's Word, will admit of no such exegetical jugglery. The rapture is a sudden event in point of time and must not be conceived of as a long-drawn-out process in human history. Confirmation of this is seen in at least two additional Scriptures. In 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52, we read: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: we all shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." Language could scarcely be clearer in indicating the rapidity of the change to be effected at the Savior's return. And the Patmos seer, in recording the last spoken words of the Lord Jesus, reveals that the return itself will be sudden: "I come quickly," i.e., suddenly. Scoffers may sneer at the seemingly delayed coming, but when the Redeemer returns for His own it will be with the suddenness of a Hitlerian blitzkrieg.

A second characterizing feature is that it will be selective. By such an expression we do not mean that only certain Christians will be taken to be with their Lord, while others are to be left to undergo a purgatorial treatment of suffering on the earth. This is a view which unfortunately has found credence among even otherwise well-taught Bible believers, but nowhere can we find warrant in the Word of God for such teaching. On the contrary, the Biblical terminology leaves no doubt that the Rapture will concern every believer, living or dead. Every dead born-again one and every living regenerate will share in this stupendous event.

It is thus a selected people for which the Lord returns. The rapture has no direct significance for the godless and unsaved dwellers of earth; it is the second aspect of His return—the revelation—which will have fulness of meaning for the unsaved as He comes in judgment and destroys even with the breath of His mouth and brings to naught by the very manifestation of His presence (2 Thess. 2:8). Nor can we be sure that His coming to the air is linked with Israel. The specific reference to "the dead in Christ" can scarcely be viewed as including Old Testament saints, for the characteristic Pauline phrase "in Christ" is used in the New Testament to describe only those who, through faith in His shed blood, have been made one with Christ in an indissoluble union effected by the agency of the Holy Spirit. Hence, it would seem that the rapture embraces only believers in this present church age; and such being the case, only a comparatively small number of the earth's population consequently will be affected.

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While it is not possible to be dogmatic about it, it would seem that His actual return for His own will be shrouded in secrecy. So far as can be determined, the world will know nothing of His coming, although unbelievers will soon become conscious of the event by reason of the far-reaching consequences attendant upon the removal of all the saved from the earth.

The Scriptures are likewise silent as to the immediate effect upon the world, but there can be little doubt that the sudden departure of every true Christian will be startling. It surely is not unreasonable or unscriptural to suppose that great consternation and alarm will be produced throughout the whole of the world by such a stupendous event as the sudden disappearance of all real believers. While imagination finds an extended field for play in contemplating the effect upon those who as mere professors are devoid of true spiritual life but have been lulled to sleep by a sense of false security, it is certain that to all such this great day of Christ will indeed be a tragic awakening.

We are on surer ground, however, when we consider the consequences of our Lord's return to the air, for revelation is quite explicit. For the Christian, it will mean three things: translation, transformation, and testing; for the world, it will mean suffering of a nature hitherto unknown in human history.

The Thessalonian passage already examined plainly indicates that before the actual translation of believers occurs the dead in Christ shall rise first. This resurrection is undoubtedly one of the series of resurrections designated by the term "first" in Revelation 20:6: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: over these the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years." It is a resurrection which will be concurrent with the Lord's appearance in the air; His presence there will be the great signal for the uprising of every sleeping believer in Christ. It is worthy of note that every recorded resuscitation of the New Testament was in response to the command of the Savior. It will be remembered that to the daughter of Jairus, He said: "Damsel, I say unto thee, Arise" (Mark 5:41); to the widow's son, He said: "Young man, I say unto thee, Arise" (Luke 7:14); and to the already entombed Lazarus, He cried with a loud voice: "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:43). It is recognized, of course, that these resuscitations were not resurrections, but may it not be that, in the manner of accomplishment, the former foreshadows the latter? Such a belief apparently finds support in the mention of the threefold signal-summons in the Thessalonian passage and in the reference to "the last trump" in 1 Corinthians 15:52, "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible." One writer maintains that "the last trump" was an expression very familiar to the people who lived in Paul's day. He says: "It was in common use in connection with the Roman Army. When a

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Roman camp was about to be broken up, whether in the middle of the night or in the day, a trumpet was sounded. The first blast meant, 'Strike tents and prepare to depart.' The second meant, 'Fall into line,' and when what was called 'the last trump' sounded, it meant 'March away.' The apostle uses that figure, and says that when the last trump of this age of grace sounds, then we shall be called away to be forever with the Lord."⁵ The Captain of our salvation and the Commander of our souls shall call His forces together, thus summoning His saints into His glorious presence. The dead shall be raised in power, the living instantly changed, and together they ascend to Him who has come for them. Who can begin to describe such a heavenly scene? Since nothing has ever occurred to which we can compare the wondrous scenes of this future day, the human mind utterly fails to conceive the fulness of the joy and the glory which will then be manifested. It is true that Enoch and Elijah were translated without experiencing death, but even the grandeur of the latter's ascent in a chariot of fire falls far short of the surpassing splendor of the great multitude of glorified saints mounting upwards in the very power of God that raised the Lord Jesus from the tomb of death.

