

# The Rapture of the Church

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2017

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Rev. Dr. Colin S. Marshall

Readings: Psalm 24, Job 19:23-29, Matthew 24:6-8, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Almost every Tuesday evening I attend training with the Ambulance service in my dual roles as Chaplain and Ambulance Officer. Frequently, the training is about things that I know pretty well and do frequently – resuscitation drills, CPR, taking basic observations. Less frequently, but in rotation, we do all sorts of other things, some simple, some quite complex. The repetition of the well-known over and over you might think would get incredibly boring ... but one thing stops that from being so ... a mistake in a real situation could cost a person's life. The more we practice, the more automatic we get in what we do, the more efficient, the more precise, the greater the likelihood that when the need is there the result will be as good as possible. I see seasoned veterans with decades of experience doing exactly the same basic drills without complaining, always looking to do better. It is a salient lesson and one that bears a startlingly close parallel to the import of today's message. This morning we continue our consideration of the Book of Revelation focussing on the text of Revelation as it reveals to us a critical time in human and Christian history. Some people have even suggested that it speaks of a period, a season, that we are now in. Chapters 7 to 14 of Revelation reveals a period known as the Rapture of the Saints or the Rapture of the Church and the seven-year period known as the Great Tribulation. We will start this week with the Rapture.

The word "rapture" in itself is telling. As a noun it describes a feeling of great joy or pleasure, as a verb it describes that transportation of believers to be with Christ at the Second Coming. In fact, for believers, it will be both. Prophecies of this time raise a lot of fear and concern amongst many Christians and non-believers. This fear that can be either positive or negative depending on one's perspective. Let us start by considering that all of what is outlined for us in the Book of Revelation is part of God's economy, that is, God's plan for salvation - particularly through the church. Because all of what follows is of God's plan it has been highlighted and outlined in prophetic material so that those whose spiritual ears are listening we are fore-warned. In the Book of Job, historically one of the oldest of the Biblical writings we find an amazing testimony to what is to come. Written at least 800 years before Jesus' birth, possibly coming from narratives as many as 3000 years earlier, Job states, **"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25–27)**. Job speaks of seeing His Redeemer, Messiah Yeshua, Jesus, standing on earth. His comment "in the end" tells us that here will be a period of conflict, of struggle, of overcoming to happen first. Job knows that the Messiah's overcoming will be a time far in the future, a time after his body has decayed and ceased to exist – yet he is confident that he personally will see the Messiah with his own eyes. This points us to two things vital things as regards the rapture: the Messiah, Jesus, will come in the flesh to earth and that the dead will be resurrected with a new or transfigured body. This certainty gave Job incredible confidence through the very worst of times. It placed a longing on his heart to be with his Messiah that was greater than anything that beset him on earth – even the loss of family, of possessions, even of health. It is a longing that, as Christians, many of us share. Job knew that in time his faith would be rewarded and that he would personally see the most glorious thing – the rising of the dead (himself included) and the Messiah, his Lord, standing on earth.

Which brings us to vital questions: when will this happen and who will it happen for? This was exactly what Jesus' disciples wanted to know as well and Jesus provided some critical insight. **"As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him**

**privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. 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. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:3–14).**

Here Jesus provides some insight as to a timeframe and some key factors to watch out for. Firstly, there will be many who claim to be Messiah and who will deceive people with false teaching. I think we can tick that one off. We have more than enough false teaching and corruption of practice and Scripture outside and inside the church to more than satisfy that criteria. Secondly, we will hear of wars and rumours of wars. Need I say anything – simply turn on any news channel. Yet this is not unique in human history – we have already been through two world wars. Jesus says not to be alarmed, that such things must happen before the end comes. Nation rising against nation goes in hand with this. There will also be a rise of famines and earthquakes in various places. The increase of these has been noticeable with climate change and the warming of the earth. All of this, says Jesus, are the beginning of the birth pains of the birthing of the new eternal kingdom. What they will lead to is a period of intense and deliberate persecution of true Christians that for some may even lead to death. An increasing hatred of Christians across the globe will be evidenced and persecution become normalised. We have not seen this yet although one would well argue it is something that is increasingly evident world-wide, including here in New Zealand. In the face of this opposition Jesus says that many people’s faith will go cold and they will even turn on their former brothers and sisters in Christ. Some will be deceived by false teaching, by compromising spirits, false prophets. But, as ever in God’s economy, there will be some who will remain faithful, who will stand firm against the ethos of the world and persecution and will see things through to the end. These will be saved. And, irrespective, the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, will be proclaimed throughout the world.

