***The Imminency of the Rapture  
  
RV48-02***

Please open your Bible to the letter to the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-13. This is segment number 18. The Lord Jesus Christ has promised to keep the Philadelphia type believer from experiencing the sufferings of the tribulation era. This tribulation that is referred to in the Scripture is an era of seven years when God expresses His wrath upon unbelieving gentiles and upon Christ-rejecting Jews. It is a time which is yet in the future. Whatever trials Christians may go through now, they will never face the horrors of the tribulation. That is the point of Revelation 3:10, where the Lord has promised to keep this type of believer, which represents the universal church (the body of Christ) from this era of human experience. This makes the return of Jesus Christ to take the church from the earth to heaven before the tribulation, a blessed hope. If we had to go through the tribulation, it would not be that great a blessing to look forward to.

The world today that we live in has pretty well believed Satan's lies, and has abandoned, consequently, the Bible. Many people profess to view the Bible as God's revelation, but in practice they actually subject that revelation to their fallen human reasoning powers. Christians often are guilty of this. They too will say, "I believe the Bible." But when it comes to what the Bible has to say, especially if it interrupts some ambition or some viewpoint they have, then they seek to adjust the Bible to what they think is better thinking and more reasonable judgment. Christians, therefore, usually feel right at home in Satan's world, and they often have no problem in sharing the lifestyle that is characteristic of Satan's world.

However, the devil's world is going to feel the holy anger of God in the tribulation era. That's what it is. It is the holy and hot anger of God. The nightmare of human suffering is described in Revelation. Remember that that's what Revelation is mainly about. It is mainly to tell you what the tribulation period is going to be like, and what life is going to be like during that seven years when God's wrath is poured out upon all humanity. The nightmare of human suffering which is described in the Revelation is but a preview really of what eternity in the lake of fire is going to be like. People are going to experience horrendous sufferings, but it's only going to be a preview of that which is going to be their status for all eternity.

We have come to a time when we don't have the hell-fire and brimstone preaching that we're used to in an era past. Consequently, the average American mind has lost touch with the fact of the pain and the sufferings that are consequent to paying for your own sins. It is a terrible thing to have to pay for your own sins. The justice of God demands that somebody must pay for your sins. Either you do it, or God does it. We should never lose sight of the fact that the consequences of our evil is suffering, and that suffering has been placed upon Christ. If you reject His substitution for you, then you'll pay for it yourself. But make no mistake about it that the consequences of evil is punishment. The integrity of God will never be compromised on that issue.

Revelation 3:11, that we come to now, explains how Jesus Christ is going to fulfill the promise made in verse 10 of keeping the church from going through the tribulation. Let's look at the first part. The Lord says, "Behold, I come quickly." The word "behold" is not in the Greek texts. What the Greek text begins with is the word "I come." That looks like this in Greek: "erchomai." The word "erchomai" means to arrive from elsewhere. This word stresses the act of coming. Therefore, it's a very significant Greek word. It is stressing the act of coming. We have another word for "come" that we've had before. It looks like this: "heko." That stresses the arrival – the actual arrival, or coming in terms of, "Here I am." The word that we have here in Revelation is this one "erchomai," stressing the fact that Jesus Christ is going to come. There will be the great event of the return of Christ. The Bible is very significant in distinguishing between these two.

**The Rapture**

Let me just give you an example. In John 8:42, these two words are used in one verse that will distinguish them for you: "Jesus said unto them, 'If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth (and that's this word 'erchomai' – the act of coming) and came from God (and that's the word 'heko').'" A better translation here would be: "I came ('erchomai' – the act of coming) from God, and now am here ('heko' – the arrival emphasis)." This is the concept of the return of Jesus Christ over against "Here I am." What we have stressed in Revelation is the concept of His coming; that is, the word "erchomai" here refers to the rapture event when Jesus Christ comes to preserve the church from the tribulation era. This is how He's going to fulfill the promise in verse 10. It doesn't stress the actual arrival which this word "heko" would have stressed. It doesn't stress His actual arrival on the scene for the church. It stresses the fact of the rapture as an event which is going to fulfill that promise. It is not an empty promise.

