

The Next Happening in the Program of God

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Today in southern California, as well as across the country, we're hearing some strange things in the area of prophecy coming from some men at whom I'm rather surprised. They are right on the border of setting a date. Some were saying Christ would come by 1980. Others say He will be here by the end of the century. Now they worry me because they seem to have a line into heaven that I don't have. That worries me a great deal because I'd like to have that line also, and I simply don't have it. And if you want to know the truth, they don't have it either.

What's Next?

The Word of God tells us what the next happening is. And the Word of God calls it the Rapture. There are three great passages of Scripture on the Rapture: John 14 is one; 1 Thessalonians 4, beginning with verse 13 is a second; and the third is 1 Corinthians 15. But now I'm turning to 1 Thessalonians 4, a very familiar passage for those that are acquainted with this field of prophecy.

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent [shall not go before] them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words. (vv. 13-18)

This passage has been called one of the most important prophetic passages in Scripture, and certainly I would concur in that. Notice that it teaches the imminent and impending coming of Christ. And now hear me rather carefully. That does not mean the *immediate* or even the *soon* coming of Christ. Now we have used, and I have used, that expression for years – “The soon coming of Christ.” But this is not the language of the Word of God. The word is the *approaching* coming. The next event on the agenda of God is when He takes His church out of the world. *When* that will take place, we are given no indication whatsoever. We're just told that's the next event. It may be tomorrow. It could be this year. It may not be. Don't quote me as saying He's coming this year – I didn't. I don't know. He may come this century – I don't know. He may not come this century.

Now let me illustrate this with a very homely illustration. Last winter Mrs. McGee and I made our annual trip to Florida. It seems strange for Californians to be going to Florida in the wintertime, but that's what we've been doing, and we've had a wonderful ministry down there. This time we got on one of the new DC-10s. We had never been on one of them before, and we were very much interested in this new plane. It took off, went out over the Pacific, circled to the left, and while we were still in sight of the airport, the captain came on the intercom and introduced himself. He told us what the weather was. He said, “The weather here in California is lovely, and the report we get from Florida is that the weather is lovely down there. But you know we go over Texas, and you can't tell about the weather there.” We were listening to him very

intently, of course. He told us the feet at which we'd be flying. He gave us a lot of other information about this new plane, and then he said, "Our next stop is Miami."

Well, we didn't grab up our bag that we'd carried on the plane and rush for the door, because it was five hours before we would get there. Yet it was the next event, provided we didn't go by Havana (which we didn't, by the way). But that was the thing he said, "The next stop will be Miami." Yet it was five hours away. Now it was imminent all the time, but it wasn't soon coming, not for a fellow like me who doesn't like to fly. Those to me are the longest five hours that I spend – when I fly across country. I wish I could get right on and right off, but it's not quite that quick. You have to stay there until you get to the place that you're going.

Imminent Coming

Now the thing that the Word of God teaches is the imminent coming of Christ, not necessarily the soon coming, although it's the thing we're to look for all the time. Now Paul put it just like that. Paul believed that Jesus could return in his lifetime. He never did say Jesus *would* return. He did not know. He just said He *could* return, and that means the imminent coming of Christ. For instance, he says here, "We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord." Paul expected to be in that "we" group, but he wasn't. There have been many generations since then. Also he said something else to a young preacher: "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

This is something to look for. And, my friend, if some friends are not due for ten hours, you don't go out and start waiting for them. But if they might come any time within the ten hours, you can go out and wait for them. That was exactly the position of the apostle Paul. And that, I think, should be our position today.

Now Paul labeled this event, when the Lord Jesus would come and take His own out of the world, the Rapture. Today there is a group of the amillennial brethren who like to say that the Bible does not use the word *Rapture* at all, that it's not a Bible term and we ought not to use it. May I say to you that the Bible *does* use this term. Will you notice verse 17: "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air."

Now *caught up* in the Greek is *harpazo*, and it has several meanings. It means "caught up," "to grasp hastily," "to snatch up," "to lift," "to transport." It means "to rapture" – that's one of the meanings of it. Therefore it is a Bible word. Now if they don't like the word *rapture*, then I suggest they call it *harpazo*, because they all mean the same. It's the Rapture of the church that he's talking about.

Now another rather startling thing here is that actually the primary consideration is not the Rapture. Really, it's not. The precise question is this: What about believers who die before the Rapture? That is the question which Paul is answering.

