

THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH – PART I

Matthew 24:1-44, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

October 17, 2021

You may recall when Edgar Whisenant, a NASA engineer turned prophet, wrote a booklet titled, “*88 Reasons why the Rapture will happen in 88,*” well it didn’t happen in 1988! Then, just over ten years ago another gentleman named Harold Camping – who owned a string of radio stations across the USA, gave a prediction on an exact date for the return of Christ. He somehow developed a Biblical dating system, and was thoroughly convinced that May 21, 2011 was exactly 7000 years from the day Noah entered the ark, so he concluded that this would be the date of the Rapture of the church. He ended up drawing a large following, receiving millions in donations to buy full page ads in major newspapers and to sponsor over 2000 billboards announcing that the Rapture would happen on May 21st. But, he was wrong! Edgar Whisenant and Harold Camping are examples of what Jesus warned us about in **Matthew 24:4**, “*Watch out that no one deceives you,*” and also **verse 10**, “*At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.*” That is why we need to study this important subject of the second coming of Christ and the Rapture of the church, because many will be led astray and deceived, and I don’t want that to happen to anyone hearing this message!

The Rapture of the church is a very controversial subject today – but is an important topic to understand especially as Jesus’ return could take place at any moment. As we look at this chaotic out-of-control world that we live in today, we may think that the current events must be the sign of the end of the world, but I want to warn you that there have always been times when world conditions seemed ideal for Christ’s return. Since the birth of the church, 2000 years ago, every generation believed that Jesus would return in their generation. However, it is very clear that Jesus’ return is getting closer with every passing generation, and I believe that our generation could be the closest to Christ’s return, since the Jews are miraculously back in their ancestral homeland of Israel since May 15th, 1948 (Israel is the fig tree referred to by Jesus in **Matthew 24:32** that has sprouted leaves and is flourishing under all kinds of opposition). Every believer should have a clear Biblical understanding of the Rapture, so they will not live in fear, or be caught off guard, or be surprised when that time of persecution and tribulation arrives for believers, even here in Canada. No believer will be exempt from persecution, as Jesus was hated, His followers will also be hated!

This morning I am going to give you my viewpoint on the second coming of Jesus Christ – and you don't have to accept my view; however, it is important for each of you to come to your own conclusion and understanding, because what we believe about Christ's return really matters to our daily walk. Christ's second coming is mentioned approximately 300 times in the Bible, so we can't bury our heads in the sand and ignore it. If God didn't want us to study the end times, then there wouldn't be such a vast amount of material in the Bible about the last days. God wants us to know what is coming so that we will be ready and live in anticipation of Christ's return!

The word "*RAPTURE*" is never found in the Bible – however, the word is commonly used by evangelical Christians, referring to the time when Jesus will come on the clouds with great power and glory, when a mighty trumpet will sound and the dead believers from all over the world will be bodily resurrected. As well, the promise for us today is that at the very same moment, those believers who are still alive will suddenly be transformed, in the twinkling of an eye and meet the Lord in the air. A day every believer should be looking forward to in expectation! Nearly all Bible believing Christians agree that the Rapture will take place, but the exact timing of the Rapture is where there is all of this disagreement and confusion. As well, most Bible believing Christians believe that there will be a seven year period of tribulation, which will basically be hell on earth, because the anti-Christ will come into power and his number one goal would be to destroy and annihilate everything that is good, and everyone that loves God!

There are three different views of the Rapture:

1. The Pre-Tribulation view, the view that the church will be raptured up to Heaven before the seven year tribulation period ever begins, with believers being spared of any hardships and intense suffering. A view that's more popular today than in the past.
2. The Mid-Tribulation view, the belief that the church will be raptured up to Heaven at the mid-point (3 ½ years into the tribulation period).
3. The Post-Tribulation view in which the church will go through the entire seven years of tribulation before Christ returns. This last view has been the position held by the church through most of it's history, and I believe lines up best with the passages in the Bible, and the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus had more to say about His return in **Matthew 24** than in any other chapter in the Gospels. **Matthew 24** opens with Jesus and His disciples walking by the

Temple in Jerusalem, marveling at this magnificent structure, but Jesus shocks them by predicting its total destruction, ***“Do you see all these things? Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down”*** (Matthew 24:2). As Jesus predicted, this event took place in AD 70, when the Romans destroyed King Herod’s magnificent Temple and left it in ruins. Then, the disciples ask Jesus about the sign of His coming and the end of the age, to which Jesus gives them this long detailed answer found in the rest of **Matthew 24**, where He explains the events to watch for in the end times; however, I want us to focus in on the few verses that speak specifically about the Rapture of the church, the mass resurrection of all believers, and the timing of this event.

Jesus tells His disciples in **Matthew 24:29-31**: ***“Immediately after the distress of those days*** (which I believe refers to the 7 year TRIBULATION PERIOD) ***...Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the people on earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”*** And to find out where that will take place, we need to turn to the O.T. prophet **Zechariah 14:4**, ***“And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives.”*** The exact place where Jesus ascended back to Heaven, 2000 years ago. Jesus will descend at His second coming and enter Jerusalem through the Eastern gate (Golden Gate)!