The word "erchomai," as a verb, is in the present tense which indicates that it's a continual coming. The fact that it's a continual idea shows that it's imminent – that it can happen at any moment. It is middle in form but it is active in meaning, which means that Jesus Christ is going to do the coming. He is actually physically going to return. It's in the indicative mood, which makes it a statement of spiritual truth. The Lord Jesus Christ is actually preparing to return for the church. That's what the word "erchomai" is describing. 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is what He is talking about in the concept of a coming: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not precede them who are asleep (the dead Christians). For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with a voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God, then the dead in Christ shall 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 so shall we ever be with the Lord." This "catching away" is what we refer to as the rapture – the snatching of believers off the face of the earth.

So, remember that the prophecies of Scripture have never failed to be fulfilled literally. The "erchomai" – the event of the coming (the return) of Jesus Christ from heaven to remove church age believers off the earth, is also certain of literal fulfillment. We have the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself for this, and we have it recorded in a book which has never been wrong about anything.

Then He adds another significant word. In the Greek, you have just these two words for this first phrase. He says, "I am coming." It's an event which is now in process. It's in the machinery. It's already in motion. Then He adds the significant word "quickly," which looks like this in the Greek Bible: "tachu." "Tachu" is a word which indicates that something is going to happen in a sudden, unexpected way when it does occur. It does not stress the idea of immediacy. When he says, "I'm coming quickly," it doesn't mean "I'm coming soon." It means that when He comes, it's going to: boom. There it is – just suddenly and unexpectedly, almost out of the blue. What it means is that Christians are going to be going about their daily routines when, suddenly, they are going to find themselves caught up from the earth to meet the lord in outer space. It's the concept of a twinkling of an eye, which is in 1 Corinthians 15:52. There are, in other words, no prophetic events that await fulfillment before Jesus Christ can return to snatch believers from off the face of the earth. There is nothing waiting to be fulfilled before the rapture of the church can take place.

**Imminency**

So, this word "tachu" is telling us something about the nature of this return of Jesus Christ. That is that it is "imminent." And this is a word you want to become acquainted with. The word "imminent" means "any moment." There is nothing hindering the return of Jesus Christ to this earth. It is imminent. That is why the Lord Jesus, who has promised in verse 10 to preserve believers from the time when unbelievers are going to experience the wrath of God in its most intense form, says that the church believers are going to be preserved from that. In verse 11, He says, "I'm going to do it because I'm going to come. Suddenly, I'm going to appear on the scene, and I'm going to pull you out, and My return is just going to be unexpected, at any moment. It'll be fast. It'll be quick. It'll be in the twinkling of an eye." The reason He can say that is because there's nothing holding back this event. Of course, the normal reaction of the Christian heart is that which John expressed in Revelation 22:20, when he said, "Even so, come Lord Jesus."

This concept of the imminency of the return of Jesus Christ is very, very important. If you and I, as Christians, know that the Lord's return is at any moment, that causes us to live in a certain way. If the return of Jesus Christ is something that we don't expect at any moment, and that it's someplace down in the future, then we will live in a different way. Compare it to a housewife who is having guests come over. If she knows that the guests are going to be arriving in a week, she acts one way about the preparation of her house. But if she knows that they're going to come the next day, she acts in a different way. There's a great deal more urgency about what she's preparing: the food; the lodging; and, the cleaning up of the house. And if she knows that they're going to be there within an hour, then everything starts going into a fast motion. That is imminency. That's what imminency means. You and I should look at the return of Jesus Christ, which these two great scriptural words here are emphasizing to us in such a pointed way: "I am coming. And when I come, it's going to be sudden." That means it is at any moment. Then we will live according to a certain way.

**Pre-Tribulation Rapture**

So, it is not surprising that this issue of the imminency of the return of Jesus Christ has come under attack, and even, of all things, by Christians. Every now and then, some Christian Bible scholar writes a book in order to destroy the concept that Jesus Christ comes at any moment. They want to undermine the concept that Christians have nothing to fear in terms of the tribulation. So, books are written to show how Christians are going to have to go through the tribulation and suffer. They reject the pre-tribulation rapture. Instead, they seek to promote the concept of post-tribulation rapture.

