Caught Up Part Two

Last week I described three common interpretations of an event often referred to as the Rapture. At some point, Jesus Christ will return to earth to claim His Church. Those dead in Christ will be raised, and those living will meet the Lord in the air. Some Christians see this occurring years before Jesus actually returns to setup His Kingdom. This is the Pre-tribulational position. Others see this occurring around the time the Antichrist demands to be worshipped as God but before God’s wrath is poured out on unbelievers as described in the book of Revelation. This is the pre-wrath position. And others believe that Christians will remain on the earth during the Antichrist’s reign, and that the Rapture and the Glorious Return of Jesus are the same event. This morning I am going to share my opinion on the timing of the Rapture. First, let’s bow in prayer. **PRAY!**

Before I share my position, I realize there may be many here who believe differently than I; that’s fine. This shouldn’t be a divisive issue because end time interpretation is difficult at best; we should all be humble enough to admit we don’t know for sure. I am not a seminary professor, I don’t know Greek, I don’t have a PHD. People much more educated than I share all three viewpoints I shared last week. As Christians, each of us should study the Scriptures and come to our own reasonable conclusions.

We all agree Christ is coming back, that we have victory over death through Christ, and that God will be faithful to us in all circumstances, until we meet Him either by our death or by being taken up to meet Him.

Regarding the Rapture, I support the posttribulational position. This morning, I would like to share my reasons for this. Then I would like to share some things I think we can learn from each of the interpretations. Finally, I would like to share what we can take away from this no matter how you feel on the subject.

In preparing for these last two messages, I read a book called “Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation” published by Zondervan. I would recommend this for anyone seeking to research the subject further.

There are four major reasons I believe posttrib is the best theory on the timing of the Rapture.

First, what we call the posttribulational view seems to have been the point of view shared by those living right after the Gospels and Paul’s letters were written. For the first few centuries of the church, it seems to be the only interpretation around. In the book Three Views on the rapture, professor Craig Blaising argued the pretribulational viewpoint. As Blaising admits in the book, early Christians all seemed to assume that the Rapture and the Second Coming were the exact same event, or rather, that as Christ came back to setup His Kingdom, believers would be raptured to be with Him on His descent to earth. In any study of history the evidence closest to the actual events is usually considered most accurate, and so the teachings of the early church are likely to be those closest to the teachings of the apostles. In my mind the interpretations of these first Christians should be given weight absent overwhelming evidence in favor of another interpretation. I do not see in either the pretrib or prewrath arguments enough evidence to convince me that the interpretation of these first Christians should be amended.

My second reason for choosing a posttrib viewpoint is this. I have a hard time believing the first readers of Paul’s letters, or the parables of Jesus, would interpret their words to mean that the Rapture and the Glorious Return of Christ are two distinct events. Rather, the general tone of passages referring to Christ’s return seem to treat these as one and the same event. Take the one passage in Scripture that clearly refers to the Rapture, found in 1 Thessalonians. Paul’s entire purpose in writing this letter was to clear up confusion; he had every reason to choose his words carefully and be tactful about how he made his points. His purpose is to strengthen their confidence in the reality of Christ’s return.

He says in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13- Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; 12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; 13 so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

The word for coming is the Greek word “parousia”, which refers to the physical, second coming of Christ, when He raises the dead, sets up His Kingdom, and punishes the wicked.

His use of the word Parousia here is significant because Paul uses this same word only two verses before the “rapture” verse in chapter 4. Let me read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:4 as one passage so we can get the context.

13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming (parousia) of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 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. 17 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. 18 Therefore encourage each other with these words. 1 Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

There are three key terms in this passage- coming “parousia” in 4:15, caught up “rapture” in verse 17, and “day of the Lord” in 5:2. In verse 15, Paul says that those of us who are alive at the “parousia”, or coming of the Lord, won’t share in the resurrection before those who have fallen asleep. He then goes on to describe the Rapture. If I put myself in 1st Century Thessalonica, I would interpret this passage to mean that the “rapture” is one of the events of the parousia, which is also known as the day of the Lord. Paul seems to be teaching that Christ will return, raise the dead and snatch up living believers, while executing judgment on the unrighteous. I see little evidence in this passage that Paul is trying to prepare the believers for a two phase Return of Christ, which is the basis of both the pretrib and prewrath position.

In addition to Paul’s letters, the Parables and Teachings of Jesus in Matthew 24 & 25 Seem to Favor a Posttrib position. In Matthew 24, as Jesus and His disciples are walking through the temple, Jesus says that one day, every stone in the temple will be thrown down. The disciples then ask Jesus when this will happen, and what will be the sign of Christ’s return. Read verses 7-21

Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains. 9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. 10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 14 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. 15 "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel--let the reader understand-- 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. 18 Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. 19 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again.

