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THE RAPTURE AND JOHN 14

by Thomas Ice

I believe that John 14:1-3 speaks of Christ's return at the Rapture for His church. However, many who do not believe that the Rapture will occur before the tribulation say that this passage refers to Christ coming at death for a believer. There are good reasons why this passage is Christ's introduction of the Rapture of the church.

CHRIST COMING AT DEATH?

Preterist, Dr. Ken Gentry, believes that the Scripture "teaches that Christ comes . . . to believers at death (John 14:1-3)".¹ Contrary to Dr. Gentry, Leon Morris notes, "The reference to the second advent should not be missed."² So why does Dr. Gentry and others of his persuasion miss the thrust of this passage? Because to take this as a reference to a future second coming would contradict their theology. Why have the majority of ancient and modern interpreters take this text as a future second coming passage? Because the plain meaning, taken in context, of the language in this passage demands such an understanding.

John 14:3, where Christ tells His disciples, "I will come again, and receive you to Myself," is an expression that is never used of death in the whole Bible. Commentators on this passage simply declare their view to be so, without substantiation. Yet, many times, various biblical texts speak of Christ coming in reference to His Second Advent (Matt. 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 42-44, 46; 25:31; John 21:23; Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2:1, 8, etc.). One of the most vocal opponents of the coming at death view is David Brown. In his pro-postmillennial diatribe against premillennialism (1882), in which Dr. Gentry penned a favorable introduction, Brown provides a six page rebuttal of the "death" view.³ Brown argues:

And if I go away"—What then? "Ye shall soon follow me? Death shall shortly bring us together?" Nay; but "If I go away, *I will come again and receive you unto myself*, . . ."⁴

The coming of Christ to individuals at death . . . is not *fitted* for taking that place in the view of the believer which Scripture assigns to the second advent. . . .

The death of believers, however changed in its character, in virtue of their union to Christ, is, intrinsically considered, not joyous, but grievous—not attractive, but repulsive. . . .⁵

The bliss of the disembodied spirits of the just is not only *incomplete*, but, in some sense, *private* and *fragmentary*, if I may so express myself. . . .

But at the Redeemer's appearing, all his redeemed will be collected together, and PERFECTLY, PUBLICLY, and SIMULTANEOUSLY glorified.⁶

The Bible never speaks of death as an event in which the Lord comes for a believer, instead, Scripture speaks of Lazarus "carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22). In the instance of Stephen the Martyr, he saw "the heavens opened up

and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). Arno Gaebelein aptly summarizes the biblical statements when he says,

This error is clearly refuted by the fact that elsewhere in the New Testament the Spirit of God tells us that the believer's death is not the Lord coming to the dying believer, but the death of a Christian means that he goes to be with the Lord; . . . For the believer to be absent from the body means "present with the Lord, . . . (2 Cor. v:1-8).⁷

So then, to what does this passage specifically refer to?

CHRIST COMING AT THE RAPTURE

Further study of John 14:3 provides further evidence that our Lord's coming again is not only a future coming, but His coming for the church at the Rapture. We find that the aorist tense of the verbs "go" and "prepare" "denote actuality as well as single acts,"⁸ which support a second coming view of the passage. "The coming again is the counterpart of the going away; visibly Jesus ascends, visibly he returns, Acts 1:9-11."⁹ But note also that the language speaks of Christ coming "from heaven to the earth, He describes a coming for His saints to take them to the Father's house."¹⁰ This is a description of the Rapture in contrast to the Second Coming.¹¹ "This passage, taken literally, indicates that the believer is going to go to heaven at the time of Christ's coming for Him."¹² This will not occur at the Second Advent because that will be a time in which Christ comes *with* His saints, who are already in heaven, not *for* His saints as John 14:1-3 requires. Arno Gaebelein tells us that Christ is unveiling a new revelation about the Rapture of the Church:

But here in John xiv the Lord gives a new and unique revelation; He speaks of something which no prophet had promised, or even could promise. Where is it written that this Messiah would come and instead of gathering His saints into an earthly Jerusalem, would take them to the Father's house, to the very place where He is? It is something new. And let it be noticed in promising to come again, He addresses the eleven disciples and tells them, "I will receive you unto Myself, that where I am ye may be also." He speaks then of a coming which is not for the deliverance of the Jewish remnant, not of a coming to establish His kingdom over the earth, not a coming to judge the nations, but coming which concerns only His own.¹³

JOHN 14 AND 1 THESSALONIANS 4

A significant number of commentators note that our Lord's statements in John 14:1-3 parallels another New Testament passage—1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.¹⁴ Renald Showers points out a number of similarities between the two passages.¹⁵ However, it was the late Mennonite commentator, J. B. Smith,¹⁶ who demonstrated just how extensive the relationship of these two passages really are.¹⁷