Now the background is simply this. Paul went to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. Paul had covered the ground that he and Barnabas had been over on the first missionary journey. And we would gather from what Dr. Luke says in the book of Acts that all Paul and his party, with Silas and Timothy, intended to do was widen the circumference of that circle. Dr. Luke says he attempted to go down into Asia where Ephesus was the chief city and one of the greatest cities of the Roman Empire, but the Spirit of God put up a roadblock and would not let him go south. So Paul thought that if he couldn't go south, certainly he was to go north, since along the southern coast of the Black Sea there was a very large group of Jews and Gentiles that had settled in that area.

And Paul started out. Again the Spirit of God put up a roadblock. Therefore he's bottled in now. He has come from the east; he can't go south; he can't go north. He can go only one direction, west. You can see it was not Horace Greeley of the New York *Sun* who first said, "Go west, young man, go west." It was the Spirit of God speaking to the apostle Paul. He came to Troas and was given the vision of the man of Macedonia. He crossed over to Neapolis, went to Philippi, and founded a church there. Then he continued overland and came to the city of Thessalonica where he had a great ministry. We are told: "And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures" (Acts 17:2).

He was there three Sabbath days, which means he was there less than one month. During that period he performed a herculean task. He did the work of a missionary. He opened up new territory and made new converts. Many were led to a saving knowledge of Christ. A local church was established, and he taught them the great truths of the Christian faith. He taught them, among other things, that the Rapture might occur at any moment. Paul then left Thessalonica. I say he left – he was run out of town. His enemies set the city in an uproar. He had to leave. Then he went down to Berea. I don't know how long he was in Berea, but there he formed a church. After that he went on to Athens, and he was there for quite a while. How long I do not know. He waited and waited for Silas and Timothy to come, but they didn't show, so he went on down to Corinth and waited there. And he had a ministry in Corinth also.

During that period Silas and Timothy joined him, bringing word from the Thessalonian church. It was a good word. It was news of how the Word of God was growing. But the Thessalonians, you see, only had Paul there for a month. They had been taught all the great truths, but there were many details that hadn't been told them. And in that interval, from the time that Paul left them until Silas and Timothy joined him, quite a few of the believers had died. And a question arose in the minds of the believers, "What about our beloved dead? Did they miss the Rapture?" And by the way, that means Paul had taught them it might occur at any moment, or they wouldn't have had the question in their minds. Their concern was, will the dead be included in the Rapture? Now at that time this was a pertinent question.

Of course, we've come a long way since then. Nineteen hundred years have gone by, and literally millions of believers have already gone down through the doorway of death; the spirits of multitudes of them have gone into the presence of Christ. Therefore, most of the church has already gone ahead, and today, comparatively speaking, a very small minority remains in the world.

The Rapture and the Dead

Now what about the Rapture and the dead? That is the question which Paul is going to answer. Now listen to him. He says: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren." I love the way Paul says that. Paul was a very astute and a very diplomatic preacher. He would declare the truth, of course – he never compromised – but Paul did use the very acme of politeness. He said, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren." And when Paul said that, you can put it down that the brethren were ignorant. That is a nice way of saying it, though, you see. He didn't come out flatfooted and say, "You're ignorant over there. You don't know." He didn't put it like that. He said, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

And death was pretty hopeless in the Roman world. The religions of paganism have never been able to offer much hope after death. Actually, today the modern thinking of philosophy and

psychology, and the lifestyle of most people, has left eternity out. They don't like to think about it. A man said to me, "Don't talk to me about that. I don't like to think about it. Keep that buried. I just don't want to hear about it at all."

In Thessalonica archeologists have found in their excavations an inscription on a stone that reads, "After death no reviving. After the grave no meeting again." Theocritus, a Greek philosopher and poet, wrote, "Hopes are among the living. The dead are without hope." So the pagan world had no hope at all. And today when I conduct a funeral (and I'm sure other pastors have the same experience), very frankly, I can always tell whether the one who has passed on and the loved ones of the deceased are Christians or not. You listen to an unsaved person weep at a funeral. My friend, it's the weeping of the hopeless and the helpless.

May I say to you, it's an awful thing to have no hope in this world today. It's a terrible thing when death comes and you have no hope, my friend. The motto of the Roman world was: "Eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow you die." And that's the way multitudes are living in this world today, by the way.

Now Paul says, "I don't want you to sorrow as those who have no hope. You *have* a hope concerning those who are sleeping." And that, may I say, is one of the loveliest things that Paul could have said.