Jesus refers to the “abomination of desolation.” This is an event first foretold in the book of Daniel. This refers to the Antichrist walking into the Holy Place, assumed to be a Jewish temple in Jerusalem, and claiming to be God and demanding worship. This will lead to rebellion against the Antichrist, and wars in which he will, for a short time, be victorious. In this passage, Christ is speaking to His disciples, not to the public. This is a private conversation between Jesus and His disciples, not a public proclamation to the Jewish people. He speaks to the disciples as representatives of His Church. His language to them seems to indicate they, or rather, the church, will witness the abomination of desolation. “When you see the abomination of desolation”. This is further reinforced by Matthew’s insert of ”reader, pay attention”. Matthew wants the church to be prepared to witness this event, and to know how to react when the abomination occurs, Jesus’ advice is in essence, “get out of Dodge”.

Jesus then describes a time of great tribulation which will come to the earth after the abomination of Desolation. Then, Christ describes His coming in verses 30-31. "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 31 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.

Pay attention to the elements of this passage. We see Christ return in the clouds, there is a trumpet call, then the gathering of believers, and his arrival sends the nations into mourning. The words “caught up” or “rapture” aren’t used, but it is important to point out the passage closely parallels 1 Thessalonians 4. The nations mourn as they see Christ’s arrival, and as part of Christ’s arrival a trumpet is sounded and the saints are gathered from all over the earth. This seems in line with a posttribulational theory.

A major component of the Left Behind interpretation is that those who aren’t taken in the rapture are given a second chance to express faith in Christ. This is the basis on which the Left Behind novels were written; left behind Christians who accept Christ after the Rapture try to survive the Tribulation. After their Christian loved ones are taken, they realize the truth behind their friends’ evangelistic efforts, and put their faith in Christ. However, a look at the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25 gives a different, and chilling, interpretation. Let’s look at that passage together.

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' 7 "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 9 " 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' 10 "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. 11 "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' 12 "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' 13 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

This is a parable about being ready for Christ’s return. Notice that when the groom arrives, those virgins who aren’t ready to join the wedding party are left behind, but are then not allowed into the wedding feast even when they show up to the banquet hall. There are no second chances, instead those who aren’t prepared hear the emphatic words of the groom “I don’t know you.” Of particular importance is the fact that they ask for a second chance, and are not given one. They missed out on the wedding feast. This parable seems to teach that if you miss Christ’s return, the door to salvation is closed forever.

A third major reason for my posttrib belief comes from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians provides 2 major problems for both pretrib and prewrath argument that I do not believe can be overcome. First in chapter 1, Paul wants to comfort Thessalonians who had been under harsh persecution. He says in verses 6-7, ‘God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels

Paul says the believers who have been persecuted will receive relief when Christ is revealed in blazing fire to punish the wicked, which clearly refers to the 2nd coming. If Paul imagines a two stage event beginning with the Rapture, and concluding with the Second Coming, why does he not say they will receive comfort when they are raptured away? That is when they would be free from trouble. Instead, their persecution will end, and their reward will be received, at Christ’s physical return to the earth.

The second passage I made mention of last week. Last week, I said 2 Thessalonians 2 can be used to make a case for the prewrath view, but it also makes as strong a case for the posttrib view. This is what Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for [that day will not come] until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

Paul equates both the coming, or parousia, of our Lord Jesus Christ, AND OUR BEING GATHERED TO HIM, to the day of the Lord. He further says that that day cannot come until the abomination of desolation takes place. Those with a Prewrath view will claim this means that we could be raptured any time after the revealing of the Antichrist, but I think the fact that Paul links the coming of the Lord with our being gathered to Him means they are one and the same event, which supports the posttrib viewpoint. If the coming of the Lord and the gathering to Him both refer to “the day of the Lord”, and if those events cannot occur until the abomination of desolation, it makes the Left Behind interpretation seem very unlikely.

My final reason for accepting a post-trib viewpoint comes from Jesus’ prayer in John 17:15, which He uttered only a few moments before His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. In verse 15, He prays not that His followers be taken out of the world, but protected from the evil one. This may seem a minor point, but it follows a narrative consistent in the New Testament, that God is less concerned about keeping us from persecution and more concerned about giving us strength to withstand the persecution. At the last supper, Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble/tribulation, but take heart, for I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) This is a point that must be emphasized. Regardless of the timing of the Rapture, Christians must be prepared to suffer persecution for their faith. Jesus promises that those who follow Him will be persecuted. The post-trib position maintains that the persecution suffered by Christians right before Christ’s return are fundamentally no different from that experienced by saints for the last 2000 years. The persecution is worldwide, and led by the Antichrist, but not much different than has been experienced by Christians in the Roman Colisseum, Russian prisons, or the gallows of medieval England.

The book of Revelation, though hard to understand, was written to encourage the church. The overall message is that God is in control of world events, and that He will soon bring all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. One of the major themes in Revelation is the need for the Church to be faithful to Christ in the midst of extreme persecution, even unto death. When the fifth seal is broken in chapter 6, those who have died as martyrs are told to wait until their number is completed, indicating that far more Christians will be killed for the name of Jesus. God’s message to the church is clear- a great number of Christians will seal their testimony with their own blood in the days preceding Christ’s return.