This translation of believers at the coming of the Lord to the air is frequently alluded to throughout the New Testament, but is never referred to in the Old Testament, because the church was not in view in those days. First announced by our Lord Himself (Matt. 16:18), the fulness of revelation concerning God's purpose in the church was committed to the Apostle Paul (Eph. 3:1–13). Hence it is in his writings that this wondrous truth is unfolded and developed, and one is not surprised to find him referring to the circumstances of the rapture as a *mystery*. "Behold, I tell you a mystery: we all shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51). By describing it as a mystery, he is not intimating that it is something mysterious and incapable of being understood, but rather indicating that it is something now revealed which hitherto had been concealed.

In this verse from his Corinthian letter the apostle makes reference to the great change which the believer will undergo in connection with his Lord's return for him. Translation involves transformation. The change is said to affect the two classes, the dead and the living: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). The dead, whose bodies were corruptible, will be raised in bodies that will never know corruption. The living, who have bodies subject to death, shall become the possessors of bodies that are deathless. Then shall be fulfilled the promise of Romans 8:11, "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwelleth in you, he that raised up Christ Jesus from the dead shall give life also to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwelleth in you." And to this agree the words of Romans 8:23, "And not only so, but ourselves also, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit,

⁵ H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 529.

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even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.”

The changed body of the believer is further described in Philippians 3:20, 21, “For our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able even to subject all things unto himself.” This present body is truly a body of humiliation, characterized as it is by many limitations and various weaknesses and he who resides therein cannot but be conscious of its imperfect condition. But a body that is in the likeness of the body of Christ’s glory — what a contrast! Such a body cannot be subject to sickness or sin, to disorder, decay or death; neither shall it know any of the limitations of earth. It will be a body that will be able to accomplish all that the spirit purposes. While we do not know all the elements of its glory, it may be that the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration affords an anticipative glimpse of the solar-surpassing splendor which shall distinguish it. That this is not just a figment of the imagination is evident from the statement of our Lord as recorded in Matthew 13:43, “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” This shall be so, because “we know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is” (1 John 3:2).

The Scriptures further bear testimony to the fact that the new body received at the rapture will be spiritual. “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44). A spiritual body is not to be regarded as a body composed of spirit. The word “spiritual” in the New Testament is not used as an antonym for the word “material,” but is best viewed as being connected with the Holy Spirit. Thus while the “spiritual” body may be a body where the human spirit may have full, unhindered expression — an impossibility with the present “soulish” body — we much prefer to regard it as a body which is completely and fully animated and dominated by the Holy Spirit. These two views, however, are not mutually exclusive, and it is probable that both will be true of the new spiritual body received by the believer, which will bear the image of the Savior. It is certain that it will be a body perfectly adapted and suited to residence in the place which our Lord promised to prepare.

In view of such a striking and stupendous transformation, it is not surprising that cries of triumph should be forthcoming from those who undergo the great change. “O death, where is thy victory?” jubilantly ask those who are raised from the dead; while the living saints, who have put on immortality, give expression to their consciousness of conquest in the words: “O death, where is thy sting?” And together they blend their voices in ascribing praise and thanksgiving to the One who has made it all possible and actual:

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"Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

A third consequence of the Lord's coming for His own is that of the believer's testing. Transformed and translated, the child of God is now to be tried. It should be noted that the Scriptures indicate a threefold judgment for the born-again one. At the cross he was judged as a *sinner*, and for sin, in the death of Christ (John 5:24); during his Christian life on the earth God deals with him as a *son* (Heb. 12:7), but following his being "caught up" to be with Christ, he is to be judged as a *servant* (2 Cor. 5:9, 10).

Assurance as to the time of this trial as a servant is given in 1 Corinthians 4:5, where it is definitely linked with Christ's coming: "Wherefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall each man have his praise from God."

The basis of this testing at the judgment seat of Christ is clearly a matter of revelation, for the plain statement of Scripture is that "Each man's work shall be made manifest" (1 Cor. 3:13a). It is therefore a judgment concerning the believer's service, and the matter of importance in that day will be quality rather than quantity. "The fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is" (v. 13b). All works that are not according to God's standard will, like so much wood, hay, and stubble, be consumed before Him whose "eyes are as a flame of fire," and the believer suffers a consequent loss of reward; but for service that survives the divine fire-test and thus remains of permanent value, even as gold, silver, and costly stones, there is a suitable recompense from the Lord according to His gracious promise. Startling as may be the revelations, surely that day will have its compensations of glory for saint and Savior alike. And with His own thus finally judged, the Lord is ready to receive the church as His bride and the great marriage of the Lamb is the glorious consummation.

