

8. The ultimate out-of-this-world experience

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I must admit that I am strange. The majority of people would like to stay inside of the airplane when they fly. I'd prefer to jump out of a perfectly good airplane. Even for rappelling, I already know how to rappel in a normal way. I'd like to learn how to do the Australian rappelling that allows you to go down face first. Exciting, ain't it?

However, any flight in the air by humans is limited with the right equipment.

For the born-again Christians who might be in the generation of the end times, they will have the ultimate out-of-this-world experience that defies every logic. We don't need no stinking flying equipment, but we DO need one person – Jesus Christ

A. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RAPTURE

After all, the rapture is more than the ultimate out-of-this-world experience. It is an expression of God's love and faithfulness to His people. At the same time, it is a signal of His justice and judgment toward the unbelieving people during the Great Tribulation time and the time after that.

If anyone tries to ignore the rapture of the church of Jesus Christ, that person is ignoring one of the most important doctrines in Christianity and they have to delete a good portion of the Bible.

In the New Testament, the subject of the Lord's return is very up-front, referred to over three hundred times more than any other subject. It's even the final thought of Scripture.

Revelation 22:20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Jesus could come at any time, and He doesn't want us to forget it.

B. RAPTURE EXTREMES

At the same time, if we're not careful, we can take this awareness to extremes, getting bogged down on miry side paths in our faith. Because we need to keep a good balance between reality and expectancy. Let's spend a moment examining the pitfalls to watch out for:

1) Fanatic intensity

Obsessed with end-times teachings and novels, some people interpret every world event as a fulfillment of prophecy. A few even attempt to set the date of Christ's return and, in euphoric anticipation, quit their jobs and disregard their responsibilities. But the date always comes and goes, and they are left disillusioned.

2) Theological ignorance

For some Christians, talk of God's prophetic timetable usually draws glassy stares and wide yawns. Unfortunately, this disinterest has a domino effect in their Christian life. Since they have little vision for the next world, they often lack passion for this world's lost and for their own personal purity. Death and the unknown future terrify them because they have not anchored themselves in the truth of Christ's glorious return.

3) Theological misinformation

Some people not only don't understand the truth, they believe what is untrue. This makes matters worse.

C. DO NOT BE IGNORANT

1 Thessalonians 4:13 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.

If you recall from chapter 3, the Thessalonian church was troubled by the Fanatic Intensity extremism. Ecstatic about Christ's imminent return, some people had quit their jobs and became freeloaders and busybodies.

Some of them were afraid that their Christian loved ones who had died before Christ's coming would be forgotten or somehow miss His return because they didn't understand the apostle Paul's teaching regarding the rapture. So Paul builds for them and us a firm theological footing concerning death and the coming of Christ.

It is with some interest we note that four times in all of his letters, Paul asked Christians to not be ignorant about something:

- Don't be ignorant about God's plan for Israel – Romans 11:25
- Don't be ignorant about spiritual gifts – 1 Corinthians 12 and 14
- Don't be ignorant about suffering and trials in the Christian life – 2 Corinthians 1:8
- Don't be ignorant about the rapture and the second coming of Jesus –1

Thessalonians 4:13

Remarkably, these are the same areas where ignorance is still common in the Christian world.

Let me tell you a story: Little Tommy was an average boy who loves to play hard, wants to be a firefighter and policeman at the same time, tease girls, and loves his mommy's cookies. Recently a brain cancer struck him hard and the chemotherapy confined Tommy to his bed most of the time.

At his young age, he started to notice that he is not going to be a normal kid again, even live to have another birthday party.

One day, with fear in his eyes, Tommy asked a question to his mom while he was lying down in his bed, "Am I going to die, mommy?" His mom was choked up with emotion and tears, she quickly excused herself that she must attend something in the kitchen and made her way to the kitchen.

While she was standing in front of the kitchen sink, she desperately prayed to God that He may give her the right answer for her dying son's question.

Instantly, the Holy Spirit spoke to her heart ever so gently. She got the answer. She went back to Tommy's room. She sat on his bed and started to stroke his freckled pale face and spoke to him, "Tommy, do you remember, you used to play so hard outside and came in and had dinner. You were so tired that you fell asleep on the couch? Then your daddy picked you up with his strong arms and take you in to your bed. In the morning, you realized that you were in your own room? That is what death is going to be like. Our God is going to take you in His strong arms from here to His home in heaven where He had prepared a special place for you."

