

## The End?

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Hey friends and family of Bethel Life Center, I am really glad that you have joined us in person and on-line this weekend. It is good to see you. Danice and I pray for you. The ministry staff prays for you. But, most of all Jesus Christ is praying for you.

The next event on God's prophetic calendar, is the imminent return of Christ.

By the time I finish this sermon, your world will have changed forever. As we are going to see, the author of the letter about the rapture gives details about the event, like no other text.

The return of Jesus Christ awakens those who have died as Christians and are now asleep. It also, unites them with those who are alive on the planet at the time of Jesus return.

This rapture, the catching up of Christians into cosmic place with Christ, starts the clock for God's end time apocalyptic drama known as the final 7 years of human history. The bible calls this epoch the Great Tribulation.

So, let's just read about it, right from God's word.

*<sup>13</sup> Now we do not want you to be uninformed,<sup>[a]</sup> brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> about those who are asleep,<sup>[a]</sup> so that you will not grieve like the rest who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also we believe that<sup>[a]</sup> God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep as Christians.<sup>[r]</sup> <sup>15</sup> For we tell you this by the word of the Lord,<sup>[s]</sup> that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep.*

*<sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel,<sup>[t]</sup> and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left,<sup>[u]</sup> will be*

*suddenly caught up<sup>[v]</sup>together<sup>[w]</sup> with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thes. 4-NET)*

Before we look closely at one of Paul's churches, who had a bunch of questions, and a lot of confusion about the end times, I want to take you on a **brief tour** of the end time prophetic biblical landscape.

\*One out of ever thirty verses in the bible points to Jesus' return, rapture, second coming or the end times.

\*There are 216 chapters in the New Testament, in those chapters you can identify over 300 references to the return of Jesus.

\*The Rapture is identified 13 times in the Greek New Testament.

\*The word rapture, which is *harpadzo* in Greek, means to snatch away suddenly by force.

\*Only 4 books of the New Testament out of 27, fail to include even one verse about Christ's return. Jesus Christ spoke of his return often, especially after he talked about his death.

Jesus was never vague or mysterious about his return. The teaching of the return of Jesus was a frequent staple, diet, and theme of the post apostolic age.

As Christianity spread throughout the world, and history moved further away from the days of Jesus death, burial, and resurrection the message of Christ's return found its way into preaching and was historically etched into church creeds.

One of the most famous creeds is the 39 articles of the Church of England. The fourth article states, *"He ascended into heaven and there sitteth until He returns to judge all men at the last day."*

The bible stands upon the truth of Jesus return. Historical church creeds stand upon the truth of Jesus return. Many of the churches hymns and gospel songs stand upon the truth of Jesus' return.

(1) I'll Fly Away oh glory, I'll Fly away!

(2) When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory!

(3) When the roll is called up yonder:

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more and the morning breaks eternal bright and fair.

When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore, and the roll is called up yonder I'll be there.

The author of this deeply loved song, James Black, was inspired to write the song because of an encounter with a sick and poorly dressed little girl in Sunday school, who was the child of a local town drunk.

One day in Sunday School, as the children answered the roll call for attendance by repeating a memorized bible verse, this little girl failed to respond with a bible verse. The class teacher James Black, the composer and author went home and told his wife, "How sad it will be when our names are called out of the Lamb's book of Life, if one of us should be absent."

Shortly thereafter, this little poverty riddled girl died of pneumonia, after an illness that lasted 10 days. Her life became the inspiration for the song. After arriving home, with the memory of the girl unable to say a bible verse for roll call, now permanently etched in his mind, James sat down to the piano, in 1894, wrote the song in 15 minutes including these famous lines:

On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise and the glory of His resurrection share-

When the chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies, and the roll is called up yonder I'll be there.

It is really significant that you know and understand heaven is an actual place. It is an eternal destination with an address, a city to be enjoyed and lived in called the New Jerusalem. A place where a redeemed people will live for all eternity.

