Caught Up

Right now you’re probably thinking, “Why is Pastor Jeff behind a pulpit? Pastor Jeff never preaches from the pulpit.” That is true. A couple of week ago we started a new unit on the End Times. Today and next week we are talking about a very important end time topic, one that is hard to decipher from Scripture. I want to be very careful how this is taught so I am scripting out the message. I have never preached from a script before, but feel I should so that I can be especially careful how I describe what is considered a very important topic. PRAY.

This morning we are talking about The Rapture. The Rapture is an event promised in Scripture where we will be caught up to Jesus Christ to meet the Lord in the air. It is important to point out that the word Rapture isn’t found anywhere in Scripture, at least not in the original Greek or our modern English translations. Rather, the word comes from a Latin word used in the Latin Bible, or Vulgate. The word simply means “caught up” or “seized”, and it is used only once in Scripture.

The word is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18- Let me give you some background to what is going on in this passage. The Church in Thessalonica was alarmed by some people apparently teaching that when Christ returns, only living Christians would reign with Him at first, with the dead in Christ being raised later. Paul writes to put them at ease and correct their thinking. This is what he says.

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming 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.

It is the words “caught up” in verse 17 that forms the doctrine of the Rapture; it is the only time in Scripture that description of our ascending to heaven is used. Paul tells the believers to encourage each other with these words. We are often comforted with the knowledge that loved ones in Christ go to heaven after death. This passage further promises us that they will also be raised physically in glorified bodies.

This is illustrated in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5.- Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. 2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

These passages assure us that at some point Christ will appear from heaven. The dead in Christ will receive Resurrection bodies and meet Him, and then those living will instantly be transformed into a glorified state, as Christ was after His resurrection.

Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

That there will be a Rapture is clear. However, Christians often disagree on when this will occur relative to other events in the last days. Briefly, let me describe three schools of thought. Because there are so many different interpretations of these passages, and because these beliefs are often deeply held, we need to get one thing clear before I discuss these various ways of interpreting Scripture. The Bible is not clear on the timing of the Rapture. As with many aspects of end times beliefs which are unclear, we should not be dogmatic about our interpretations. In other words, write your interpretations in pencil, not pen. We are trying to make sense of passages I do not believe God intended for us to fully understand. I have my personal belief on the timing of the Rapture, but you are free in Jesus Christ to disagree, and there is no reason Christians should be divided based on where they come down on this issue. If Scripture was clear on this issue, there would not be so much disagreement among Spirit-filled believers.

For the first several centuries of Church history, the commonly held belief was that what we call the Rapture was not a separate event from the physical return of Jesus Christ. The assumption was that the Church would continue to go through various persecutions and tribulations and then Christ would return to set up His Kingdom, raising both the living and dead Christians to reign with Him. Over the past 300 years or so, three different ways of interpreting Rapture have arisen.- Pretribulational, Mid-tribulational or pre-wrath, and posttribulational.

Several years ago I read the Left Behind Series- written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. This was an impactful series of books that I thought brought End Times Scripture to life. To be able to weave End Times scripture into a realistic-sounding narrative was a great feat, and LaHaye and Jenkins are to be rightly commended for the success of their books. **The end times theory described in that book is “pretribulational”- that is, it assumes the Church will be raptured before a period of worldwide anguish sometimes called The Tribulation.**  The interpretation came to life in the 19th Century, during the 2nd Great Awakening, and it became popular in large part through the evangelist John Darby and his contemporaries. It has risen to prominence over the last century, especially in the evangelical church. Let me describe this interpretation for you.

**Pretribulational scholars believe Christ’s return is imminent, meaning at any moment Jesus Christ could appear.** In other words, there is no significant event which must occur before Jesus takes the Church into heaven. Jesus said, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.- Matthew 24:36 They believe Jesus could return for His Church at literally any minute.

**The Church will be raptured, or taken out of the world, and into heaven, where they will wait approximately seven years before returning with Christ to the earth.** In the chaos which would naturally follow a billion or so Christians simply disappearing, one sixth of the world’s population, a world ruler appears who becomes very powerful and makes a seven year agreement, presumably involving the Jewish people, to bring peace to the world. This ruler is adored the world over.

After the departure of Christians, there will be some who are spiritually awakened and come to Christ. These may be people who had heard the Gospel previously but didn’t respond. Realizing they have missed the boat, so to say, and wanting a second chance, they choose to live as a Christian rather than follow the ever-increasing number of Antichrist worshippers. As worship of the Antichrist becomes more common, these Christians will suffer extreme persecution and most will be killed for their faith. Eventually, the Antichrist will force all people to receive a mark symbolizing his kingdom on their hand or forehead; those who refuse are summarily executed.