This, then, is the significance which the rapture holds for true believers. But what of the issues for the unsaved who are left on the earth? The genuine Christian is "caught up" in grace at the Lord's return, but that same coming means that the unbeliever will be cut off in judgment unless there shall be a reception of the good news of the kingdom which shall be proclaimed in the period immediately following the departure of the church. This seventieth week of Daniel's revelation will be a period of unparalleled suffering for the inhabitants of the earth. It is the time of "Jacob's trouble" when Israel shall experience the climactic troubles of her age-long sufferings (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21), as the final divine judgments fall upon the world in general and the chosen people in particular. The conditions of unspeakable anguish which feature this period are graphically portrayed in Revelation 6-19; and while it is difficult to conceive the full details because of much

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evident symbolism, the terrible character of the symbols points to the dreadful reality of the things for which the symbols stand.

When will the Lord come? This is a question which has been asked down through the centuries, and many have endeavored to answer it by various ingenious theories and calculations. All such attempts, however, are futile, for the very simple reason that Scripture is altogether silent with regard to the exact time. On the contrary, the Word of God expressly warns that this is a secret known only to God Himself: “But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son but the Father” (Mark 13:32). The primary reference is to the second aspect of the Lord’s return but the principle involved is equally applicable to the rapture. One would judge that with such emphatic language as our Lord used, no individual would ever attempt for one moment to discover the time when He should come. Yet, strange as it may seem, many have ventured, in the most daring and dogmatic way, to predict not only the year and the month, but also the very day, when the Lord is to return!

Such irreverent attempts at date-fixing have resulted in incalculable harm, for they have been used to discredit prophetic truth in general and the Lord’s return in particular. But it must not be overlooked that the relative time of His coming is clearly taught in the Scriptures. When this present age has run its appointed course, *then* shall He return to claim His own and take them to be with Himself forever.

It remains but for us to note briefly the challenge which the glorious truth of Christ’s return issues to every believer. Second-advent teaching is sometimes rejected on the ground that it is not practical, that it bears no relation to conduct, that it does not strengthen the moral life. It is frequently said that belief in His return does not impose any ethical imperative, neither does it impart any compelling inspiration. Such statements, of course, reveal gross and inexcusable ignorance of the Bible, of church history, and of present-day life. The New Testament teaching is that every doctrine has its associated duty. Knowledge and action, theology and morality, creed and conduct—these are related as the root of the tree is to its fruit. Belief is wedded to behavior. “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6) announces a principle which as truly applies to the union of doctrine and deportment as it does to the union of husband and wife.

Then what manner of men ought we to be? The Biblical teaching concerning the life of the believer in the light of His return may be summarized in this threefold fashion: walking in holiness, working in haste, and waiting in hope.

The believer is to walk in holiness. “Holy living and godliness” (2 Peter 3:11) are to be distinguishing features of his life on earth in all its varied relationships, and what this

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involves is detailed and developed in Romans 13 and 14. Surely nothing impels so much to keen, pure and vigorous living as does the blessed hope that He may return at any time for His own.

The believer is to work in haste. He has been saved “to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). And when our Lord gave the instruction: “Do business till I come” (Luke 19:13, lit.), He evidently did not mean that the time should be filled up with mere activity, but that it should be spent accomplishing the divinely-appointed task of witnessing to a lost world concerning the Christ of Cavalry and of the Empty Tomb.

Finally, the child of God is to wait in hope, “to wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Thess. 1:10). He is to wait for the Son, not to watch for signs. Waiting time is not wasted time, for the believer is to work while he waits. He is to labor energetically and at the same time live expectantly. The hope he cherishes is: Perhaps He will come today. It is his privilege to retire at the close of the day with the thought that the midnight gloom may turn to midday glory, and to rise at the dawn of another day with the glad thought that that day holds the possibility of the glorious meeting with Christ in the air. No wonder the Scriptures call it “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13)!

“The Blessed Hope”

It is not for a sign we are watching —
For wonders above and below,
The pouring of vials and judgment,
The sounding of trumpets of woe;
It is not for a Day we are looking,
Not even the time yet to be
When the earth shall be filled with God’s glory
As the waters cover the sea.

It is not for a King we are longing
To make the world-kingdom His own;
It is not for a Judge Who shall summon
The nations of earth to his throne.

Not for these, though we know they are coming;
For they are but adjuncts of Him
Before Whom all glory is clouded,
Beside Whom all splendor grows dim.
We wait for the Lord, our Beloved,
Our Comforter, Master, and Friend,
The substance of all that we hope for,

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Beginning of faith and its end;
We watch for our Savior and Bridegroom,
Who loved us and made us His own;
For Him we are looking and longing—
For Jesus, and Jesus Alone.

—Annie Johnson Flint⁶

⁶ Whiting, A. B. (1945). "The Rapture of the Church: Part 1." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 102, 360–372. Whiting, A. B. (1945). "The Rapture of the Church: Part 2." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 102, 490–499.