Heaven is not a misty dream in the sweet by and by or a floating fantasy in some distant galaxy far away. Heaven is literal real estate, someplace in the universe right now, Christ is preparing a place for you and preparing you for that place.

Let me see if I can prove this to you. Jesus said, *“and I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again.”* (John 14:2) The word for place in the Greek is *topos*. This is where we get our English word, topography.

What is topography? It is the layout of a landscape. It is the contours. It is the elevation. It is the shape. It is the arrangement of the physical features of a geographical area.

It is the art or practice of showing heights and depths of a featured place. The topography of Kansas is flat. The topography of Colorado is mountainous. The topography of Florida is swampy.

Now, this word, *topos* (place) was used to describe the place that Judas ended up in, after his hideous death by hanging.

*Show us which one of these two you have chosen to assume the task of this service and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own **place**.* (Acts 1:24-NET)

**Place-Topos.** A real geographical place, called hell where people who do not want God to lead their life, get their final wish. *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.* (Matt 25:46)

A place where nothing good or godly exists. Not beauty. Not peace. Not pleasure. And certainly not love. Just uncontrollable lust. Torment. Torture. Pain. Barrenness. Thirst. Darkness. Fear. And perpetual unimaginable screaming.

So, heaven and hell are real geographical, topographical places in eternity. The body of every believer, whether in a casket, those who died in a fire, tore apart by war, wild beast or ravenous disease will be received personally at the return of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is coming back. And like the disciples who stood watching Jesus disappear on his day of ascension, Jesus will reappear on his day of return.

*This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1-NIV)*

The bible does give us some insights, into what Jesus’ return will look like because the idea of rapture is connected to Elijah, Phillip and Paul. The Rapture will be characterized by suddenness.  
(Elijah), by transport (Phillip) and by removal from danger. (Paul)

**Elijah**-2 Kings 2:11, *As they were walking along and talking, suddenly a fiery chariot pulled by fiery horses appeared. They went between Elijah and Elisha, and Elijah **went up** to heaven in windstorm. (2 Kings 2:11)*

**Philip**-Acts 8:39, *now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord **snatched** Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him anymore, but when on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:39)*

This word snatched away, is the Greek word harpadzo and it means to snatch away suddenly by force.

It is used a couple other times. Paul was caught up, snatched away into the 3rd heaven as he had an out of body experience. <sup>2</sup>*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows) was **caught up** to the third heaven. (2 Cor 12-NET)*

There is that word harpadzo again. Caught up to the third heaven. And it is the word used in text in 1 Thes. 4:17, <sup>17</sup>*Then we who are alive, who are left,<sup>[u]</sup> will be suddenly **caught up**<sup>[v]</sup> together<sup>[w]</sup> with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

Elijah, Philip and Paul provide a clear picture of what Paul is telling the Thessalonians will happen at the day of Jesus return, the rapture.

Let me turn over my PC keyboard to Max Lucado, perhaps this illustration will stir your heart:

He was as princely, as a prince could be. He searched in towns and villages to find his bride. You could see it on his face - determination, which was only surpassed by his love. A love waiting to be accepted. A love waiting to be found.

Then one day, it happened, he finds his peasant bride. A more unique romance never occurred. His attraction to her was baffling. He is the stately prince. She, the common peasant girl.

She was plain. Flawed. Walked with a limp and one eye seemed a little off. He was perfect, she was plain. At times she slipped into periods of sadness and crankiness.

Not the kind of soul you would expect to be with a prince.

According to the prince she was the SOUL that he could not live without. He proposed. On the dusty floor of her peasant cottage, he knelt, she smiled, he took her hand and asked her to be his bride.

The angels of heaven leaned in to hear her whisper, "Yes."  
"I will return for you soon", he promised.  
"I will be waiting," she pledged.

Now, a prince leaving? Is that odd? No. He had princely duties to fulfill. He is after all the son of a king. Surely, he had Kingdom work to do. But Kingdom work did not crowd out the thoughts he had for his bride. His thoughts were always about her even while he worked. And about his return.

