

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 97-3

Dear Reader

We looked at when the Church began in the last newsletter. In this issue of the Assembly Messenger we want to look at when the Church will end. The answer to that question is in two words: *It won't!* From previous newsletters we have seen from Revelation 19-22 the Church (pictured as a city -- Revelation 21:9-22:5) as the bride and wife of Christ, deeply loved and reigning with Him during His thousand year kingdom reign. Then in the eternal state -- the future eternity -- the Church is still seen as "a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev.21:1-2). So the Church will never end but will uniquely be connected with Christ her Savior and Lord forever.

So a better title for this third edition is "When and how will the Church end its earthly existence?" or "Will the Church go through the Great Tribulation?" Now, those are questions with considerable controversy! Many professed Christians have sort of a vague idea of some future coming of the Lord after severe earthly judgments, and an earthly reign of the Lord. Others may see the fact that the Church will have a heavenly future, but again that future is seen as occurring after many devastating earthly judgments. Not much to look forward to, is it? But Scripture holds out a much brighter hope and greater blessing for the Church, for ourselves. Let's look at it in some detail.

When and How Will the Church End its Earthly Existence? Will the Church go through the Great Tribulation?

There are many verses in Scripture that speak of the Lord's coming. I will not quote the passages for the sake of brevity, but they all are quoted in the referenced book. One set of verses is found in Joel 3:14-21; Zechariah 14:2-9; Matthew 24:27-44; 25:31-46; Acts 1:9-12; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 2 Timothy 4:1-8; Colossians 3:4; 1 John 3:2; Jude 14-15; and Revelation 19:7-16; 22:12. Please look them up. Note in these verses we see the Lord coming *to earth* (His *appearing* or manifestation) at the end of (or, ending) the Great Tribulation. He comes with angels and *with His saints*, and *in power and glory*, in contrast to His first coming in meekness to go to the cross. He comes *for judgment and to reign* in His 1000 year kingdom.

Now contrast the above with another set of verses which also speak of the Lord's coming. Read John 14:2-3; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54; Philippians 3:20-21 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Note the differences. In this set of verses there is no standing on the Mount of Olives, no judgment, no kingdom, no saints coming *with* Him to reign. Rather, we find the Lord coming in the *air*, *for His saints*, to take them to the Father's house. Since we absolutely affirm the inerrancy of God's Word, *the inescapable conclusion is that these two sets of verses indicate two distinct aspects of the Lord's "second coming," each for a different purpose.* How is God going to bring the saints with the Lord at His *appearing* (the first set of verses) -- the "coming of our Lord Jesus *with all His saints*" (1 Thes.3:13) -- when some had died by the time Paul wrote to the Thessalonian local assembly? Paul explained in 1 Thessalonians 4. *The Lord is first coming for all His own, whether dead or alive!* He will raise the dead in Christ, change the bodies of the living believers to bodies of glory, and then catch all of us up to meet the Lord *in the air*, and so shall we *ever* be with the Lord.

This second set of verses speaks of a coming or phase of the Lord's second coming which is usually called the *Rapture* from the Greek word *harpadzo* (catch up -- 1 Thes.4:17), meaning a joyous catching away from one sphere to another. When will this wonderful but little-understood event occur? The first obvious answer is sometime *before* He appears at the Mount of Olives to reign, when He comes *with* the previously-raptured saints, as seen in Zechariah 14, Acts 1 and 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:13-14. But how

long before? Before the time of God's judgments? During those judgments? Immediately before He comes to reign? Let's turn to Revelation, God's great New Testament prophetic book.

The Church in Revelation 1-4

The apostle John was divinely given the outline of the book of Revelation with respect to time. He was to "write the things which *you have seen* and the things which *are*, and the things which shall take place *after this*" or "*after these things*" (1:19). Chapter 1 presents the things which John had seen. Chapters 2 and 3 present the things which *are* -- the things of this present Church dispensation which included the time John actually lived after the Church began at Pentecost. In the messages to the seven local churches or assemblies in these two chapters, we have the prophetic history of the Church on earth from its beginning to its end -- exactly what we would expect in a prophetic book like Revelation! What comes afterwards? In chapter 4:1 we see the Lord telling John to "*Come up here* (to heaven) and I will show you what must take place *after this*" or "*after these things*" (JND, NASB) -- *immediately after the end of the history of the Church on earth*. What does John see?

