

May 2009

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Recommended Citation

Ice, Thomas D., "A Little Used Rapture Passage" (2009). *Article Archives*. 45.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/45

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A LITTLE USED RAPTURE PASSAGE

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

A number of years ago I was preaching the funeral of a dear lady who used to be in a church that I had pastored. Her husband, also a devout believer, asked that I build my sermon for his wife's funeral around 2 Corinthians 5. Since I had never taught through 2 Corinthians, I was somewhat surprised to discover during my preparation for the message that it spoke of our blessed hope—the rapture. Follow along with me and see what I mean.

THE CONTEXT OF 2 CORINTHIANS 5

Many of us are familiar with the second half of 2 Corinthians 5, but what about the preceding context? Paul is dealing with a group of people who were rejecting his authority as an apostle of Christ. Thus, they were reluctant to accept his advice. In chapter 4, Paul notes that he is pouring out his life for their sake. He contrasts this temporal life, which the Corinthians believers greatly valued, with the one to come. Since the life and world to come are of greater value, then, Paul reasons, believers should live this present life from the perspective that places a priority on things that will have “an eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17).

The Corinthians, to which Paul wrote, had adopted the view that the physical body was of no value, since everything on the physical plane was inferior to things in the spiritual realm. Paul rejects this, and teaches that the physical is not in and of itself carnal but can be used to promote that which has eternal spiritual value. This Paul explains in his chapter on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. As he sets the stage for 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17–18).

A TENT VERSES A BUILDING

2 Corinthians 3:1-2 says, “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven.” Since verse 3 is based upon Paul's statements in verses one and two, we need to know what he is saying there. Paul tells the Corinthians believers that their current body is like an “earthly tent.” Why did he choose the word “tent?” He most likely uses the word “tent” because it is a temporary dwelling for a person who is on a trip away from home. That is the status of a believer during the church age, he is a pilgrim, just passing through this world (Phil. 3:17–21). The term used for a resurrected believer in heaven is called “our dwelling from heaven.” It is also called “a house not made with hands.” Thus, our permanent dwelling place is clearly said to be in heaven and something to which we look. Since heaven is our home, then it makes sense that “building” is the description that Paul uses since it connotes a permanent structure.

So our current physical body is called a “tent,” while our future resurrected body is described as a “building.” So what does Paul mean when he speaks in verse 3 of not wanting to be found “naked” in verse 3?

NAKED BELIEVERS

Since the subject matter of this portion of Scripture relates to the state of the body, whether mortal or resurrected, Paul speaks of the interval between a believer’s death and the resurrection. Robert Gromacki says, “This period between the physical death of a believer and his resurrection is designated as the time of nakedness. It is when the self has neither its old body or its new body. Theologians have called it the intermediate state of the soul.”¹ This does not mean that when a believer dies he does not go to be with the Lord, since Scripture says, “to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Philip E. Hughes explains as follows:

At the death the soul is separated from the body, and man’s integral nature is disrupted. This important aspect of the disintegrating character of death explains the Apostle’s desire that Christ should return during his lifetime so that he might experience the change into the likeness of Christ’s body of glory (Phil. 3:21) without having to undergo the experience of “nakedness” which results from the separation of soul and body at death. . . . It still means a state of nakedness and a period of waiting until he is clothed with his resurrection body.²

This passage, in its indirect way, is teaching the Paul was longing for the rapture to occur before he died, since the interval between Paul’s death and the obtaining of his resurrection body would come at the time of the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:51–58). Thus, 2 Corinthians 5 is a rapture passage. “It is the resurrection and the rapture which the new desire longs for,” says Roy Laurin, “because the resurrection and the rapture will bring us this building which is “an house not made with hands.”³ Gromacki notes the rapture connection in the following:

The verb “clothed upon” is a double compound (*ependuô* using three words *epi, en, duô*). It actually means to put one piece of clothing over another which is presently being worn. The usage in this context probably means that Paul wanted to be alive when the Lord returned. In that way, the new body could be put on right over the old one.⁴

