

RAPTURE IS MORE RISKY THAN DEATH!

Today's Text: 1 Cor. 15:51-58; 1 Thes. 4: 13-18

Extracts:

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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed* [1 Cor. 15: 51-52]. But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope...For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that *we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord* [1 Thes. 4: 13, 15-17]

Harold Camping (91), a retired civil engineer and an evangelical broadcaster with the Family Radio International in Oakland, California, USA, predicted that Jesus Christ would return to earth on Friday, 21 May 2011. Believers would be raptured and all non-believers would be dead the following day.¹ Keith Bauer, a tractor-trailer driver took the week off and travelled 3,000 miles (4,830 km) from Maryland to California to be part of the rapture. Some parents sold their homes and an atheist entrepreneur, Bart Centre, did brisk business looking after the pets of over 250 clients (who believed that they would be raptured) at US\$135 per pet. But on that fateful Friday, nothing happened! Gleefully, Bart Centre told journalists that his clients were disappointed twice- "Once because they weren't raptured and again because I don't do refunds."

The Bible tells us that Jesus will return to judge the world. On that day, He will come with believers who have already died. The rest of us who will still be alive will be raptured, that is, turned in an instant from mortality to immortality to meet Him and His entourage in the air. That suggests that we will all die first before we can be with Jesus: some by natural death and others by rapture. But which of them would you rather choose? Is rapture not more risky than natural death? This week's study, based on Paul's epistles to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians, will help us to answer the question.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: "'Rapture': Believers perplexed after prediction fails," May 22, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13489641>; and "'Rapture' apocalypse prediction sparks atheist reaction," 21 May 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13468131>

1. Background: Features of the Rapture

If this very moment you were to suddenly hear a trumpet blasting from the skies to herald the return of Jesus Christ, would you be happy or sad? The likelihood is that true believers would be ready and happy but the majority of us would be shocked and unprepared! How many of us are likely to be more into religion than a close relationship with God should Christ suddenly appear today? Jesus once told His listeners during the Sermon on the Mount [**Matt. 7: 21-23**]:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness.

We know for sure that some of us may be dead before the return of Jesus. However, some of us may still be alive. The dead already know their fate—whether they will return with Jesus or not. The prayer of most believers is to have the privilege and opportunity to confess their sins before death comes. Death is uncertain in the sense that we do not know when, where or how we would die. For example, the word of God says that, at the white throne judgment, “the sea gave up the dead who were in it” [**Rev. 20: 13**]. That suggests death by drowning, which is unexpected or accidental death. On the other hand, on the day that Jacob (Israel) died, he simply “drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last” [**Gen. 49: 33**]. He died a natural death at old age. He was ready for it.

But how about the rest of us who will still be alive on rapture day? Are we sure that we will be raptured? Therefore, we are facing a big risk. ***Something is said to be risky if its occurrence is known but in a probabilistic sense.*** Like death, ***we know that rapture will happen but we do not know when and how or if we may not be left behind.*** Which is more risky: to be raptured or to be dead before the rapture? For an adequate answer to the last question, we need to understand more about the rapture as explained in Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians and his first to the Thessalonians. Here are the key features of the rapture:

a) *It will occur when Jesus appears*

Paul writes, “The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God” [**1 Thes. 4: 16; 1 cor. 15: 51-52**]. ***His appearance will be more than a CNN breaking news event in that “all the tribes of the earth will mourn [and] see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” [Matt. 24: 30].*** The trumpet will be louder than the sirens that herald the entourage of the Head of State of a powerful nation because it

will be heard by the high and the low in every nation around the world at the same time. What a spectacle!

b) *In the twinkling of an eye*

The Lord's appearance will be "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" [1 Cor. 15: 52]. It will be unexpected and unanticipated. The Lord will come "as a thief in the night" or "as labour pains upon a pregnant woman" [1 Thes. 5: 2, 3]. Therefore, ***the chances of being caught unprepared can be quite high.***

c) *The dead will rise first*

We are told, "The dead in Christ will rise first" [1 Thes. 4: 16]. The dead in Christ are the saints already judged righteous when they died. They will form part of His entourage from heaven. That suggests that ***those who died unrepentant of their sins will not be part of the dead in Christ.*** They will remain in hell, waiting for the final judgment when "Death and Hades [will be] cast into the lake of fire" [Rev. 20: 14].

d) *The living will then join*

Paul writes, "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them [the dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" [1 Thes. 4: 17]. This instant transformation from the mortal body to immortality is popularly referred to as the rapture and it belongs to the living in Christ. In other words, ***the spectators of the big show in the skies on the day of rapture will actually be those left behind!***

From the foregoing, we can have a glimpse of what the rapture looks like. It will happen in a flash. Before people know what is going on, it is over. There is no second chance. People left behind will miss family members who may not have been the richest or most popular among them. ***Left behind are likely to be the unbelieving and the abominable, murderers and the sexually immoral, sorcerers and idolaters and all liars [Rev. 21: 8]. Left behind are likely to be people who draw near to God with their lips and honour Him with their mouths but whose hearts are far removed from Him; and their fear toward Him is taught by the commandment of men [Is. 29: 13; Matt. 15: 8-9].*** Therefore, rapture can be a more risky route to eternity with Christ than death!