Again we want to know – when will this happen? Or has it already begun? When we consider the persecution of Christians today you might be surprised to look at the figures. The Centre for the Global Study of Christianity states that between 2005 and 2015 900,000 Christians were martyred. That is 90,000 a year. In a number of countries Christian minorities are under sustained attack. The worst are listed in order as North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen and Eritrea. That’s without mentioning the atrocities against Christians in places like India and other African nations. Over the last two years this rate of persecution has increased. In the West, Christians who want to hold to orthodox Christian values and sexual morality in particular, are ironically targeted, abused and mocked by those who call for toleration. Yet this will get far, far worse.

Further down in Matthew 24 Jesus tells us that false prophets and messiahs will appear doing great and miraculous signs. Already, we of know of at least one false messiah in Europe that has a following of thousands. This year the National Geographic magazine ran an article on five men in different countries, all who claim to be the messiah who have

significant followings. At what point will Jesus appear? Jesus tells us that ***“of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.”*** There will be many, probably the majority of people, who ignore the warnings of the season and are unprepared when Jesus does come. It is not for us to know the day or the hour but to be ready. Jesus’ parable of the ten foolish bridesmaids in Matthew 25 points to the same truth. Complacency is a serious risk. If we are not ready when Jesus returns we will be left behind.

When Jesus returns He will come, as the angel told the disciples who were standing watching Jesus leave, in the clouds (Acts 1:10). In 1 Thessalonians 4 the apostle Paul outlines more of what will happen when Jesus returns. He will descend with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel and with a trumpet blast. These are the signs of divine authority, of a message to the world and the heralding of things to come. Then Jesus will call His own to Himself, those that have died and then those who still live. This will be a truly unimaginable day. The church universal will be revealed. All those who truly believe, who have and are truly working at being faithful servants of the Lord, will rise to meet Him in the air. From all over the world. From where-ever they are. In 1 Corinthians 15:35ff the apostle Paul outlines what will happen to us, alive and dead, we will be changed in an instant from physical and corrupt to a new body. This will be the beginning of our time with the Lord forever. That also, as an aside, is why we have no fear of the Day of Judgement. Yes, we will be there, but the Lord will already have claimed us as His own. The rest of the human population will be left on earth, or in their graves. There will be many who have treated faith lightly, for whom being a Christian is just a label, to whom Jesus will say, as He did to the foolish bridesmaids, ***“Truly, I do not know you.”*** (Matthew 25:12). This will be a terrifying time for them. There may be for some, one further opportunity to repent, but what is to come next is not pleasant. How much better to walk with the Lord now in love and humility and have confidence about what is to come.

Much has yet to transpire on earth and in the history of the world before Jesus physically returns to earth to fulfil what Job envisioned but the rapture could occur at any moment and there is much to argue it is immanent. Are you ready? If so this will be an exciting time for you. If not, you’d better get ready. And if you don’t know how then talk to me or one of our leaders after the service. If you have friends and family who don’t know the Lord then I’d suggest you might seriously want to pray for them and look for, or make, opportunities to share your faith because, seriously, I’d wish we’d all be ready. What life or lives can you save, are you trained and ready to save? Because now is the time – not for practice but to be doing it!

The rapture is the start of the Lord’s return to earth. Next week we will look at the seven year period and events of the time known as the Great Tribulation – unless He returns before then - in which case we will be watching instead!

Amen