Paul further explains in verse 4 why he hopes for the rapture before his death. “For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” G. Coleman Luck explains, “The thing for which we groan is *not* death and dissolution of the body. We do not long to be ‘unclothed,’ so to speak, but rather to be ‘clothed upon,’ to have our mortal bodies transformed and perfected *without* dying at the time of the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:17; 1 Cor. 51, 52).”⁵

This passage seems to teach that a believer during the church age who dies before the rapture is with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), but do not yet have their new resurrection body. This seems to also imply that there is no New Testament basis for those who teach that we have an intermediate body (i.e. not a resurrection body) during the interval between death and the resurrection as we dwell in the presence of the Lord. Otherwise, how do they explain Paul's desire to not be naked? Further, this passage does not allow for "soul sleep" since the person is very much alive during the interval, it is the body that is "sleeping."

RAPTURE IMPLICATIONS OF 2 CORINTHIANS 5

There are a number implications that flow from the fact that Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5 that he desired to be taken in the rapture rather than die. I will attempt to note some of those implications.

First, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." This is significant in that the "judgment seat," or "bema" is the special judgment for church age believers only, not the end of the millennium great white throne judgment of unbelievers. Since verse 10 is part of Paul's passage where he has expressed his desire to be taken in the rapture, it supports the notion of pretribulationism since the bema will take place after the rapture of the church, while in heaven, in order to prepare the church for her return with Christ at the second coming (Rev. 19:1–10).

Second, Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 the following: "Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." Here Paul taught the doctrine of the resurrection, while in 2 Corinthians 5 he links it with the rapture. Although 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 stands on its own as a rapture passage, it is further strengthened by Paul's rapture teachings in 2 Corinthians 5. Paul is writing to the same church in both epistles, thus, he is speaking of the same subject—the rapture—both times when he addresses the subject of the resurrection.

Third, we learn from 2 Corinthians 5 that it is indeed a godly attitude to desire for the rapture to occur in one's lifetime. Since Paul desired to be taken to be with the Lord via translation so that he would not be naked, it is clear that he is modeling a godly attitude to be emulated throughout the remainder of the church age by subsequent generations. Yet, many Christians in our day disdain the rapture. Rapture hater Gary North says the following:

Christians living today supposedly will escape this supposedly burning building because we all have been issued free tickets on God's helicopter escape.

This escape never comes. The supposedly imminent Rapture has now been delayed for almost two millennia. . . . They care only about an imminent escape from long-term responsibility: the Rapture. *Rapture fever destroys*

men's ability to reason theologically. It weakens God's Church.⁶

How does North explain Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:8, which says, "we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord"? According to North's theology, Paul's attitude is sinful. Apparently the rapture has destroyed Paul's ability to reason theologically. Perhaps Paul's theology also weakens God's church, as North declares. Paul clearly states that he would really rather be "at home with the Lord." Was Paul one of those just sitting around waiting for the helicopter escape known as the rapture? Of course not, and neither do we who would rather be "at home with the Lord."

Fourth, this passage does not teach one to shirk genuine biblical responsibilities as suggested by rapture haters like North. Instead, it teaches those of us who love His appearing that "we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him" (2 Cor. 5:9). Why? Because we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Tim LaHaye has said many times and in many ways that those who believe in the pre-trib rapture have three great practical applications: First, a motive for evangelism; second, a motive for world missions; and thirdly, a motive to live a godly life in an ungodly world. That is exactly what Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians 5:1–13, contrary to rapture nay-sayers like Gary North.

Even though 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 is a little used passage relating to the pre-trib rapture, it is an important one that needs to be considered by anyone desiring a complete understanding of the New Testament teaching of the rapture. It provides another interesting piece of the puzzle concerning the nature and role of the church and how it fits into the blessed hope, which is the rapture of the church. It models for believers a proper motive for longing for the rapture, not because we cannot handle life in the present, but because "though you have not seen Him, you love Him" (1 Pet. 1:8). Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert Gromacki, *Stand Firm in the Faith: An Exposition of II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 78.

² Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 171.

³ Roy L. Laurin, *Second Corinthians: Where Life Endures* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Company, 1946), p. 97.

⁴ Gromacki, *Stand Firm*, p. 77.

⁵ G. Coleman Luck, *Second Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), pp. 48–49.

⁶ Gary North, *Rapture Fever: Why Dispensationalism is Paralyzed* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993), p. 90.