Halfway through the seven years, the Antichrist will go into a reconstructed Jewish temple in Jerusalem and proclaim himself God, an event known in Scripture as the abomination that causes desolation. This causes rebellion against the Antichrist and leads to the destruction of Jerusalem and even harsher persecution of Christians.

Also during this final 3 ½ years, God will pour out His wrath on those who worship the Antichrist. These judgments become more and more severe, culminating in the physical return of Jesus Christ, who throws the Antichrist and his false prophet into hell. Those Christians originally raptured into heaven return with Christ to the earth, while those who were killed by the Antichrist’s forces are resurrected.

The primary assumption behind pretribulation argument is that the final years of this age are reserved as a time of God’s wrath on the earth, and since, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1, that we are saved from God’s wrath through Jesus, it is thought that God would not allow His Ransomed Church to be present during the time of wrath. The Rapture therefore is in essence a rescue mission, God sending in His special forces to rescue us out of the world, before He drops the bomb so to speak. Just as God rescued Lot and his family from Sodom before destroying it with fire, God will take believers from the world before pouring out His judgment.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, 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.- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-4. According to the pretrib argument, Christ’s sudden return through the Rapture, in addition to rescuing believers, also will usher in what is referred to as the “Day of the Lord”, a time of divine judgment which will overtake all of those who were not ready for His return. The Day of the Lord is the seven year period also known as the Tribulation.

A key belief within the pretribulational community is the belief that the Antichrist cannot rise to power as long as the Church is present. This belief comes from 2 Thessalonians 2:7, which says, “For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.” This verse speaks of a “restrainer”, someone who is preventing the Antichrist from coming to power until the appointed time. According to some, this restrainer is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Church. When the Church is removed, the absence of Christian influence will quickly cause the world to run toward wickedness and the rising influence of the Antichrist.

Next week I will address the merits of the pretribulation argument, but for now I want to briefly describe the other two prominent theories on the Rapture. The second is called the mid-tribulational, or pre-wrath argument. It is in some ways similar to the Pretrib argument. Christians are seen to be protected from God’s wrath by being taken from the earth, however, **it occurs not at the beginning of the seven year tribulation, but sometime soon after the middle of the seven years, around the “abomination of desolation.”** Christians will be around during the Antichrist’s rise to power and may undergo significant persecution as the world gives more and more influence to the new global government. However, it is possible that during this first 3 ½ years, we may not know the Antichrist’s identity, as he will not be proven to be the Antichrist until he marches into the temple and demands to be worshipped as God. According to this theory, God’s judgment begins sometime after this point. The Rapture of the Church will occur after the Abomination of Desolation and immediately prior to God pouring out His wrath on the world as described in the book of Revelation.

To justify their timing of the Rapture, prewrath advocates point to 2 Thessalonians 2’s discussion of the abomination of desolation, where Paul says, “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.” According to the Prewrath view, Paul, by describing in detail the abomination of desolation, assumes that the church will be present and will see the abomination of desolation take place. If Paul assumes the church will witness the abomination take place, he must not have believed that the church will be raptured prior to the event.

You see, the Thessalonian church was under the mistaken assumption that the day of the Lord had already begun. Paul writes to clarify their understanding of our “being gathered together to meet Jesus”. However, as prewrath and posttribulational scholars point out, if Paul believed we’d be raptured out before the day of the Lord, why didn’t he merely tell the Thessalonian church that the time of God’s judgment couldn’t have begun because the church was still here? Instead, he writes that the day of God’s judgment and our being gathered to meet the Lord, CANNOT begin until the Antichrist is revealed and declares himself to be God. This shows that Paul believes the Church will still be present and will recognize the Antichrist at the moment he desecrates the temple.

The final Rapture theory I will describe this morning is the posttribulational theory. In short, this theory holds that the Rapture and the Second Coming are the same event. This interpretation is the one held by the majority of Christians throughout the centuries, including the vast majority of the early church fathers.