We have the seven-year tribulation period. If the rapture occurs before that seven-year period, that is called a pre-tribulation rapture. If the rapture occurs after that seven-year period, that is called a post-tribulation rapture. Satan hates pre-tribulation because that puts Christians on the job. It's sort of as if you had gone to a doctor and discovered that you had a week to live. Now, your whole lifestyle would change. You would suddenly move into all kinds of activities because of the urgency of the event that faced you. The imminency concept was very big in the New Testament church. In fact, the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians had to be written to try to reassure the Christians in Thessalonica that they hadn't missed the rapture. They were so sure that that was going to happen just any time: next week; two weeks from now; or, three weeks from now, it was there. They were very much aware of the fact of the return of Jesus Christ, and they lived every day that way. Then something started happening, and they said, "Hey, this looks like what's supposed to happen after the rapture." Pretty soon, some of them were saying, "Could it be possible that we missed the rapture?"

So, Paul says "Now let me straighten it out. You have the slant wrong." He gave them some clues to give them some guidance to understanding that they had not missed the rapture, but that they were sure on the track with their intense sense of the imminency of the return of Jesus Christ.

**The Nature of the Church**

So, let's look at it for a little bit. Pre-tribulationists and post-tribulationists are in disagreement on the nature of the church. That's where part of the problem comes in all this. You have to understand what the church is all about. The post tribulationists generally include believers of all dispensations in the church body. There is no distinction made between the church and Israel. That is sometimes referred to as Covenant Theology. It is a very serious error. It is one which was born in the Reformation. It is a descendant from Roman Catholic theology. It was one of the unfortunate things that the Reformation never cleaned up – the concept that there is no difference between Israel and the church. There is every difference in the world.

So, the people who believe that the rapture takes place after the tribulation always lump together everyone from Adam on down to the last believer of all time. They just lump them all together, and they put them under the one title of "saints." Now, since there will be believers in the tribulation (and there will be believers in the tribulation), they say, the church must pass through the tribulation. They say that everybody is going to be one group: believers. There are believers in the tribulation. That's evident. These believers become martyrs, so, consequently, they say that the church does go into the tribulation.

However, the Scripture indicates that the word "church" refers to what is called the body of Christ. And it only includes believers of the present dispensation – not Old Testament believers. Old Testament believers do not share certain things that only members of the body of Christ share. Old Testament believers never received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Every one of you here today, who is born again, has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit which joined you forever to Christ. The Old Testament believers were never united to Jesus Christ in the intimate relationship that you are; that is, to be in Christ. That was completely foreign to any Old Testament believer. The Old Testament believer never had God the Holy Spirit permanently indwelling him, so that he had the power of God constantly at his fingertips the way you people do who are believers in this church age. The believers of the Old Testament were not their own personal priests. You enjoy the priesthood of the believer: your personal priesthood; and, your private personal relationship before God. That was totally unknown to the believers in the Old Testament era. The believers in the Old Testament were related to Jehovah as a wife, and she became an unfaithful wife, which is to be restored in the millennium to a position of faithfulness. But the church is related as the spotless, pure, virgin bride of Jesus Christ. And she is forever united to Him in that personal intimacy. It's a totally different picture.

So, the church believer has infinite privileges and blessings and possessions that the Old Testament believer never had. It is a totally different relationship to God. The believers in the church age are not part of the believers of the Old Testament era. The Old Testament, the tribulation, and the millennium believers are not all part of the body of Christ. They are different groups of saints. The tribulation believers are saints. The Old Testament people: David; Abraham; and, all those people – they were saints. The church believers: they are saints. But they are not all saints belonging in the same group. So, don't make that mistake.

Furthermore, the word church is never used in the Bible in reference to the tribulation era. The tribulation passages that you will read about in Revelation do not include references to the church. One of the great tribulation passages is Matthew 24-25. That is pure-gutted tribulation doctrine and presentation there. The church is nowhere seen in any of that description.

The post-tribulationists must include the saints of all ages in the church in order to put the church in the tribulation. That's why they do it. They have to lump all the saints together so they can say that the church is in the tribulation, because there are saints in the tribulation. Remember that post-tribulationist concede that their views are not taught specifically in Scripture, but it is a doctrine that they have inferred. They have concluded that this is the way it is. The church is never used in the Bible in the sense of saved people of many generations as one body, except in this present dispensation. When the word "church" is use of a group of people, it is only in reference to the era since the day of Pentecost. In the Old Testament, the word "church" was never used as a group of people – the people of God in that specified technical sense.