Now *sleeping* is another word that I'd like to call attention to. In the Greek it's *koimaomai*, and it means "those that are lying asleep." I got down my classical Greek lexicon some time ago and found the word meant "to go to bed" back in classical times. And you know, you can't put a spirit to bed. You couldn't put your soul to bed to save your life. Which end would you stick in the bed if you put your soul to bed, my friend? It's utterly preposterous to use words like this in reference to the death of the soul. The soul never sleeps. The moment a person dies, if he's a child of God, Paul says he is "absent from the body; present with the Lord." But the body is put to sleep, and we'll see that in a few moments and talk about it. And I can't think of a lovelier word to use for death than *sleep*. Sleep never refers to the soul because the very language itself means to lie down, and only the body can lie down.

This is the same word, by the way, that's used of natural sleep. In Luke 22:45 we read that at the Garden of Gethsemane, "when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow." Peter, James, and John were asleep. In Acts 12:6 you have that word again. "Peter was sleeping between two soldiers." That fellow Simon Peter didn't seem to have much of a problem sleeping. He could sleep at the Garden of Gethsemane or go to sleep between two soldiers. We can say one thing about him. He did not suffer from insomnia; he was able to sleep at night. So this is the same word that's used of the body of a believer, and it's a very wonderful word.

Now why would that word be used to speak of the body? I have several suggestions to make. The first one is the similarity of sleep to death. A sleeping body and a dead body are similar. I'm sure that you've been to a funeral and you've heard someone say, "Oh, he looks just like he's asleep." And if you want to know the truth, if he is a child of God, that body is asleep. That's the picture. That's the way the Word of God says that we should look at it. And sleep is temporary. Death is also temporary. Sleep has its waking; death has its resurrection. Life is not just existence, and death therefore would not be just nonexistence.

Then there's another reason I'd like to suggest to you why this word is used. The very derivation of the word for sleep goes back to a word *keimai*, and *keimai* means "to lie down" It always refers to the body. And the interesting thing is that the word Paul always uses for resurrection is *anastasis*, which means "to stand up." *Histemi* means "to cause to stand." *Ana*

means “up.” And, my friend, may I say to you, resurrection refers only to the body, never to the soul or spirit. The spirit has gone to be with Christ. You remember the Word of God makes it very clear. God said to man, “In the day that you eat of that tree you will die” Then when he disobeyed and ate of it, God told him: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19).

In other words, you were taken out of the dust, as far as your body is concerned, and you’re going to be put right back there. Solomon put it this way: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7). So it is the body that lies down in death. It is the body that’s raised up in resurrection.

Many years ago in the city of New York (in fact, it was way back in the day when liberalism was called modernism, back in the 1920s), there was an argument about whether resurrection was spiritual. The liberal even today claims it’s spiritual. He doesn’t believe in bodily resurrection at all. A very famous Greek scholar from the University of Chicago read a paper on the passage from 1 Corinthians 15: “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body” (v. 44). His paper put the emphasis on the word *spiritual*. He concluded by saying, “Now, brethren, you can see that resurrection is spiritual because it says it’s spiritual.” The liberals all applauded, and somebody made a motion that they print that manuscript and circulate it.

Well, a very fine Greek scholar was there, and he stood up. And when he stood up all the liberals were a little uneasy. He could ask very embarrassing questions. He said, “I’d like to ask the author of the paper a question.” Very reluctantly, the good doctor stood up. “Now, doctor, which is stronger, a noun or an adjective? A very simple question, but I’d like for you to answer it.”

He could see the direction he was going and didn’t want to answer it, but he had to. “Well,” he said, “a noun is stronger, of course.”

“Now, doctor, I’m amazed that you presented the paper that you did today. You put the emphasis upon an adjective, and the strong word is the noun. Now, let’s look at that again, ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual *body*’.” He said, “The only thing that is carried over in resurrection is the body. It’s one kind of body when it dies, a natural body. It’s raised a body, but a spiritual body, dominated now by the spirit – but it’s still a body.”

And, you know, they never did publish that paper. They decided it would be better not to publish it. May I say to you, just a simple little exercise in grammar would have answered this great professor’s whole manuscript and his entire argument which he presented at that time.

The Tent of the Body

Now I want to turn to a passage of Scripture that’s related here. It’s 2 Corinthians 5. Paul begins: “For we know ...” He’s writing to believers now that know something. You notice he approaches it differently. He doesn’t say, “I would not have you ignorant.” He says, “We know”—we know something. “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle [the word is “tent”] were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (v. 1).

