

GOD'S PROPHECIES

FOR

PLAIN PEOPLE

by William L. Pettingill

- 1923 -

Van Kampen Press Wheaton, Illinois

~ out-of-print and in the public domain ~

Chapter Two - The "Rapture" and the First Resurrection

What does the "Rapture" mean? Since we have adopted "Make it plain" as our slogan in this Bible class, we need to be careful about definitions as we proceed.

The dictionary will show you that "rapture" comes from the root which means *to be caught up*. The use of the word in connection with the study of prophecy is based upon the closing paragraph of I Thessalonians 4, that is, verses 13 to 18:

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

There is no question, I believe, as to the date of this Epistle; all agree that it was Paul's very first contribution to the New Testament, and many believe it to have been the first written among all the books of the New Testament. We shall therefore make no mistake in starting here.

It is evident that First Thessalonians was written in reply to hard questions sent from Thessalonica to Paul by his friend and fellow-laborer Timothy. The 17th chapter of Acts and the 3rd chapter of First Thessalonians will make this clear. Paul had labored in Thessalonica only two or three weeks when his enemies drove him out of the city. Since his departure many perplexing problems had confronted the young converts there. Paul had taught them that when they turned to GOD from idols it was **"to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from Heaven"** (I Thessalonians 1:9, 10). He had not talked much about the death of believers, but since he had gone from them some of their number had died. Through Timothy they sent an inquiry to Paul concerning these Christians who were dying. What had become of them? and what should be their relation to the great ever-imminent event of which he had told

them, that is, the catching away of the church to meet her LORD?

First Thessalonians is Paul's answer to this and other questions. The dead in CHRIST were with their LORD, and those alive and remaining should in no wise precede them when the LORD should come for His own. That coming for His own was something to be constantly waited for; it might take place at any time. Their place was to serve and to wait. All through the Epistle these things are stressed, and in most of the later Epistles of Paul to the churches they were among the subjects treated. Nothing is more insisted upon than that the saints should be continually in the attitude of expectancy in view of the imminent rapture of the church.

"Out from Among Dead Ones"

The Rapture of the church, as is seen from the Scripture already quoted, is linked up with the resurrection of the saved. I say "of the saved," for the lost will not be raised from the dead at the same time with the saved. The resurrection of the saved "is the first resurrection," as Revelation 20:4 puts it. **"And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them (the armies from Heaven - 19:14), and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast (the wicked king of the 13th chapter), neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived (literally lived again, or revived) and reigned with Christ a thousand years."**

Just here it is proper to explain that the word "millennium" comes from this expression, "a thousand years." It comes to us through the Latin *mille* = a thousand; *annum* = year. The passage goes on.

"But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4-6).

Then follows a description of what comes after the Millennium, all of which we hope to study together at a later point in our series.

There are, then, two resurrections instead of one. And the two are separated from each other by a thousand years. The first resurrection is premillennial, or before the Millennium; while the second resurrection is post-millennial, or after the Millennium.

The first resurrection is only of the saved;

the second resurrection is only of the lost.

But now we need to turn to the 5th chapter of John to clear up a point in connection with this part of our subject. Here, in verse 24, a resurrection - that is, a coming to life from the dead - is described, but it is a spiritual resurrection: **"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."**

That is spiritual resurrection, clearly enough; it is what takes place when a man is born again. And so also it is in the next verse, the 25th: "**Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.**"

Resurrection, Bodily and Spiritual

This, I say, is spiritual resurrection also; for the LORD said, "**The hour is coming, and now is.**" Bodily resurrection is not yet, but spiritual resurrection now is. Every time the Gospel is preached - and the Gospel is certainly "**the voice of the Son of GOD**" - every time it is preached to lost men, it is preached to those who are dead - dead in their trespasses and sins. Some will, by the power of the grace of GOD, hear that voice; and they that hearken - shall live. That is resurrection. It is coming out of death into life. And yet it is spiritual, and not bodily, resurrection.