The prince talked about her often. What is odd, is not his departure, but her behavior in his absence. She forgot she was engaged.

You would think that her upcoming wedding was the only thing that she talked about to her friends. It isn't.

You would think that the wedding day would be her first thought and last prayer, but it isn't.

Some of her friends had not even heard of the prince. She has never described how wonderful he is. How kind and gracious.

Days have passed, even weeks-and his return isn't mentioned.

I am almost too embarrassed to tell you this next part. Maybe I should whisper. There have been times when she was found flirting and whispering with the village men.

This happened in the bright sun of the day, what is she doing in the dark of the night?

Has she fallen out of love? Is she rebellious? Need I even raise the question-**unfaithful?**

No, she may only be **forgetful**. You say that is no excuse. Why his return should be her every thought. How could a peasant forget her prince? Would a bride forget her groom?

This story is more than a fable, it is a story that is all too familiar. It is not a story about them, but rather a portrayal of us.

Question? Are we not the bride of Christ? Have we not been set apart for that day of his return? As a pure bride to one husband?

<sup>2</sup> For I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God himself. I promised you as a pure bride<sup>[a]</sup> to one husband—Christ. (2 Cor. 11:2-NLT)

Has not God said to us, *"I will make you my promised bride forever* (Hosea 2:19-NCV)

Are we not mere peasants before a Holy and Great God? We, the sinful peasants, have heard the promise from our prince king. He entered our village, took our hand, and stole our hearts.

Why, even the angels thought it an odd match, this perfect and holy prince selecting a sinful and rebellious bride.

I wonder if the same angels are puzzled by our behavior. We don't always act like we are engaged, do we? Days pass and even weeks and we fail to mention the one who has captured our heart and healed our soul. Shockingly, some who know us best, know nothing of a prince that will come to get us.

Are we rebellious? Maybe? Are we forgetful? Oh, for sure. Amnesic? To forget that we are engaged to Christ. Perhaps today, the lover of your soul can light a fresh fire. Let's start with some verses about the **princesses return found in 1 Thes. 4**

1. God wants you to know about the coming rapture. (vs. 13)

When it comes to Christ return, ignorance is not bliss. Our Lord does not accept excuses like:

Well, can anybody really be sure Christ will return?  
I just hope things work out in the end.  
I have more important fish to fry.

God is not pleased with our ignorance or neglect. God wants you to be informed and ready. God wants you to at least have a 30,000-foot panoramic view of what is out in front of us.

*<sup>13</sup> Now we do not want you to be uninformed,<sup>[a]</sup> brothers and sisters,*

Paul is talking tenderly those he loves deeply, and telling them, don't be in the dark. What is it that Paul does not want them to be in the dark about?

2. God wants you to have hope because of the coming rapture. (vs. 14)

I officiate a lot of funerals. I sit at many bed sides. I watch how those without Christ go into eternity. It is a marked difference between those whose hope is in Christ and his return from those who wonder if poof, their candle goes out. Or they are coming back in another reincarnation.



Many who die without Christ, experience some of the deepest emotional pain and encounter some of their darkest moments.

Death brings tears. Sorrow. Sadness. God does not tell us to not grieve, he tells us that we do not have to grieve, like the rest who have no hope. When you and your loved ones are in Christ, your sorrow and grief is not like the rest who have no hope,

*...about those who are asleep,<sup>[a]</sup> so that you will not grieve like the rest who have no hope.*

You see because of Jesus' resurrection; we have hope beyond the grave.

And it is the hope of heaven, the hope of healing, and the hope of eternal happiness in a place where sin does not exist. And all of this is made possible because we shall be raptured and rise and be resurrected with Jesus.

*<sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also we believe that<sup>[a]</sup> God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep as Christians.*

Jesus Christ resurrection was so supernatural that not even death was irreversible. Even death could be reversed. In itself, the empty tomb was not enough to convince the disciples that Jesus had risen, it required intimate personal experiences.

A private dinner. A seaside breakfast. Some weeping in the garden. A walk along the road.