Paul calls this body that you and I live in a tent, just a flimsy little tent. That’s all in the world it is. And our bodies are very flimsy, by the way. I found out that seven spots on your lungs could put you out of business. My, these little old tents that we live in are fragile. They can fall

down most any time. And some of them are getting old now. I know that mine is beginning to wear out. But I'm thankful that He may give me a few more years. I want to stay in this tent in spite of the fact that it's got a lot of aches and pains.

Now you will notice, Paul says: "For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven" (v. 2). Now let me just drop down to verse 4. "For we that are in this tabernacle do groan." Have you found that to be true? I sleep upstairs, and I used to come bounding down those steps. Twenty years ago I could do it easily. You ought to see me go down the steps now. I hold onto the side, take one step at a time, and groan at every step. My wife tells me, "You ought not to groan." And I say, "It's scriptural to groan." And I believe it is. I think that it's natural to groan in these bodies.

For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord.
(vv. 4-6)

Now we're home down here in the body, yet we're absent from the Lord today. But one of these days something is going to happen. "(For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present [at home] with the Lord" (vv. 7, 8). If you are a believer, the minute you leave this body, you're going home. And the body is put to sleep. That's the way the early Christians spoke of their own who died. In fact, they called the place of burial, the graveyard, the *koimeterion*, and that really means a rest house for strangers. It was the word for the inn that was closed to Mary and Joseph. Such places were all through the Roman Empire, and we get from it our word *cemetery* today. A cemetery is a resting place, a sleeping place. What do we call sleeping places today? We call them motels and hotels. You don't weep, do you, when your loved ones write, "We're going to spend a week at the Hilton Hotel in San Francisco"? We congratulate them and think it's wonderful. We miss them if they're close to us and are going to be away from us, but they're asleep up in the Hilton Hotel and will be for seven straight nights. Well, that was the feeling of the early church. They took their loved ones and put them out in the cemetery, in the ground, when they were asleep in death, and called it the *koimeterion*.

And let me just add this (although I know that I get in controversial places, but I have always done that) there's a great deal being said today about cremation, whether Christians ought to cremate. Now, very frankly, I don't think it makes very much difference as far as the individual is concerned, but I don't believe in it, and I don't think a Christian ought to practice it. I'll tell you why. An undertaker in Pasadena, who is also an aviator, told me that he made good money in taking the ashes of unsaved people and scattering them out over the Pacific.

Do you know why? The unsaved man says, "God, I dare You to bring me back. I don't want to be back." They want death to be the end of it. But, you see, the early church said, "This is not the end. We're just putting them in the motel for the week, or for just a short time. The body is asleep. They've gone to be with the Lord." Even the book of Ecclesiastes, as pessimistic as it is, speaks of the fact that the dust shall return to the earth, but the spirit will return unto its Maker. So that today we reveal our faith when, instead of cremation, we bury our loved ones in a grave.

We Will Awaken

We believe the body is going to be awakened someday. And how will it be awakened? Will you listen to this in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven.” And I love that. When the Lord comes to the earth to establish His kingdom at His second coming, He’s going to send His angels to gather His elect, but He will not send any angels for His church.

Do you know why? Because angel ministry is not connected with the church. It’s connected with Israel, never with the church. And there will be no angels connected with the Rapture. But notice here: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven.” He’s coming Himself. I love that. *He’s* coming. Our Lord is coming. Will you notice this: He “shall descend from heaven with a shout.” Now what is that shout? That is a word of command. That is the word which He gave in Bethany at the grave of Lazarus, “Lazarus, come forth.” That is the shout of the Son of God. Then somebody says, “Oh, you slipped up because it says ‘with the voice of the archangel.’” Well, whose voice is it? It’s His voice. His voice is going to be like the voice of an archangel. It’s the voice of majesty. It’s the quality of His voice, the authority of His voice. It’s the voice of the Son of God. No archangel is there.

Let me ask you a question, and I do not mean to be irreverent. Do you think the Lord Jesus will need an archangel to help Him raise His church from the dead? I don’t think so. Can you imagine Him at the tomb of Lazarus saying, “Gabriel, will you come on over here and help Me get this fellow out of here”? That is absolute blasphemy, if you ask me. He didn’t do that. He didn’t need to do that. My Lord was able to raise the dead. And He will be able to raise the dead at the Rapture. There will be no archangel there. His voice is like the voice of the archangel.