2. Why the Rapture is more risky than death

We do not know for how long we shall live on earth but we do know that, sooner or later, we shall die and face judgment. We do not know when the rapture will occur but it may or may not happen before we die. So, which of those two ways

of facing Christ's judgment is more risky? Let me give you some facts to help you to decide:

a) *Even Jesus does not know the day or the hour!*

Jesus gave His listeners enough signs of His return, adding, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place." Then He added, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" [Matt. 24: 34, 36]. It is over two thousand years ago that Jesus uttered those words and yet, the rapture has not happened. Even Methuselah, the oldest man in human history, lived for 969 years [Gen. 5: 27]; for less than one thousand years!

The implication of that is that we may have an idea of the time (by signs) but not the day or hour of Christ's return. Our attention span cannot be sustained over an uncertain and lengthy waiting time. What if He were to come at our slack moment? That was what happened to the five foolish virgins in the Parable of the Ten Virgins [Matt. 25: 1-13]. They took lamps just like the five wise ones. While waiting for the bridegroom, they "slumbered and slept" just like their wise colleagues. But when the bridegroom came unexpectedly, the lamps of the foolish virgins had grown weak and they had no extra oil. In the end, their long wait was wasted because they missed the "day and hour."

b) *The dead already know what to expect*

When people die, they either go to heaven or hell for "it is appointed for men [and women] to die once, but after this the judgment" [Heb. 9: 27]. We know that not all deaths are predictable or anticipated. Yet, a few facts are obvious: *with the exception of accidents (including illness, plagues, terrorism and wars), older people tend to die before younger people.* At the age of 50 years, you are almost sure that you may not have more than 40-50 years longer to live.

Therefore, when you know that today is the beginning of the rest of your life, you can budget it as the only time you have to prepare to meet Christ at His judgment seat. Each day you wake up, you thank God for the extra day privilege that He has given you to make eternity. When you fall sick, it is the right moment to reconcile with Him- in case the illness could take your life. For example, King Hezekiah was sick and near death. Prophet Isaiah brought him the word of God that he should *set his house in order because he was going to die.* He prayed to God and "wept bitterly." God heard his prayer and extended his life by fifteen years [2 Kgs 20: 1-6]. Can you imagine what could have happened to any of us in his situation if rapture should come before the death threat?

c) *Waiting time for the Rapture is indeterminable*

The rapture was already an urgent matter even in the early church. Reminding the Thessalonian church that the Lord's Day will come as a thief in the night, Paul urged them to behave as the children of light by being sober, "putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation" [1 Thes. 5: 1-8]. Over two thousand years later, it is the same message that we still hear in our churches. That is why false prophets have multiplied in recent times, luring gullible worshippers to expect the rapture on their forecast dates!

Jesus has cautioned His followers awaiting His return with the following words [Mk 13: 33-37]:

Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to keep watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming- in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning- lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!

An interminable watch can be exasperating- especially for modern worshippers who prefer user-friendly fast foods highways to God-fearing narrow lanes of perseverance!

d) *Yet you must always remain alert!*

Something that looks interminable can also be boring! We do not know the day or hour for Christ's return; yet, He WILL come when we least expect Him. Therefore, ***you must remain rapture-keen and rapture-ready instead of being rapture-ignorant.*** A rapture-keen person is desirous to meet with Christ no matter when or how. A rapture-ready person lives a godly life- as a matter of routine. Therefore, no matter what happens, by death or by rapture, heaven is home. But to be rapture-ignorant is not to know or care about Christ's return.

Take the case of Paul's sermon at Athens on God's judgment by the resurrected Christ. In concluding his speech, Paul said, "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." The ignorant among his listeners mocked him; the keen said they would hear him again on the matter; but the ready joined him and believed [Acts 17: 22-34]

From the foregoing, *we can conclude that every true believer ought to be rapture-keen and rapture-ready at all times. However, because it is indeterminate, there is no guarantee that we can be rapture-focussed till it happens- if it happens in our life time. But when we see rapture as coming before we die, we can regard it as going to happen in our life time.* We can say, like Paul in the evening of his life, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, *there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing*” [2 Tim. 4: 7-8]. That is the rapture message in Paul’s epistles that we have examined this week.

3. Conclusion: Prepare for eternal life at all times

We can worry about our salvation the same way we worry about earthly needs. On the latter, Jesus has taught us not to worry about life; what to eat or drink or put on. Instead, we should seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all other things will be added. In concluding, He said, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. *Sufficient for the day is its own trouble*” [Matt. 6; 25-34].

Tomorrow is in the future. The rapture is in the future, so is death. All are certain in that they will come. But they are uncertain in that we have no idea of their form when they come. Therefore, all we have control over is today, now, right now.

For believers who want to spend eternity with Christ, rapture is more risky than death. But if you realize that all you have is today, right now, it no longer matters which comes first. Your attitude to death or rapture will become the same. So, no matter which comes first, you are ready!