In that same first verse of Revelation 4 we have a door opened in heaven and a voice *like a trumpet* speaking to John. John's visionary "rapture" to heaven with a "sound like a trumpet" (v.1; 1 Cor.15:52; 1 Thes.4:16) calling him up, is a clear picture of the rapture of the Church! *Never again do we see the Church on earth in Revelation*. The Church's prophetic history on earth in Revelation ended with the close of Chapter 3, and it (represented in picture by the Apostle John as part of that Church) begins its heavenly destiny in chapter 4.

In Revelation 4:4 we see 24 "elders" in heaven -- the elders representing or picturing Israel and the Church, the leaders of God's two unique sets of people. These elders sit around Christ in heaven. The wording indicates resurrected saints *in their bodies*, not disembodied spirits such as seen in Revelation 6:9 when speaking of believers who die during the Tribulation who have no part in the Church.

The next time we see the Church is in Revelation 19 at the marriage of the Lamb. His heavenly bride, the Church (Eph.5), has made herself ready. Most of Revelation between chapters 4 and 19 deals with the *earthly people* and *earthly judgments* of the 7-year long *Tribulation*. So the rapture of the Church, pictured in chapter 4:1, *takes place before any part of the Tribulation begins!* We thus see a definite *pretribulation rapture*.

In earlier newsletters we saw the Church, the bride, at the marriage of the Lamb (Rev.19:7-9) which takes place just before the Lord *appears* and we appear with Him in glory (Col.3:4; Rev.19:7-16). His *wife* has "made herself ready" (v.7). *She has clothed herself in her righteous acts as viewed and accredited by the Lord Himself* (v.8).

What has happened to the Church *in heaven* during the intervening seven years (or so) since the Rapture? How has she been accredited with those righteous acts? There has been the *Judgment Seat of Christ*. "We must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ that each one may be recompensed *for his deeds in the body* according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor.5:10). "Each one of us shall *give account of himself to God*" (Rom.14:12). All things will be made right then, as discerned by the righteous, perfect discernment of God's eyes (1 Cor.3:10-15). What has been truly done for Him will be manifested by our clean linen garments at the "marriage." In passing, note that there are others at the marriage supper beside the bride -- those who have been *invited* to the marriage supper (Rev.19:9). Those are the believers before the Church began, such as Adam, Abraham, David and John the Baptist, and probably the martyred Tribulation saints.

Finally, as we have studied in previous newsletters, the Church, pictured as a city, is seen in Revelation as reigning with Christ over the earth for 1000 years (Rev.20:4,6). The city is "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev.21:9-22:5). The Church is pictured as perfectly organized, having every resource it needs to properly reign with Christ. There are two other key verses in Revelation that strongly support what we have just studied. They are discussed below.

Saved From Even the *Hour* of Tribulation Wrath

We have seen from Revelation 4:1 that the Church is raptured to heaven before any part of the Tribulation begins. Is there further proof of this? Let's see. Revelation 5-20 pictures the great time of God's wrath on earth which we have called the *Tribulation*, intensifying for the last half of that "week" of years (Dan.9:27) to the *Great Tribulation* (Mt.24:21-22) due to the casting down to earth of Satan (Rev.12:7-17) and Satan then *directly* energizing the two beast-like men of Revelation 13. These men respectively are the political-military leader of the West (the revived Roman Empire) and the religious-political leader of Israel.

Matthew 24:5-14 shows the first half of this week-of-years "Tribulation" while verses 15-24 show the last half and identify it as the "Great Tribulation." The 3.5 years or 42 months or 1260 days of this terrible Great Tribulation are identified in Daniel 7:25; 9:27; 12:7; Revelation 11:2-3; 12:6,14 and 13:5. This specified time period (whether in years, months or days) is always associated with the *Great Tribulation*, never with the first half. It's as if God were saying, The time is under control: it won't run beyond its allotted course. It's a set time of unique trial for those who *dwell upon the earth*. Now, let's look at these two verses.

