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CHAPTER ONE

THE KING RETURNS FOR US

*When we put our trust in Jesus Christ, we transfer from the
road to Armagedon to the road to Glory.*

—John Walvoord

Imagine you are having a regular day at home or at the office, and then without warning, you are in the presence of Christ with a new body and in an entirely different realm of existence. Incredibly, Jesus is there; friends who have died and gone to heaven are there; and you find yourself mingling with an innumerable host of people, all suspended in midair. You are reunited with your mother, father, and friends long since forgotten on earth. But the focus is on your leader, Savior, King Jesus, who returned as He promised. “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3).

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

For many of us the return of Jesus often seems theoretical, far off, and quite irrelevant to our daily existence. We think that prophecy is a scheme to be understood by mature Christians—but recent converts (we believe) need other kinds of doctrine.

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After all, Christ has not returned in the last two thousand years and He might not return before the next thousand years have expired. So, we surmise, let the return of Christ be the last topic to be studied and grasped. Looking for Christ's return is a wonderful ideal, but practical people have other matters to worry about.

But Paul the apostle strongly disagreed with the notion that the study of prophecy should be left for the curious-minded folk who are so “heavenly minded” that they lack the practicality of how to live on earth. He did not intend that the events that surround the return of Jesus just be investigated by “prophecy buffs” who spend time wondering if they know who the Antichrist is or whether the European Union is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. Don't misunderstand, these topics are all relevant, but if we are sidetracked by such discussions we might miss the very purpose of why prophecy was given to us. *Prophecy is intended for every believer because the return of Jesus is to be our focus and hope.*

When Paul began a church, filled with new believers, he taught them about the return of Jesus. For this church planter, prophecy was the heartbeat of his life and ministry. So we should not be surprised that when he founded the church in Thessalonica he taught them to look forward to Christ's return. He knew that a focus on the return of Christ would keep the congregation pure and courageous. But, as all prophecy teachers have learned, people are often confused about the details, and sometimes even

Paul left his students with more questions than answers.

The believers in the church looked forward to the return of Christ in their lifetime, but obviously, He did not return and so some Christians were confused about what would happen to them if they died before He returned. Some of their friends died, so they were wondering, “Our friends who died before Christ’s return, are they at a disadvantage? What about my uncle? What about my wife, my husband, my child? Will they miss the return of Jesus if and when He comes for those of us who are living?”

Paul’s answer, as we shall see, is a resounding no. He taught them that their loved ones will not be at a disadvantage. In fact, the dead will rise even before the living are caught away into heaven. Both the dead and the living will be transformed at almost the same time; they will be given new bodies and a new home. All that in “the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:52)!

PAUL’S WORDS OF COMFORT

So Paul answered the concerns of the believers in the church by introducing them to the details surrounding the rapture of the church, the “snatching away” of all the living believers when Christ returns. And, yes, the additional news is that those who have died will actually be raised a moment before the living are caught up to heaven. Just read the full context of Paul’s comments in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18:

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. 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. 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

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those who have fallen asleep. 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. 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. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

When I prepared to preach a message on the *rapture*, a friend said to me, “You’re speaking on the rapture? The word ‘rapture’ doesn’t even occur in the Bible!” Technically, in English this may be true, but take a moment to look back to the passage just quoted. “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” (v. 17, italics added). The Latin word for “caught up” is *rapturo* from which we get the word *rapture*. So it is true that English translations do not include the word *rapture*, but the rapture is a thoroughly biblical term. The day is coming when living Christians will be “caught up” to be with the Lord and with each other forever.

Let’s get the sequence of events in our minds:

BELIEVERS ARE WITH THE LORD

Paul taught that believers who die will immediately depart to be with God in heaven. In fact, several times he spoke of his own preference to die and be “with the Lord” (see 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:21). My wife Rebecca and I were in Colorado Springs for the funeral of a dear friend who was a musician. He died unexpectedly in his sleep. His body was laid tenderly in the ground and even as we were there at his grave, his soul/spirit was already in the presence of God in heaven. There, I’m sure, his soul/spirit took on the characteristics of a body and he was able

to communicate with Jesus and others who were already there. In heaven, Christians recognize one another; they are in the presence of Jesus, enjoying Him, but they are still incomplete. Their permanent resurrection bodies have not yet been given to them.