And then somebody says, “Wait a minute. ‘And with the trump of God.’ What is that?” It is the voice of the Son of God. It’s still His voice. Well, somebody says, “It says that it’s the trump of God.” Yes, but His voice is like a trumpet. Somebody says, “Do you know that?” I know that from Scripture. Turn to Revelation 1:10 and you will find that John on the Isle of Patmos said: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.”

And whose voice was it? He said, “I turned to see,” and when he turned to see, it was the glorified Christ that he saw. His voice will be like the sound of a trumpet. It will be like an archangel’s. It will be a shout, and I think it will roll over this earth, and those who are His own will rise up. Paul makes it clear here. “The dead in Christ shall rise first.” And I think – beginning way back yonder with Stephen, the first martyr, and after him, the apostles – they will come.

After them, that great company of believers who were martyred during the first 200 years of the church; and then believers from century after century until it comes down to the time of those that are living. If we’re living, we’re just going to bring up the rear of the parade, that’s all – that great parade of resurrection when He calls His own out of the grave with a shout. It will be His voice, not an archangel’s, but His voice is like that of an archangel and the sound of a trumpet. Now that ought to get rid of the silly notion that Gabriel is going to blow a trumpet.

The Real Hope

To begin with, I don’t think Gabriel owns a trumpet. And even if he owns a trumpet, I don’t think he can blow a trumpet. And I’m confident we’re not talking about Gabriel here at all. It’s the Son of God, and He alone is coming to claim His bride and call His church out of the world.

And, my friend, that's the hope today. That's the next happening in the program of prophecy, when He calls His own out of this earth. That ought to be a blessed hope for us in these days in which we live.

Many years ago when I was a pastor in Pasadena, we were invited out to celebrate the fiftieth wedding anniversary of one of the loveliest couples I have ever met. There were congratulations and a great deal of conversation. During the time of the dinner he reached over and patted his wife on the hand and said the loveliest thing that any man can say who has been married to a woman for fifty years. He said, "We're still on our honeymoon."

Isn't that lovely? On the way home that night I said to my wife, "What happened to ours?" We hadn't been married twenty years at that time. They'd been married fifty years and were still on their honeymoon. It wasn't long after this that I conducted his funeral. After the service the friends and loved ones came by. He was greatly beloved; many were weeping. Then his widow came out leaning on the arm of a friend. She was sorrowing, but she had a hope. She came up to the casket. She leaned over and patted him on the hand; she reached down and gave him just a quick kiss, then said, "John, I'll see you in the morning." She was just putting him in the motel for the night. And the morning is coming, that bright morning someday when the Lord Jesus will come. That's the hope of a believer today, friend, and it's hopeless without Him.

When I was a very young fellow, I ran with a very fast crowd, and in that fast crowd there was a son from a very wealthy family. He was engaged to a girl who was a debutante. And they made great preparations for the home they were going to build. The father of the boy gave them the home. He built a lovely home, a two-story southern home with columns. Then this young couple searched everywhere for valuable antiques to furnish that home. And they had it furnished beautifully. The day came for the wedding, and it was lovely.

Then they started on their honeymoon, driving into the big Smokies. They went around a curve, and a truck that was coming crowded them off the road. In fact it knocked them off the road down a precipice several hundred feet. They both were instantly killed. I went out to that house and looked in the window. I couldn't help but weep—tragic. Later I came to the Lord, and when I came back from school one year, I said to a friend of mine, "Let's go out and see that home." We went out. The grounds were well taken care of. The father, when word came of their death, had put the key in the door, turned the lock, and never opened it. We looked in the window. Dust had covered everything. And again I couldn't help but weep, but this time for a little different reason. I wondered where they had gone.

Isn't it tragic to live down here and make every arrangement to live here and no arrangement for over there? Jesus says, "I go to prepare a place for you ... that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2, 3). Thomas said, "We don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" And the Lord Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (v. 6). My friend, are you on the way to that place today? A prepared place. Do you have a hope today? Or today are you living like that couple did, for the here and now? And you may not live to enjoy it. They never spent five minutes in that home as a married couple. But they went out yonder into eternity unprepared. That's enough to break your heart, my friend.

What about you? Do you have a hope? Are you on the way? Is Christ your Savior today? Right where you're sitting you can make that decision. If you're not a child of God, all He asks you to do is trust Him as Savior. He died for you. He rose again. He did that because He loves you. He couldn't save you by love, so He had to give Himself to pay the penalty of your sins. And when you accept Him, you have a place over there. You have a hope.