"Because you have kept My commandment to persevere I also will keep you from the *hour of trial which shall [is about to -- JND] come upon the whole world* to test those who *dwell upon the earth*. Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have that no one may take your crown" (Revelation 3:10-11).

Verse context is very important. Someone has said that a *text* without a *context* is a *pretext*. Where are these two verses found? They are in the *prophetic history* of the (professing) Church, near the end of that history, in the Holy Spirit's letter (Rev.3:13) to the local church at the city of Philadelphia in Asia Minor. Those Christians had uniquely obeyed their Lord, had not denied His name, and had really loved Him -- picturing those comparatively few believers in that condition shortly before the end of the Church-age.

Historic Philadelphia (that aspect of the Church's history pictured by the Lord's letter to the assembly at Philadelphia -- Rev.3:7-13) began in the early to mid 1800's when, out of the dead formalism of the remnant of the Reformation (Sardis -- Rev.3:1-6), the practical truths of the Church, its heavenly destiny and God's prophetic plan (among many other truths) were recovered, preached openly and put into written ministry which spread around the world in just a few decades. The Christian community was forever changed! Prophetically, this Philadelphian condition was to occur shortly before the general (and present) condition of the professing Church became *lukewarm* and self-sufficient, but outwardly prosperous, as pictured in *Laodicea* (Rev.3:14-22).

Since the early days of the Church, the prophetic meaning of the above verses as applying to the Rapture (as well as the truth of the Rapture itself) were lost. These verses have only been understood by any large number of Christians as being a *special promise* to those near the end of the Church-dispensation, since the mid-1800's -- the same time frame as the renewed interest in the pretribulation rapture!

The special promise given to the Philadelphian assembly *is the pretribulation return of the Lord Jesus to take His people away from this world before the storm of tribulation-judgments come on the earth*. The true Church -- those really saved -- are not to be protected *through* the coming time of testing, but *from* that hour of testing. *They simply won't be around when that hour begins!* That time of judgment, of testing, is for *earth-dwellers* -- those who openly prefer earthly things and self to divine things and Christ. Revelation 6:10; 11:10; 13:8,14; 17:8; as well as our verse in 3:10 prove the unsaved and evil moral state of these *earth-dwellers*.

Old Testament Example

An Old Testament picture or example of the difference between the heavenly saints and their rapture, and the Tribulation saints is found in the history of Enoch (Heb.11:5; Gen.5:22-24). Enoch is a picture of the heavenly saints including ourselves. He was *raptured* (taken to heaven) shortly before the divine judgment by flood came upon the earth-dwellers -- all those sinful people who refused God's ark of safety (a picture of Christ). Noah and his family -- pictures of the Tribulation saints, saved after the Rapture, having never before heard and rejected the gospel (2 Thes.2:10-12) -- were carried safely *through* the judgments to be deposited on a cleansed (millennial) earth where government was established by God (Gen.7-9; Heb.11:7; Rev.7:14). However, Enoch was kept from the very *hour* of that judgment in a most remarkable way: he was raptured from it: "God took him." We will be "taken" also! Let's look at some more verses.

Delivered from the Coming Wrath

1 Thessalonians 1:10 says, "... how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to *wait for His Son from heaven*, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, *who delivers us from the wrath to come.*" We are delivered from the wrath to come. What wrath? From going to hell? Yes! From any other wrath? Yes! *We are delivered from any wrath you can find in the Bible.* Christians may need to be child-trained (chastened) by the hand of the loving Father (Heb.12:3-11), but they are *never* under His wrath. The unsaved abide under His wrath (John 3:36).

Revelation 6:16-17 speaks of a Tribulational wrath to come. "Hide us from ... the wrath of the Lamb, *for the great day of His wrath has come** and who is able to stand?" These verses primarily are speaking of the Great Tribulation, but there is wrath (just not His "great day" of wrath) *before* the *Great* Tribulation as seen in the terrible times predicted in Matthew 24:5-14; Mark 13:6-9 and Revelation 6:1-8; 8:7-9; etc., for the first half of Daniel's 70th week (the Tribulation). We are kept from all that wrath! *Whatever the wrath, we are kept from even the hour of it!*

* The fearful people -- the earth-dwellers -- speaking in this verse erroneously thought the *actual* final day of the Lord's wrath had come. They didn't think things could get worse, but they would get worse. Their anticipation doesn't change the fact that a day of *great wrath* was shortly to come, or that it was already a terrible time under the judgments allowed by God because of their sins.