The wife of a friend of mine also died unexpectedly in her sleep. The widower, God bless him, is sorrowing intensely, anxiously awaiting the day when he will die to be reunited with the one he so dearly loves. We can understand that, but when a loved one dies, we should remember this: although we miss them, they would never want to return to earth even if they could. As a friend of mine said, “*No Christian who has ever died has regretted it!*” They have already seen Christ, they have been reunited with friends, they are free of sorrow and pain. Yes, they no doubt await our arrival, but having had a glimpse of eternity, they can only rejoice that we will soon be with them.

JESUS WILL RETURN WITH BELIEVERS WHO HAVE DIED

Next, the apostle Paul says that when Jesus comes in the rapture, He will bring with Him “the dead in Christ.” The souls of all those who have died and are presently in heaven, all these will return with Christ. Take a moment to contemplate what this means. I think of my father who died at 106 years old; I think of my dear mother who died at 103; I think of other relatives and friends who are in heaven; children to whom we said goodbye, all of whom are already in heaven—these will return with Jesus.

Just imagine: all of these souls of the dead will be returning with Christ. These people are very much alive, having been in heaven since the time of the death of their bodies. And if I die before Christ returns, I also hope to return with that number! Jesus will bring with Him those who have “fallen asleep,” an expression used in the New Testament to refer to all those who die as believers.

**THE LORD
WILL DESCEND
WITH A SHOUT,
“GET UP! YOU’VE
BEEN DEAD
LONG ENOUGH!”**

Janet Willis, the mother of nine children, six of whom were killed in a tragic accident back in 1994, says that even amid her grief there are three things she knows about her precious children: “First, they are safe, second, they are good, and third, they are happy, and I will see them again!” What a testimony to the power of God’s promises and the assurance that those who die in Christ are even now with the Lord. Yes, those children will be returning with Christ when He comes to receive His redeemed people.

ALL BELIEVERS RECEIVE NEW BODIES

The souls of the dead will now be joined to their newly resurrected bodies. “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” (1 Thesalonians 4:16). Amazing! If you can, imagine that the graves will open and these resurrected bodies will once again join their souls. So, for the first time, these souls will be “clothed” with their resurrected bodies. The Lord will descend with a shout, “Get up! You’ve been dead long enough!” and the bodies will appear.

Jesus taught that the day is coming when the dead shall hear His voice, and they shall be resurrected, some to the resurrection of life and some to the resurrection of damnation (John 5:28–29). Although, as we shall explain later, these resurrections take place at different times, be assured that in the end, everyone must respond to the voice of Jesus. When He shouts, the dead hear His voice and come out of their graves.

Notice that Paul refers to “the voice of an archangel” (v. 16). This is probably a reference to Gabriel. I’m of the opinion that many angels will accompany this event. They were there when Jesus was born. They were on hand at His ascension and will

likewise accompany Him when He returns. At the second stage of His coming, known as the glorious appearing, they are explicitly mentioned as being present (2 Thessalonians 1:7–8).

Then we read that there will be the sound of “the trumpet call of God” (v. 16). What was the trumpet used for in Old Testament times? Blowing the trumpet signified that it was time to pack up and move. When Israel camped in the wilderness for forty years and it was time to break camp, a trumpet would be blown. You can imagine that the entire camp of Israelites began to stir and even those who were asleep in their tents would be roused from sleep and begin to move to their next destination. So, Jesus will come with a blast of a trumpet, and the dead in Christ will rise because the time to move up to heaven will have come.

THE LIVING ARE INSTANTLY TRANSFORMED

What about those who are alive when the rapture takes place? The dead in Christ rise first; “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds” (v. 17). So, those who are alive when the rapture happens actually are transformed *after* the dead in Christ rise. The dead have a very brief time advantage (perhaps because they have a bit farther to go!).

**ABRAHAM, MOSES,
AND DAVID, AND A
HOST OF OTHERS
DIED AS BELIEVERS
BUT THEY DID NOT
DIE “IN CHRIST.”**

I believe that this expression “the dead in Christ” refers only to all who have believed in Christ since the formation of the church on the day of Pentecost. The body of Christ was formed on that special day and so the “dead in Christ” does not include Old Testament saints. Abraham, Moses, and David, and a host of others died as believers but they did not die “in Christ.” The redeemed of the Old Testament will be raised at the second stage of the coming of Christ, at His glorious appearing (to be discussed later). Making a proper distinction between the church

and Israel is a further reason to believe in the pretribulation rapture which sees the return of Christ as two stages, not just one.