Dr. Smith made word-for-word comparisons between the Rapture passage (1 Thess. 4:13-18) and a clear Second Advent text (Rev. 19:11-21) and found no significant parallels. "Hence it is impossible that one sentence or even one phrase can be alike in the two lists," observes Dr. Smith. "And finally not one word in the two lists is used in the same relation or connection."¹⁸ He goes on to conclude that "It would be difficult if not impossible to find elsewhere any two important passages of Scripture that are so diverse in the words employed and so opposite in their implications. . . . We believe the comparison of the words of these two passages . . . describe different events."¹⁹

When it comes to a comparison between John 14:1-3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 we see amazing parallels. That John 14:1-3 is a Rapture reference is supported by the progression of words and thoughts when compared to Paul's more extensive Rapture passage (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Observe the following comparison:

JOHN 14:1-3		1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18	
trouble	v. 1	sorrow	v. 13
believe	v. 1	believe	v. 14
God, me	v. 1	Jesus, God	v. 14
told you	v. 2	say to you	v. 15
come again	v. 3	coming of the Lord	v. 15
receive you	v. 3	caught up	v. 17
to myself	v. 3	to meet the Lord	v. 17
be where I am	v. 3	ever be with the Lord	v. 17

Dr. Smith notes the following observations as a result of these comparisons:

- The words or phrases are almost an exact parallel.
- They follow one another in both passages in exactly the same order.
- Only the righteous are dealt with in each case.
- There is not a single irregularity in the progression of words from first to last.
- Either column takes the believer from the troubles of earth to the glories of heaven.²⁰

CONCLUSION

In light of comparing Scripture with Scripture, it appears obvious that Jesus' teaching in John 14:1-3 and Paul's revelation in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 speak of the same event. Dr. Smith concludes, "It is but consistent to interpret each passage as dealing with the same event—the rapture of the church."²¹ How else does one explain the progression of eight specific words/phrases in exactly the same order, in two different passages, by two different spokesmen? It is clear that these passages refer to a single future event—the Rapture of the church. We learn that the church's Blessed Hope was first revealed by our Lord on the eve of His crucifixion to His disciples as they grieved over His departure. Later, the doctrine of the Rapture was explained in greater detail via Paul's revelation to give comfort to the Thessalonians who were faced with a similar problem of departing loved ones that Jesus dealt with in the Upper Room with His

disciples. Now, 2,000 years later and half-way around the world, today's church can be comforted by the Blessed Hope that in the next moment of time we could be face-to-face with our Lord, in the Father's house, via the Rapture of the Church. May it be today. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Kenneth Gentry, *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), pp. 25-26.
- ² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 639.
- ³ David Brown, *Christ's Second Coming: Will It Be Premillennial?* (Edmonton Alberta, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, [1882] 1990), pp. 20-25.
- ⁴ Brown, *Christ's Second Coming*, p. 21. (emphasis original)
- ⁵ Brown, *Christ's Second Coming*, p. 22. (emphasis original)
- ⁶ Brown, *Christ's Second Coming*, p. 23. (emphasis original)
- ⁷ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John: A complete analytical exposition of the Gospel of John* (New York: Our Hope Publishers, 1925), pp. 266-67.
- ⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1942), p. 973.
- ⁹ Lenski, *John's Gospel*, p. 974.
- ¹⁰ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 194.
- ¹¹ For a comparison between the Rapture and the Second Coming see Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *The Truth About The Rapture* (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), pp. 26-31. Or Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *Prophecy Watch: What to Expect in the Days to Come* (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), pp. 100-02.
- ¹² Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, p. 195.
- ¹³ Gaebelein, *Gospel of John*, p. 268.
- ¹⁴ Renald Showers cites the following individuals who see a connection between John 14:1-3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: J. H. Bernard, James Montgomery Boice, Arno C. Gaebelein, Arthur Pink, Rudolf Schnackenburg, F. F. Bruce, R. V. G. Tasker, and W. E. Vine in *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come!* (Bellmawr, N.J.: Friends of Israel, 1995), p. 162.
- ¹⁵ Showers, *Maranatha*, pp. 161-64.
- ¹⁶ J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961), pp. 311-13.
- ¹⁷ Earl Radmacher first called my attention to Smith's comparison during a debate with Robert Gundry in Long Beach, CA in 1976.
- ¹⁸ Smith, *A Revelation*, p. 312.
- ¹⁹ Smith, *A Revelation*, p. 312.
- ²⁰ Smith, *A Revelation*, pp. 312-13.
- ²¹ Smith, *A Revelation*, p. 313.