Just like that, 'asleep' is a euphemism for death, minus the finality. It is a hopeful word because sleeping assumes a future "awakening" – a resurrection.

Early century Christians called 'death' 'sleep', but they emphasized the idea of rest. They began to call their burial places "cemeteries," which derives from, "dormitories" or "sleeping places." Yet the Bible never describes the death of the unbeliever as sleep, because there is no rest, no peace, no comfort, and no hope in their death.

D. THE RETURN OF JESUS CHRIST FOR HIS CHURCH

1 Thessalonians 4:14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

There are 3 kinds of death in Scripture:

1) Physical death, which is the separation of the spirit from the body.

That is what we ordinarily call death. Adam didn't actually die physically until 930 years after the fall of mankind.

2) Spiritual death

Paul says that to be carnally minded is death, which is separation from God. This is what happened to the man in the Garden of Eden when God said that man would die in the day he ate of the fruit. Mankind became separated from God – a spiritual death.

3) Eternal death

It is the eternal separation of the unbelievers from God. This is the second death described in Revelation 20:

Revelation 20:14-15 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

E. LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

1 Thessalonians 4:15 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.

U.S. Navy SEALs and Army Rangers are not only famous for their courage but also they have the reputation of not leaving their fallen comrades-in-arms behind. They do everything within their power to get their friends' bodies back. They are not the first ones who started that. God did.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that those who are asleep – Christians who have died before Jesus returns – will by no means be at a disadvantage. God will allow those who are asleep to share in the glory of the coming of the Lord.

F. MUSIC TO OUR EARS

1 Thessalonians 4:16 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.

The rapture will not be silent, even though the vast majority of people may not understand the sound or its meaning because they don't have the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

When Paul heard the heavenly voice on the road to Damascus in Acts 9, his companions heard the sound of a voice, but they did not hear articulate words. They heard a sound but did not understand its meaning. It may well be that the

shout/voice/trumpet sound that accompanies the rapture will have the same effect. The entire world will hear this heavenly sound but will have no idea what its meaning is.

In the Old Testament, trumpets sounded the alarm for war, and threw the enemy into a panic, in the sense of the 7 trumpets described in Numbers 10 and Revelation 8-9. But here, the trumpet of God gathers together God's people.

However, please notice the difference. The 7 trumpets from Numbers 10 were blown by people, the 7 trumpets from Revelation 8-9 by angels. But for the rapture, God Himself will blow the trumpet. He has been waiting for this moment for a long, long time to take His people to heaven.

1 Corinthians 15:52 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.

I heard that somebody measured the time of the twinkling of an eye. It is not the time of the blinking eye which is very fast. The rapture will happen before the unbelievers realize what happened.

Many wonder how are the dead in Christ raised are first. The same God who created the universe into its existence from nothing by His command will take care of all the details.

G. I'LL FLY AWAY

1 Thessalonians 4:17-18 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. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The word "caught up" is the Greek 'harpazo,' meaning "to grasp hastily, snatch up, to lift, transport." We get the word 'rapture' from Latin Bible, Vulgate 'rpto, rapturo, or rapturus'.

We will not only meet our Lord Jesus Christ at the rapture but will also be reunited with our believing friends and loved ones who have died. "Together with them" is a great statement of encouragement. Death is the great separator, but Jesus Christ is the great Reconciler.

H. APPLICATIONS

1) Make certain we have taken what God has given – His salvation.

Christ died to pay for our sins and rose to give us eternity. To be forgiven and to receive life, He simply asks that you place your belief in Him.

2) Continue to resist a corrupt lifestyle.

Paul instructs us to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires" so we won't be caught unprepared.

3) Live in a sensible and godly manner.

Live as if Christ might come today. Stay in the Word of God. Give ourselves to the Savior. Share His love with others.

One day there will be a moment like no other in human history. With a thundering shout and the blast of a trumpet, Christ will split the skies, the clouds roll back as a scroll, graves will crack open, and we will all see Jesus. Are you getting ready? Better still, are you keeping ready?