At the rapture, the scene will be reminiscent of the resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus was at the tomb of a dead man (John 11). It was when Jesus spoke the words, “Lazarus, come out!” (v. 43) that his soul reconnected with his body and he returned to life. The church father Augustine once noted, “We can be thankful that Jesus said, ‘*Lazarus* come forth.’ If he hadn’t named him, the whole cemetery would have arisen up from the dead!” The resurrection of Lazarus was a selective resurrection, just like the resurrection of the “dead in Christ.” Eventually, all the dead will be raised, but they are not raised at the same time.

So, in answer to the believers who were worried about whether their dead loved ones would be disadvantaged at the return of Christ, Paul politely tells them that they are wrong; in point of fact, the dead have a slight advantage over the living. The dead are the first to be raised and the living are then transformed so that *together* we will all go in procession to meet King Jesus. “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together [raptured] with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever” (v. 17).

Paul taught that there would be an entire generation of Christians who would be alive at the return of Jesus. The same event is spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—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.” When he says we shall not all sleep, he once again is referring to death; not all Christians will die, but will be instantly translated into heaven when the rapture happens.

We will be changed in the “twinkling of an eye.” How long does it take for your eye to twinkle? I’ve been told that it is ap-

proximately one-fiftieth of a second! There will be an entire generation of believers who will be changed from this existence to their eternal bodies immediately; but in the seconds that precede this event, the dead in Christ will have already been raised just as quickly.

What about the expression “the last trumpet”? When Jesus spoke about His glorious appearing, He also mentioned a “trumpet call.” To quote Him, “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” (Matthew 24:31). Since there will be a trumpet call at the glorious appearing and since the church is raptured at “the *last* trumpet call, posttribulationists say the rapture and the glorious return must happen simultaneously. However, I believe that the “last trumpet” should not be interpreted to mean that this is the last trumpet call to be heard, but rather it is the last trumpet for the church; it signals the end of the church age. There are other “trumpet calls” to follow, such as the trumpet judgments in the book of Revelation.

If you wish to better understand the reasons for pretribulationism, compare Paul’s discussion of the rapture with the teaching about the glorious return of Christ to earth. Read Zechariah 14:1–4; Matthew 24:15–35; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10, and Revelation 19:11–22, and then take the time to compare these passages with Paul’s discussion of the rapture as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. I think it will be clear that there are two comings of Jesus, and the rapture is a very different event than the glorious return.

Consider (1) we are raptured to “meet the Lord in the air,” whereas at the glorious return Jesus descends to earth, specifically to the Mount of Olives; (2) at the rapture there is no mention of Jesus fighting a battle; at the glorious return He fights to defend Jerusalem and destroys the armies who oppose His rule;

(3) the tribulation is a time when the wrath of God is poured out onto the earth, but believers are assured they are saved “from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10 ESV); and finally, (4) although there are no specific signs given as to when the rapture might occur, there are many signs given that anticipate the Lord’s returning in power and great glory. Clearly Paul taught the believers in Thessalonica that the rapture could happen at any moment.

THE PROCESSION TO MEET KING JESUS

So, both groups, the dead in Christ and the living, will be transformed to be caught up together with Christ, in the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The appearing of Jesus is always associated with clouds; these clouds could represent either angels or human beings. The Bible says that we are presently living with a “cloud of witnesses,” a reference to believers who have died (Hebrews 12:1). The clouds that accompany Jesus could also be a reference to clouds of angels or even natural clouds that accompany Jesus in His descent to earth. He ascended from the Mount of Olives and disappeared among the clouds, and He will return with clouds.

WE WILL SING,
“HAIL, KING
JESUS. THANK
YOU FOR
COMING FOR US.”

We read that we shall “meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever” (v. 17). The word *meet* often was used for a delegation meeting an important person. For example, it is used of a delegation coming out to meet Paul when he arrived in Rome (Acts 28:15). It is almost as if we should visualize both the living believers who were raptured, as well as those who had previously died, now rising in their glorified bodies to meet King Jesus in glorious procession. We will sing, “Hail, King Jesus. Thank You for coming for us. Thank You for redeeming us. Here we are, Jesus, Everlasting King!”

To conclude his instruction on this topic, Paul included the phrase, “And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Think about it. We are going to be with the Lord for all eternity. If pretribulationism is correct, and I believe it is, we’re going to be with the Lord in heaven during the great tribulation on earth. The contrast between the suffering on earth and the bliss of heaven at this point is beyond our imagination.