Now let us go to the 28th and 29th verses of our chapter; and there we shall find bodily resurrection: "**Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.**"

Standing by itself, this statement would seem to teach a simultaneous resurrection of all, the saved and the lost, at the same time. But, let it be noted, the "**hour**" of verse 25 has already lasted for nineteen hundred years. Why, then, should not the "hour" of verse 28 endure through the thousand years of the Millennium? Even here, in verse 29, two resurrections are named - one unto life, and one unto damnation. In Luke 14:14 the first resurrection is called "**the resurrection of the just.**"

There are hints in the teaching of the LORD JESUS which seem to show how His own mind was often occupied with anticipation of that great day of the Rapture of the church and the resurrection of His beloved ones. For example, there is the parallelism easily traced between His own words in the opening verses of John 14 and Paul's words in the 4th chapter of First Thessalonians already quoted at length in this study:

Our LORD said, "**Let not your heart be troubled.**" Paul said, "**Comfort one another with these words.**"

The LORD said, "**Ye believe in God, believe also in me.**" Paul said, "**If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.**"

The LORD said, "**If it were not so, I would have told you.**" Paul said, "**This we say unto you by the word of the Lord**" (that is, from the LORD JESUS' own mouth).

The LORD said, "**I will come again.**" Paul said, "**The Lord himself shall descend from Heaven.**"

The LORD said, "**and receive you unto myself.**" Paul said, "**We . . . shall be caught up . . . to**

meet the Lord in the air."

The LORD said, "**That where I am, there ye may be also.**" Paul said, "**and so shall we ever be with the Lord.**"

The parallel is too complete to be accidental. It is of the SPIRIT of GOD.

There is another such parallelism in connection with I Corinthians 15:51-54, a passage so familiar as to have lost its point with many who seem to think it has no important place outside the funeral ritual. But let us look at it as something new, just as if we had never seen it before.

Let the members of our class put themselves by imagination in the home of, say, Aquila and Priscilla, on the night when perhaps the church of Corinth met in their house to hear the latest news of their beloved Paul: "**The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house**" (I Corinthians 16:19). The meeting comes to order, and some one announces that there is a letter from the Apostle to be read to the assembly. Imagine, if you can, the tremendous impact upon your own ears when the startling language is read:

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep."

Doesn't Everybody Have to Die?

In modern phraseology this means: "Listen! I have a secret to tell you. Not all of us shall die!"

Whatever could the man mean? Everybody knows that we must all die. No. That is the great mystery now revealed, the wonderful secret never before made known.

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 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, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory" (I Corinthians 15:51-54).

Note the parallelism. Let the class turn to John 11:20-26, and note carefully the language:

"Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house. Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

Here is language that confuses the commentators, and it defies all intelligent or intelligible

exposition until the parallelism is seen to which reference has been made. It is as clear as the noonday sun that the LORD JESUS, who was about to enact a miniature representation of "**the resurrection of the last day**," had the scenes of that day in mind while talking to Martha.

When that day arrives - the day of the first resurrection - He who is the Resurrection and the Life will do on a large scale what He did in the Bethany burying-ground when He called His friend Lazarus out of the grave. But He will also do much more than raise dead men to life. On the great day that is coming He will speak out of Heaven the word of power, and "**he that believeth in**" Him, "**though he were dead**" - that is, though since believing he has died - "**yet shall he live.**" As Paul puts it, "**the dead shall be raised incorruptible.**" And as for those other believers, those who "**are alive and remain,**" our LORD declares: "**Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.**" Again, the parallel is complete.

It is impossible to regard it as accidental. It fits as the hand in the glove. It is of GOD'S SPIRIT.

So, then, death does not await all GOD'S children. Some shall not die. The LORD JESUS may at any moment say the word, "**Come up hither**" (Revelation 4:1), which shall draw His own - the quick and the dead - up to Himself in the air. For this we are to look, for this we are to wait, and in this hope we are to live. Blessed hope! How it should lay hold upon us. How it should mould our lives! What a pity that we have not learned it, and been gripped by it! for it is written that "**every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure**" (I John 3:3).

May it be even so with all who follow with us in these studies! May every day be lived in the power of the God-given truth that before the day is ended we may be "**caught up . . . to meet the LORD in the air!**"

"Caught up! Caught up! No wing required
Caught up to Him by love inspired,
To meet Him in the air.

"Spurning the Earth with upward bound,
Nor casting a single glance around,
Nor listing a single earthborn sound,
Caught up in the radiant air!

"Caught up! with rapture and surprise;
Caught up! our fond affections rise,
Our coming LORD to meet.

"Hearing the trumpet's glorious sound,
Soaring to join the rising crowd,
Gazing beyond the parted cloud,
Beneath His pierced feet!

"O, blessed! O thrice blessed word!
To be for ever with the LORD,
In heav'nly beauty fair!

"Up! Up! We long to hear the cry!
Up! Up! Our absent LORD draws nigh!
Yes, in the twinkling of an eye,
Caught up in the radiant air."

~ end of chapter 2 ~