In Chapter 13, the Antichrist is given power to wage war against Christians and to overcome them, but we are told to remain firm to the end, for this is our chance to be a witness for Jesus. In Chapter 14, an angel says, “Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on”, and in Chapter 17 the Great Prostitute is condemned in large part for spilling the blood of Christians. Is it conceivable that these Christians martyred are those born again after the Rapture, as those in the pretribulational viewpoint maintain? Possible, but let’s not miss the larger point.

Remember what Jesus said in John 15:18-21- "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. 20 Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. 21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.

The New Testament writers consistently tell us to expect persecution, and to be strong in our witness while enduring it. If persecution is an opportunity to be a witness for Jesus, if, as the 2nd Century church father Tertullian wrote, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,” how am I to make sense of a viewpoint that says God will take us out of persecution and out of the world at just the time in history when strong Christian witness is most needed, even as the clock runs out on human history and the souls of millions of lost people hang in the balance?

Pastor Jeff, you may be saying, this seems a depressing message. You’re saying I may be asked to give my life for Christ? Look, none of us wants to be persecuted, and I am thankful we are in a part of the world where persecution hasn’t to this point been an issue. What I am saying, is that if we are persecuted, God promises to give us the strength to withstand it, and when our life is over we will be rewarded beyond imagination for our faithfulness. Be comforted; no persecuted believer has ever escaped God’s notice, or His grace.

Because there is much that is unclear regarding the timing of the Rapture, I think it is important to discuss for a moment the implications of each of the theories. Each of the theories I’ve described over the last couple of weeks has strengths and things we as Christians should ponder. Remember that ours is an active faith; we are called to search the Scriptures and to test all teaching. Please, please, test my teaching on this matter. Study God’s Word and let His Spirit speak to you.

Pre-trib- A strength of the pretribulational argument is that it requires us to be constantly ready for Christ’s return. The thought that Christ could come back at any moment should give us a greater sense of purpose and care in how we live out our faith. After all, we don’t want to be found living in sin when the Lord returns. This is an element somewhat missing from the post-trib theory I hold. One potential stumbling block for a post-trib believer is that it may be easy to become lazy in his faith, as one might believe that we can wait to get really serious about Kingdom living until we see the rise of the Antichrist. Whether or not the pretrib viewpoint is true, we need to adopt an attitude that says, Christ could return at any moment, so I must be careful in how I live. I must be always ready, come Lord Jesus!

Pre-wrath- A key strength of the pre-wrath argument is the reminder that though we will experience trouble on this earth, God does not intend for us to suffer His wrath if we are in Christ Jesus. Praise God, we are free from the coming wrath! However, if the pre-wrath position proves true, it is important that we pay attention to world events. We may not know the identity of the Antichrist until the abomination of desolation, which means his true nature is hidden even as his worldwide influence rises during the first few years of his reign. As believers, we must be careful not to become one with the prevailing culture, for its values are not our own and will eventually celebrate open rebellion against God. Because the pre-wrath theory keeps people on earth during the first half of the Antichrist’s rule, we must be vigilant.

Post-trib- If the pretrib theory requires us to be ready for Christ’s any-moment return, the post-trib theory requires us to count the cost of our faith, because it is not possible to be a post-trib without realizing that if we happen to be alive during the final years before Christ’s return, we will suffer extreme persecution and may be required to give our lives for Christ. We must be prepared to give faithful witness for Christ and take seriously His command to be faithful in spite of persecution.

Another implication of the post-trib theory is that for those left behind after the rapture, there is no second chance. When I was a pre-trib believer, I took comfort in the idea that loved ones who weren’t believers before the rapture would have another chance afterwards. But if the posttrib argument is correct, there is no second chance. In reaching others for Christ, we are required to be faithful, and not to hope that they will get it after we are whisked away.

In closing, I hope the last two weeks have been helpful to you as we’ve discussed Christ’s return. These sermons have been far more scholastic than I am generally comfortable with and I hope I have done the subject justice. If you take anything away from this message I hope it is this. Please look at your own beliefs regarding the Rapture and its timing. Examine your assumptions. How did you come to your conclusions? In the Brethren Church we believe in the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible. We have a long tradition of allowing the words of Scripture, not our culture or the ideas of man, to form our worldview. I would encourage you to look at the Scripture passages referenced in the last two weeks’ sermons. How do they speak to you? My goal hasn’t been so much to convince you of one interpretation, but to hopefully drive you deep into the Scriptures. I don’t pretend to know how things will play out between now and Christ’s return, but I do know that we are only ready for what’s ahead, when we are in the Word. Study, and ask God to guide you. Each of these sermons, as well as my notes from the book I used to study for these sermons, are available on the church website. Feel free to reference them if you think it will be helpful. But most importantly, remember that God is in control, and His grace is sufficient for us, whether Christ raptures us this afternoon or returns a hundred years from now in a time of great persecution. I once heard someone, when asked if they were a pre-trib, pre-wrath, or post-trib believer, reply, “I’m a pan trib believer. I believe it will all pan out in the end.” If we adopt that attitude, we’ll be just fine.