It’s not just that we will be with Jesus, glorious though that is. But it is also about being there with the whole family of God and our loved ones. That’s why the apostle Paul ends by commanding, “Therefore encourage each other with these words” (v. 18). When someone dies as a believer and we say we will see them again, we really mean it. The departures on earth for Christians are never permanent. We never really say goodbye. We only say, “See you soon.”

Earlier in this passage, Paul speaks of those who have died as those who “fall asleep” (v. 13). The imagery of “sleeping in Jesus” is one that intimately connects with a mother and a child. After a mother feeds a newborn baby, she will rock the baby gently to sleep. When a Christian dies, it is as if Jesus has lulled him/her to sleep in His arms, and then later the child will rise to be with Him forever and ever. So, we do not “grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope” (v. 13).

Cyprian, a writer from the third century, observed that if it were not for the plagues, Christianity would have never swept North Africa. Why? He said that during the plagues, Christians were filled with anticipation of seeing Christ and the pagans died without hope. The pagans said of the Christians, “They carry their dead as if in triumph. Where is all this hope coming from?” Early Christians bore witness to the saving grace of Jesus, because Christians died differently. The Lord is going to return from heaven and the believers will be snatched away, and the dead in Christ will rise.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US

The implications for us are momentous, aren't they?

First, we should be looking for the return of Christ. We need not be looking for the rise of Antichrist and other signs that will eventually be revealed as the great tribulation is about to begin. Of course, as we shall point out, we may even in our day see certain geopolitical events take shape that make us think we are nearing the time when God wraps up history, but that should not be our focus. A bride in waiting yearns to be married to her Beloved.

Paul said that a special reward was given to him and to all those who long for the Lord's appearing (2 Timothy 4:8). This anticipation should motivate us to holy living.

**THE RETURN
OF CHRIST IS
PRESENTED TO
CHANGE US, TO
REORDER OUR
PRIORITIES.**

Listen to what the apostle John says: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

We will be like Christ; we will have a body like that of Jesus. There will be no cancer, no aches, no pains, no need for sleep, and no aging. We will be like Him "for we shall see him as he is."

It is clear that the New Testament doesn't give us these prophetic words just to satisfy our curiosity. To quote John again: "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). The return of Christ is presented to change us, to reorder our priorities. It is a motivation to holiness. Evangelist D. L. Moody's favorite verse was, "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17).

Second, it's a motivation for us to be busy serving the Lord, doing those things that please Him. As we shall learn in the next chapter, we as believers will give an account for the way in which

we lived. Whether we will be rewarded or “lose our rewards” is determined by our lifestyle, our priorities and motives.

Sometimes we can learn lessons from the animal kingdom. Indeed, the Lord laments, “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isaiah 1:3). As you know, dogs are very loyal. There is a story about a farmer who had a very close relationship with his dog, and when the old man died they took his body, put it in a coffin, and put it on the train. According to the story that I was told, this dog ran toward the train every single day when it came to the station. The dog was always hoping that the train that took his master away would eventually bring him back. We as God’s children should live each day with the same anticipation.

**YOU CAN LOVE
JESUS FOR THE
WRONG REASONS.**

At the Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago many years ago, I met a woman from another religion. I asked her if she loved Jesus. She said, “Oh yes, I love Him,” and she began to cry. I said, “Why?” She answered, “I love Him because of all the miracles He did. I love Him because He loved children. I love Him, I love Him, I love Him.” Then I looked directly into her eyes and asked, “Do you also love Him because He died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins so that we could be forgiven and know God?” She broke eye contact with me and said, “I never thought of that before.”

Yes, you can even love Jesus for the wrong reasons. What a tragedy to know Shakespeare but not as a man of literature; to know Newton but not as a scientist; to know Jesus but not as a Savior and King. I urge you today, if you’ve never settled the issue of making Jesus your Savior, do not read another chapter without realizing that He died on the cross for our sins and was raised so that we could know Him, and so that we could be reconciled to

God, and so that we could be “in Christ.”

Like a magnet that attracts only iron filings, so the first coming of Jesus will draw only those who know Him into the clouds to meet Him in the air. As this book progresses, we will learn what happens to those who are left behind. The difference between the “two eternities” is beyond the human imagination.

*Face to face with Christ, my Savior,
Face to face—what will it be,
When with rapture I behold Him,
Jesus Christ who died for me?*
—Carrie E. Breck