Romans 5:9 also tells us, "Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be *saved from wrath* through Him." A distinctive feature of Christianity is that Christians are saved from (kept from the danger of) the wrath of God -- any wrath you want to consider!

1 Thessalonians 5:9 further says, "God *did not appoint us to wrath*, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." The same comments as above apply. However, a few more comments on 1 Thessalonians 5 might be helpful. The *day of the Lord* -- the day when the Lord is *personally* active in the affairs of men for judgment and then for blessing -- is before Paul. Notice the change in pronouns in the first eleven verses. "They" speak of the unsaved of a future time who will be surprised at the swift and violent coming of the day of the Lord. But "we" (Christians) are not in darkness. That day won't surprise us. We know lots about it, even to its timing in relation to other events, if we have studied the prophetic scriptures. We are not of the night of God's judgment, but children of the day. In fact, as Paul had just detailed for the Thessalonians a few verses before, *we are not destined for wrath at all, but for rapture!* Our complete deliverance or salvation, even of the body, is God's goal for us. We will be saved from all danger.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-9: Verses in Contention

"Now, brethren, concerning [*by* -- JND, W.Kelly] the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled either by spirit or by word, or by

letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord had come [is present --JND]. Let no one deceive you by any means, for that Day will not come unless the falling away [apostasy] comes first and the man of sin [lawlessness] is revealed, the son of perdition" (2 Thes.2:1-3). Note that, in verse 2, the KJV and the NKJV use "day of *Christ*" instead of "day of *the Lord*" against virtually all manuscript authority, including 6 of the 7 editors of the Stephens Greek text used for the KJV.

"And now you know *what* is restraining [him -- i.e., the man of sin] that he may be revealed in his own time. For the *mystery of lawlessness* is already at work; only *He* who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way, and then the lawless one will be revealed" (2 Thes.2:6-8). This is an accurate translation of the subject verses. The bracketed words as noted are from the accurate J.N.Darby or William Kelly translation and are preferred.

2 Thessalonians 1 deals with the *appearing* of our Lord (and ourselves with Him) at the end of the Tribulation to personally put down the world's opposition to Himself. This event occurs just before the Millennial day of blessing. That whole time of the Lord's *personal intervention* is the great and dreadful *day of the Lord* (Joel 2:1-2; Malachi 4:5). However, 2 Thessalonians 2 shows that some were wrongly teaching that the day of the Lord already was present. That would have put those early Christians, who were being persecuted, right in the middle of God's final judgments of the earth-dwellers, and the Thessalonians were upset. Evidently, there even had been a forged letter, supposedly from the apostles, circulated to that effect.

Paul strongly argues the truth, *using the fact of the Lord's coming* -- that coming or presence when we are gathered together unto Him -- as the backbone of his argument. The fact that the Rapture had not taken place was proof of the falseness of the letter. Don't get upset, don't be deceived, Paul urged. Further, he argued, the day of the Lord can't begin until at least two other future events occur. There must first be the final *apostasy*, the final, great falling away from or abandonment of most or all divine truth on the part of the masses. This apostasy will take place shortly after the rapture of the Church -- in part as a result of the rapture of the Church. See Matthew 24:11-12; Mark 13:6; etc. Second, the *man of sin* [lawlessness] has to be revealed. This is the person who, after the middle of the Tribulation, sits in the future Jewish temple and claims to be God as seen in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and 9. All of those things -- the Rapture, the apostasy and the revealing of the man of sin -- had not (and still haven't) taken place. *The day of the Lord is still future!*

Verses 6-7 show that two *restraints* presently hold back lawlessness and prevent the lawless-one from coming before his proper time. In verse 6 it is a *thing*. In verse 7 it is a *person*. The *thing* probably is the Church, although it is not defined, but the Thessalonians *knew* what it was. The Church has been left here to shine (like the moon) in the night of the absence of the Sun of Righteousness (the Lord Jesus -- Malachi 4:2) and, consequently, its presence and shining for Christ help to restrain evil. When the Church is removed from the earth at the Rapture, that restraint therefore is removed. *Then*, you wouldn't want to be around here!

