

Rethinking the Rapture
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, Tennessee

I remember one night in college when a simple question occurred to me for the first time: Where does the Bible teach that the Rapture of the saints will occur seven years before the Second Coming of Christ? I was just lying in bed in my dorm room when this question suddenly popped into my mind. To my dismay, I could not think of any place where the Bible teaches this. I think it was the next day when I remembered that the Apostle John is summoned up into heaven at the beginning of Revelation chapter 4. I knew that some taught that John's ascent at that particular point in the Apocalypse represents the Rapture of the saints after the church age and before the seven-year tribulation. That satisfied me at the time, probably because that is what I wanted to believe. I had no desire to doubt the only view I had ever been taught. In reality, Revelation 4:1 has nothing to do with the Rapture question. John is there caught up into heaven so he can witness some events in the heavenly throne room. In chapter 10, John descends back to earth (cf. vv. 1,8-9) and observes events for a time from an earthly perspective. In chapter 15, John is again in heaven, and in chapter 17, John descends back to earth. If John represents the raptured saints in Revelation 4:1, then why does he not also represent the raptured saints when he travels to and fro between heaven and earth in these later chapters?

I was not disturbed by this question again until my last year at Dallas Theological Seminary. During that year, I took a course in English Bible taught by Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, author of **Things to Come**. During that course, Dr. Pentecost covered 2 Thessalonians chapter one, which talks about Christ's coming to dispense both relief to the saints at Thessalonica and judgment upon their persecutors (1:3-10). Dr. Pentecost told us that Paul was there speaking to the saints at Thessalonica as representatives of the tribulation saints who will be alive at the Second Coming. That seemed to me to be an artificial interpretation designed to fit a preconceived system. The natural interpretation is that Paul is predicting what will happen at the Second Coming to both the first century saints at Thessalonica and their persecutors. These first century saints will experience consummate relief at the resurrection unto life. Only then will they be delivered both body and soul from the miseries of this life. Their persecutors will experience consummate punishment at the resurrection unto condemnation. Only then will they be delivered both body and soul unto their final judgment.

In 2 Thessalonians one, Paul speaks of both these events as occurring at the Second Coming. In Dr. Pentecost's system, these two events are one thousand seven years apart, the first occurring seven years before the Second Coming, and the second, one thousand years after the Second Coming.

Another passage I considered was Titus 2:13. The popular view today is that the Rapture will be a secret event. The only clue that anything has happened will be that many people will suddenly and mysteriously disappear. Yet Titus 2:13 describes

the Rapture as a gloriously visible event. Titus 2:13 literally says, "looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and Savior of us, Jesus Christ." In the Greek, there is only one article before these two titles "great God" and "Savior," which indicates that they together describe one person. Thus, Jesus is both Savior and God. There is also in the Greek only one article before the designations "blessed hope" and "appearing of the glory," which indicates that they together describe one event. Thus, the ESV has the translation "our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory." The NIV has "the blessed hope -- the glorious appearing." The end time event which Christians are "looking for" as their "blessed hope" is not an invisible and secret coming but a glorious appearing.

The Rapture will also be not silent but noisy. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, we read that the Lord will descend with "a cry of command" (ESV) or "a loud command" (NIV). When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!'" (John 11:43). At the time of the Rapture, Jesus will no doubt cry some command for the dead to come forth from their graves, and they will obey (cf. John 5:28-29). The dead in Christ will rise first, and then those who are alive will be caught up together with them. In addition to this loud cry of command, there will be the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God. This definitive passage on the Rapture certainly does not characterize the Rapture as secret and silent.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 also says that the translated living saints will be caught up together with the resurrected saints in clouds "to meet the Lord in the air." Some argue that the saints will

meet Christ in the air because there will be a seven year delay before Christ finishes His descent to earth. There is a better explanation based on a special meaning of the Greek word here translated "meet." This word "is to be understood as a technical term for a civic custom of antiquity whereby a public welcome was accorded by a city to important visitors" (**Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**, I.380). This word was "the ancient expression for the civic welcome of an important visitor or the triumphal entry of a new ruler into the capital city and thus to his reign" (**The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology**, I.325). In other words, when a king of antiquity approached his capital city to begin his reign from that location, citizens of the city went out to meet him and to escort him into the city. It was the ancient equivalent of rolling out the red carpet.

This word is found two other places in the New Testament. It occurs in Matthew 25 in the parable of the foolish virgins:

And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!" Then all the virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. ... the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding and the door was shut. (vv. 6-7,10b)

This word also occurs in Acts 28 in the account of Paul's arrival at Rome:

And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as the Appii Forum and the Three Inns. (v. 15a)

A second Greek word (υπαντησις), closely related in both form and sense to the one already mentioned (απαντησις), is also used to refer to this ancient civic custom (TDNT, I.380). These two related Greek words are used interchangeably in the parable of the foolish virgins to refer to meeting the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1,6). This second Greek word is used in John 12:12-13 to refer to those in Jerusalem who poured out of the city with palm branches to meet Jesus at His Triumphal Entry into the city:

The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out: "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' The King of Israel!"

This Triumphal Entry meeting does appear to be a significant parallel to the Rapture meeting of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In both events, people rush forward to acclaim Jesus as Messianic King and to accompany Him on the remainder of His journey.

Notice that in all of these usages, there is no hint of any significant delay in the journey.

The use of the Greek word translated "meet" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 indicates that the resurrected saints will meet the Lord in the air to honor Him with an escort for the remainder of His descent to earth. Thus, the saints will meet Christ in the air at His Second Coming to give Him the "red carpet treatment" when He comes to earth to renew it and to rule over it for eternity.