According to this theory, the word tribulation as used in the New Testament, does not signify a set time period, such as the seven years prior to Christ’s return, but instead refers to the troubles Christians have experienced throughout history, and which will continue to experience right up until Christ comes back. According to Bible Scholar Douglas Moo, the Greek word “thlipsis”, which is translated “tribulation”, is used 45 times in the New Testament. Of these, 37 clearly do not refer to the time period immediately preceding the return of Christ. An example of this would be when Jesus says, “In this world you will have trouble/tribulation, but take heart, for I have overcome the world.” In these occurrences, the word refers to trials Christians face because of the world’s opposition to Jesus Christ. According to Moo, the other 8 occurrences of “thlipsis” do not necessarily refer to the final seven years before Christ’s return either. In short, the Christians alive in the final years before Christ’s return will experience the same tribulation the saints have endured since the first century. Christians have gone through unspeakable brutality over the years, facing dungeons, torture, and execution. The only difference from the suffering of early Christians and those in the years immediately before Christ’s return, is that the persecution will be global and coordinated by the one who leads a worldwide rebellion against God.

One of the biggest challenges in trying to figure out end times theology is that you have to make assumptions about how God intends the original Greek and Hebrew words to be interpreted. If thlipsis usually refers to general suffering of believers, is it fair to assign a different meaning to it in other passages? That answer isn’t made clear to us in Scripture.

There are three primary words used to refer to Christ’s return in the Greek- apokalypsis, epiphaneia, and parousia. According to Post-trib argument, In each occurrence of these words, they clearly refer to the physical return of Christ to the earth to establish His kingdom and punish the wicked. This is sometimes called the Second Coming or the Glorious Appearing of Christ. It is this that Christians are told to look forward to, the physical return of Christ.

As Doug Moo says, ““If, then, believers are exhorted to look forward to this coming of Christ, and this coming is presented as [after the tribulation], it is natural to consider that believers will be present through the tribulation.”

An important assumption in both the pretrib and prewrath argument that posttribs question is that the phrase “the day of the Lord” refers to an extended period of God’s judgment after the Rapture but before Christ’s physical return. The phrase “the day of the Lord” is used several times in Scripture, mostly in the Old Testament prophets, and it can refer both to God’s wrath in the end times, as well as wrath poured out against various nations at various times in history. According to posttribbers, it is a mistake to assume that “the day of the Lord” is synonymous with the Great Tribulation, as the only two times that “the day of the Lord” appears in Revelation clearly refer to God’s final judgment on the wicked AFTER Christ physically returns to earth.

In questioning the posttrib argument, one might ask, “What is the purpose of the Rapture if we will be meeting Christ only to be coming right back to the earth?” According to the posttrib argument, this may not make sense in our culture, but it did in Jesus’ day. Posttribs see the Rapture not as a rescue mission, where God takes the righteous out of the world before pouring out His judgment, but rather, the Church is seen as a royal delegation, going out to meet Christ and to accompany Him on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In Biblical times, it was common practice for the king’s friends and officials to go out to welcome his arrival into the capital. It could also be compared to the friends of the groom going out to escort him into the city to meet his bride, which Jesus illustrated in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, which is seen as a story about Christ’s return. The purpose of the Rapture from the posttrib argument is to allow all believers throughout history, and from all corners of the earth, to share in the joy of Christ’s return, not from a distance, but with Jesus Christ Himself.

Finally, critics of the posttrib argument question why God would allow Christians to suffer the wrath of God along with the world. The short answer is that, He won’t, at least not in the way HE will cause the ungodly to suffer. Remember in the Exodus story, that God poured out His wrath on Egypt through various plagues, but the Jews were spared. They did not experience the curse of darkness, or the hail, or the locusts, and their crops and cattle were not harmed. In the same way, Christians could be spared many of God’s judgments. In fact, Revelation says clearly that several of the bowl judgments listed in that book are given only to those who have accepted the mark of the Antichrist and who have worshipped his image. This is not to say that Christians would be unaffected. Certainly life will be difficult even for Christians, just before Christ’s return. But they are not destined for God’s wrath.

Is your brain swimming yet? I have briefly outlined the three common arguments regarding the timing of the Rapture. I will talk about this more next week, and include my personal opinion. And by the way, my opinion is just that, an opinion. If there is one thing I hope you take away from this message, it is that the timing of these things is uncertain. If we imagine the end times passages as a giant puzzle, we have some of the pieces, but many are missing, by God’s design. All three viewpoints I have described today are ways of putting those pieces together, but there are holes in each. It should be noted that the Brethren Church does not take a stance in favor of any of these three viewpoints, only affirming that Christ will one day physically return to earth, and that the righteous will live forever with the Lord. It is apparently not important to God that we fully understand the particulars of how these things will take place. We are to trust that whatever tribulation comes our way, He will give us strength to withstand it. Know that one day we will be called to meet the Lord in the air. Our present troubles will end, and we will spend eternity with Jesus Christ, free from the trials and pain of this earth. Be encouraged by that.