The *person* apparently is the Holy Spirit. He is now on earth, indwelling the Church collectively (1 Cor.3:16) as well as the believers individually (1 Cor.6:19). He will be with us *always* (John 14:16-17). Therefore, when *we* go to heaven at the Rapture, *He* goes, and the restraint of a divine Person on earth thus also is gone. Of course, He will still be active on earth with the newly-saved Tribulation saints, but not as an *indwelling possession* of the saints. He will be *with* the Tribulation saints (as with the Old Testament saints), but not *in* them (John 14:17) as He is with us today.

So, instead of these verses substantiating in any way a post-tribulation rapture, the very fact of the Rapture is used (along with other arguments) to prove that the day of the Lord, even in its introductory judgments, could not possibly be present. The Church and the Holy Spirit have to be removed for that day to come. From Revelation 4:1 we have seen that the Rapture takes place before any part of the Tribulation begins. Also, from the great prophecy of the *70 weeks* in Daniel 9 (see suggested reading) we see that once the last "week" begins, God's dealings return primarily to "Daniel's people" (the Jews), for

God has completed the bride of Christ, the Church, a unique, primarily Gentile “people for His Name” from our current dispensation.

We thus see that a pretribulational Rapture of all believers (including the Church) to heaven, followed about seven years later by a premillennial “appearing” of Christ *with His saints*, is *one of the great prophetic truths of the Bible* -- a truth specially to be enjoyed by us who form the Church.

Finally, see Paul’s “we” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. He was looking to be one of the *living* at the Rapture. He therefore obviously didn’t believe the Church had to go through the Tribulation!

Titus 2:12-13

Titus 2:12-13 says, “...denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in the present age, *looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing* [or, *the appearing of the glory*] *of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.*” In these verses the question is, Are we awaiting here one coming spoken of in two ways, or two comings (or two phases of one second coming) each spoken of in its own way? We believe the latter. We first await or look for the “blessed hope” of being raptured out of this world before the terrible dangers of the Tribulation begin, and second, we also await or look for the “appearing” of Christ *with us*, in His display of glory. In view of this, and because of the rewards for being faithful (Lk.19:11-27), which are associated with His *appearing*, we should be living godly lives in this present time. Note that in the Bible the word *hope* never has the idea of wishful thinking. It always means something that is absolutely sure, but still in the future. The Rapture is our blessed hope because that is when we see Jesus “who is our hope” (1 Tim.1:1).

SUMMARY

Despite many millions of professed Christians who are preparing themselves for the terrible time of wrath coming upon the earth-dwellers, or are simply resigned to suffer or die in that terrible time, we have seen that the Church will *not* go through any part of the Tribulation. Yes, the mystery of lawlessness will keep right on increasing until the Rapture, but it will be as nothing compared to the sudden unleashing of evil when we and the Holy Spirit with us, are removed swiftly and silently from this earth.

Please be assured of these things in your own minds, from God’s Word. The many, many foes of the pretribulational rapture of the Church are now very active in opposing this truth after years of being content to allow the “dispensationalist” to proclaim the Rapture of the Church to the comparatively few who would listen. Covenant Theology is active! While there are many lovely and godly believers who are fighting the Rapture (and won’t they be pleasantly surprised), they are very wrong on this doctrine, so don’t allow them to rob you of these great truths! “Test all things: hold fast that which is good” (1 Thes.5:21).

RPD

Suggested Reading

“From Rapture to Reigning” by R.P. Daniel will help explain in more detail the differences between the Rapture and Appearing, as well as related events of the Tribulation and Judgment Seat of Christ. R.K.Campbell’s “A Prophetic History of Christendom” and R.P. Daniel’s “God’s Performance Review of the Seven Churches of Asia” will help make the prophetic aspect of Revelation 2 and 3 much clearer to the interested reader. The little book, “An Outline of Prophecy” by R.P. Daniel, will briefly explain Daniel’s 70-week prophecy both in words and with a chart. These books are available from Believers Bookshelf USA (717) 672-2134 or Canada (905) 563-4929.

NOTES