In **Matthew 24:4-28** – Jesus begins by telling us about all of the horrible things that are going to happen during this seven year tribulation period, and then, beginning in **verse 29**, Jesus tells us the good news, ***“immediately after this 7 year tribulation period,”*** He will come back to get us out of here before God releases His final judgment on this earth, before the seven bowls of Gods’ wrath is poured out on this earth, the events recorded in John’s vision in the book of Revelation, chapters 15 to 18. The church on earth is not mentioned again after Revelation 14, so that is most likely when the Rapture takes place, when Jesus harvests the earth.

We are also told by the Apostle Paul in **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17** about Jesus’ return for His church, ***“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”*** Another place where Paul speaks about

the rapture is **1 Corinthians 15:21-24**, *“For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead came through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ the firstfruits; then when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come!”* Death came through the first Adam, but Resurrection will come through the second Adam – Jesus Christ who was the first to rise from the dead and receive a glorified eternal body!

I believe that the church is not going to avoid tribulation – because before Jesus returns, the Bible clearly tells us that the world will be heading for a time of great shaking, which will bring a great many to repentance. As this shaking takes place, when everything that we have been putting our faith in is removed and turned upside-down, many will wake up from their sinful life-style and repent, according to **Matthew 24:14**, *“And the Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.”* As a result, there will be the greatest harvest of souls take place, with great multitudes turning to their only hope, which is to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

This Pre-Tribulation belief that has been common in many of our churches, the belief that when trouble comes God will get us out of here, has only helped produce laziness, apathy, indifference, and idleness among God’s people. And it doesn’t help when our secular news stations don’t report the fact that currently there’s a great deal of persecution of Christians taking place throughout the world, especially in Muslim countries. So, most of us here in the west, believe that we’re protected and immune, thinking persecution will never come to Canada, and we’re not prepared physically and spiritually to endure the times of tribulation that the Bible warns us about!

The teaching of the Bible tells us that we are not to be worldly or to put our faith in worldly things; however, the Canadian church for the most part has become worldly, which is another issue against us from being prepared for persecution. What I mean by worldly Christians are those who are compromising their faith as they try to fit in with the current trends taking place within our secular society to avoid persecution, rather than being salt and light. So, for those trying hard to fit in with those around them, living for wealth, status and the pleasures of this world, the coming years of shaking are going to be extremely difficult and traumatic, and as a result, many will turn away from their faith. Therefore, there will not only be a great harvest of lost souls; there will also be, at the same time, believers who will

turn away from their faith. That's exactly what Jesus predicted would happen in the last days, "***At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other***" (Matthew 24:10). Paul also gives the same warning in **2 Thessalonians 2:3**, "***Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs (believers fall away) and the man of lawlessness (anti-Christ) is revealed.***"

The O. T. prophet Joel, as well as the Apostle John's account in **Revelation 19** both speak of the physical return of Jesus Christ, along with His Heavenly army prepared for war at the end of the Tribulation period. **Joel 2:11** describes it in this way "***The day of the Lord is great: it is dreadful. Who can endure it?***" Could the Bible be any clearer! When Christians go through the fires of testing, some will not endure, and will lose their faith because they weren't prepared, they were caught off-guard, thinking that God would rapture them out of here before any trouble comes. Well, that didn't happen during the holocaust of WWII, and it didn't happen during the great persecution of the saints that took place in Communist Russia and China, and it's not currently happening today in the Middle East, especially in Afghanistan. Millions-upon-millions of Christians have died as martyrs for their faith in the last century, so why should it be any different for us here in Canada!

On a positive note – if you are living for Christ, I believe the years ahead are going to be exciting times, the very best time to be alive. As the shaking of our society increases, when everything society has put their faith in starts falling apart, it will provide the church with countless opportunities to proclaim the Gospel message and witness for Christ. During those difficult times, for the true Bible believing faithful church, it's going to be the greatest time of revival and victory the church has ever known. I'm praying for the day that people will come flocking to our doors, to have the same assurance of salvation that we currently have, and receive the same hope we enjoy in God's promise of peace in the midst of suffering and hardships. So why worry about what the future brings, when we serve the ONE true almighty God, the Creator of all things, who has the future firmly in His hands. God has a plan, and nothing ever happens that takes God by surprise. If God knows every hair on our head and every breath that we take, nothing is coming that we won't be able to handle as long as we trust fully in Him. The threat of death will not deter us! They can kill us physically, but not spiritually, because we have been promised eternal life!

The Bible clearly points to the second coming of Christ's, and that's what we all should be eagerly awaiting and anticipating; however, I firmly believe the Bible also clearly tells us that the time of trouble for believers must come first before the Rapture of the church takes place. And when the seven years of tribulation are over Revelation 19:11-16 tells us what will take place – Jesus comes back with the armies of Heaven, defeats the Antichrist, and sets up His earthly millennial kingdom of a thousand years, when the righteous, those who came through the great tribulation period, will reign with Christ. It will be a glorious time of peace and the restoration of all that Satan had stolen from us since that day he deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden!