If Jesus is free as a bird from the tomb and possesses new supernatural powers in his body: a sudden arrival on an Emmaus Road, a hidden presence at a tomb, and walk through-a-wall-abilities, **what is instore for us?**

What is in store for each of us is so amazing: a new eternal body, an eternal marriage and marriage feast, rewards enjoyed forever and a forgiveness that is so thorough that our past is totally removed forever.

A place where our sins are cast as far as the east is from the west. ...*as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.* (Ps 103:12-NIV)

3. God wants you to know your loved ones who have died in Christ are asleep and waiting for the coming rapture. (vs. 14)

God is using the word to describe, the death of a Christian as sleep. Why does he use the word sleep? For a Christian when you sleep, it is nap time.

The Thessalonians were concerned their family and friends were going to miss out on the rapture because they had died. Are folks who died going to miss out on this promise of Jesus return? That's why Paul tells them he does not want them to be in the dark.

4. God wants you to know there is an order to the coming rapture. (vs. 14-15)

Here is the overall order of events: First, Jesus will return from heaven. One word of command. One shout from the arch angel. And one trumpet blast. This event never ceases to get me excited. And make me smile.

*<sup>15</sup> For we tell you this by the word of the Lord,<sup>[s]</sup> that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep.*

Next, the dead will rise first, those who are asleep will awaken. And together we who are alive at the time of the rapture, will suddenly be caught up and together we will join Jesus in a cosmic reunion. That takes place in another reality.

In another stratosphere. Caught up in the atmosphere. Arising into the Celestial sphere. Off into the Wild blue yonder.

What the rapture does is brings several reunions. You and Christ. You and all Christians. You, with those either dead or alive. And so important.

The rapture is a reunion with you and your new eternal body.

It is my conviction that the Lord Jesus will come for us in the clouds. Following that reunion there will occur on earth a time of terrible judgment, of unrestrained evil and a time of great tribulation.

After 7 years of destruction and evil, Jesus will return to this earth and establish a 1000-year reign of peace. A virtual garden, like Genesis, just a little more populated and a little more advanced in technology.

The government will be a kingdom, like Bhutan, that has a king, and Jesus will sit on a throne where Jesus reigns as king. Jesus return for his own as described in 1 Thes. and 1 Cor, is prior to a literal kingdom on earth. But the most important thing for you to understand, in my opinion, is that you will be rescued from the day of the Great Tribulation.

5. God wants you to know that you will be rescued by the coming rapture. (vs. 16-17)

The reason you do not need to fear the end is because the rapture includes a rescue.

It includes a reunion with Christ. A reunion with loved ones. A reunion with a new eternal body that never wears out. But it also involves a rescue.

Scripture predicts the coming of a time in the future of worldwide suffering. Not just in the middle east where women are brutally mistreated. Not just in countries of Africa ruled by warlords. Not just in places like China that torture dissidents.

Global. Worldwide. No discrimination. This period of time is called the Great Tribulation. The day of the Lord. A Time of Jacob's trouble.

Now, protection and rapture of Christians from these 7 years, does not mean that we are exempt from suffering, trials, persecution and temporary or lesser tribulation. Jesus said, "in the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33)

In Acts 14:22, we learn that through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God.

As it relates to the end times, the bible distinguishes between trials and tribulations and a time period of 7 years, called the Great Tribulation. Where God's wrath is poured out on the earth.

So, take comfort my friend, *God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* (1 Thes 5:9)

And I find a lot of comfort from the verse in Rev 3:10, *because you have kept my command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.*

Probably the most asked question about salvation and the tribulation is, will people be saved during the tribulation?

Notice with me, that immediately after reassuring believers they will be saved from the tribulation and a future worldwide testing, Jesus promises to come quickly. Rev 3:11, *I am coming quickly!*

The place of this statement is right after the promise of removal by means of the rapture, implies the deliverance of Christians from wrath and testing.

The bible teaches rescue and removal: Lot was rescued, Noah was rescued, and Rahab was rescued. And if you are alive at the time of the tribulation, you too will be rescued.