Now, the next big questions is this: *“When will this all take place?”* Jesus says in **Matthew 24:36-42**, *“About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* Then Jesus informs us that most of the people on this earth will be caught off guard, *“As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the time Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away ...”* And then, Jesus gives to us the church our marching orders – because I have warned you about these things, you are called to be MY watchmen. *“Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”*

Jesus warns us that no one can know the day or hour, it will happen unexpectedly, just as during the world-wide flood in Noah's day. Unfortunately, a great many, even Christians, will be caught totally off-guard, going about their daily lives, oblivious to the destruction coming their way. So, as believers we should know better than be caught off-guard; instead, we need to be vigilant, watching in expectation for Christ's return at any moment. And as we wait, not to fall for any deception or wrong teaching that may come our way, especially those that come up with very specific dates. Even though the hour day is unknown, there are signs within the Scriptures that point us to the end times. In Noah's day, in spite of the warnings, the people were un-prepared because they ignored Noah's preaching; they kept on eating, drinking, marrying, and partying until the day the flood brought an end to all of it. They had no idea that their world was about to come to a tragic end, so Jesus warns us – don't be like those living in Noah's day. Be alert! Know the signs of Christ's return!

The Apostle Paul also warns us about the unexpected day of the Lord in **1 Thessalonians 5:2-3**, ***“the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...destruction will come suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman.”*** And then in **verses 4-6** Paul adds, if we are awake and in-step with what God is doing in the world, we will not be caught off-guard. ***“But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should not surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day...So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.”*** When Jesus comes to Rapture the church, it will be sudden and unexpected like a thief, it will happen in the twinkling of the eye, so stay awake and stay in touch with what is happening in this world, and especially keep your eyes on Israel. God has an end-time plan for the nation of Israel, especially the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem!

God wants everyone to be saved – however, only those who accept His saving grace will be selected to be part of His eternal family in Heaven. So, when Jesus comes to Rapture the church, some will be taken, and others left. As we read in **Matthew 24:40-41**, ***“Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken the other left.”*** That’s why it’s critical that we make a choice for Christ now, today, because we may not get another opportunity tomorrow. Among Christians there should be is no dispute about Christ’s return. The only remaining question should be: ***“Will I be ready when Jesus returns?”*** Remember, Jesus will come for us in one of two ways: either we will meet Him at death, or we will meet Him in the air when He returns. Either way, we need to be ready and prepared, and God has not only placed numerous warning signs all along our pathway of life to help us be ready, He has also given us the Holy Spirit, who draws us to Christ, who speaks into our lives and guides us into all truth!

Unfortunately, there are always skeptics among us – making fun of all this talk about the Rapture, both inside and outside of the church. God had predicted that that would happen: ***“In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of the creation’”*** (2 Peter 3:3-4). So, who are you going to believe, the scoffers, or the Word of God about Christ’s imminent return?

YES, I believe that the church will go through at least some and most likely all of the tribulation period, but I don’t want you to see that as bad news, because Jesus

promised to come back for His bride, the church, and the coming trials will only help to refine us and purify so that we would be ready to be Christ's holy, spotless, and radiant bride. The overcoming church that is ready to meet Christ at all costs, will never back away, or back down, or back off when evil and darkness fills the earth, because they are clothed in the protective armour of God, they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and are crushing the enemy with prayer and the Word of God. So be encouraged, the greatest days of the church are right around the corner, and I want to be part of that great revival that is coming, when the lukewarm, half-hearted religion that we have called Christianity for so many years is going to die away, and God will birth something new – a church that is full of life, joy, passion, and vitality, ready to meet Christ in the air when He returns!

So, as the current shaking increases, when violence, chaos, fear, and hopelessness will be all around us, we will not be like the rest of the world; we will keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. We will be confident that we will overcome the enemy with the blood of the Lamb of God and by the word of our testimony, and we will willingly lay down our lives for the one who willingly laid down His life for us. We won't worry or fret but look forward to that day when the last trumpet will sound and the dead will rise and we will be gathered to our eternal home in Heaven. And, when that day arrives, we will rejoice because we will never be separated from our Lord and Saviour ever again!

So, as we wait in anticipation for that day of Christ's glorious return – we are not to forget this one thing, according to **2 Peter 3:8-13**, ***“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. YES, the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. YES, that day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”***

As our world becomes increasingly unstable – we need something permanent upon which we can base our lives, and that permanence is God’s Word that stands forever. As Jesus said in **Matthew 24:35**, “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*” God’s Word reminds us that everything around us is temporary, so we don’t hold tightly to the things of this world that will one day turn to dust; instead, we commit to holding firmly to the promises of God, for they are eternal!

I have given you my understanding of Christ’s return and the Rapture of the church – and now it’s up to you to decide for yourself. For every believer there shouldn’t be any fear or confusion on such an important topic on which our eternity depends, and on which so much has been written within the pages of the Bible.

EVEN SO, COME, LORD JESUS!