So, the post-tribulationists have to come up with some kind of an argument to defend the idea that Christians are going to suffer the tribulation nightmare that we've looked at previously. One passage they base this is on is Revelation 19:7. They say, "Here's the church, right in the tribulation:" "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife has made herself ready." They say that this refers to the church as the wife of the Lamb. So, the church is here in the tribulation. Here it is being described.

So, what are they saying? Well, the pre-tribulationists are saying that the marriage of the Lamb takes place at the rapture. The post-tribulationists say, "No, it takes place here at Revelation 19:7. Pre-tribulationists say that the marriage takes place at the rapture. The post-tribulationists say that it takes place here, which is describing a point right after the tribulation era. Here's the problem.

The problem is with that word "marriage." The word "marriage" is this in the Greek: "gamos." And "gamos" does not mean "marriage." It means "the marriage supper." That is a very significant difference. The word "gamos" is "marriage supper." In the procedure of Jewish weddings, there were three stages. Stage number one was called "the legal stage." This is where a man and a woman were committed to one another in marriage. This was a legal agreement which was binding. It was often and usually made by the parents in behalf of the young people – sometimes when the young people were themselves, but children. That is a legal stage. The second stage of a Jewish wedding was "the groom calling." That is, he went to the home of the bride to secure his bride. He went to her father's house, and he secured his bride. Then the third stage of the Jewish wedding procedure was the wedding feast. And the wedding feast is what this word "gamos" is referring to. The wedding feast of the church takes place after the tribulation. It in no way has anything to do with keeping the church from being raptured at the beginning of the tribulation, because this is exactly what does happen.

The legal relationship to Jesus Christ was established by the Lord on the cross. The second stage (the groom calling for his bride) will be the rapture. The third stage is going to be the wedding feast. And the wedding feast (celebrating your marriage to Jesus Christ) is going to be the millennium. That's when the wedding feast takes place. The millennium is one great big all-out bash celebrating your marriage to Jesus Christ. It is going to be the wedding festival to end all wedding festivals. Some of you have created some very monstrous, monumental wedding festivals. I have seen them where they have had trumpeters up in the balcony blowing away, and announcing the arrival of the bride. I have seen them with flower girls throwing flowers on the audience and everybody else, and the place is just dripping with flowers, in a magnificent panoply. I'm just waiting for one of them to walk down with a big fan behind the bride, like a big oriental potentate coming in. But you haven't seen anything yet. The best wedding feast you have ever attended is going to be in the future – in the millennium, and you're going to be the bride. You're going to be the principal personality.

Now, that is what is being referred to here in Revelation 19:7. What has taken place up to this time is that Jesus Christ has taken His bride to heaven, and immediately when you and I arrive in heaven, we now have glorified bodies; we are now perfectly conformed to the image of Christ; but, there is one very important thing that has to be done, and that is the judgment of our lifestyle. So, the Judgment Seat of Christ is faced at that point. We are going to look into that a little more, because if you drop your eye down to the end of verse 11, you see what is coming. Jesus Christ says, "I am coming." Then immediately He says, "But I should remind you, therefore, that because I am coming quickly, that you hang in there with doctrine and don't let anybody take your crown."

Some people think that Jesus Christ is saying, "I'm coming, and you have to hang in there, and live right, and act right, and do right, so that you don't lose your salvation and lose your crown." Isn't that what that says? If you want to know what that says, keep coming. We're going to go into that. It doesn't say that, but you do have crowns that you may lose. So, it's kind of interesting, isn't it, that the Lord Jesus says, "At any moment, I can show up on the scene, and bring everything to an end, and take you to heaven?" And when you walk into heaven, the first thing you're going to see is the magnificent Judgment Seat of Christ. I'm going to walk up on that seat; I'm going to sit down; I'm going to turn to the angel in charge; and, I'm going to nod to him. They're going to punch the computer buttons, and we're going to start putting out on the screen all of the divine good production name-by-name. And there it will be: Tom Cross; divine good production; whatever; down the line. And certain people in heaven are going to get a crown (of about four different ones). Certain people in heaven are not going to get a crown. Certain people in heaven are going to get rewards and a crown. Certain people in heaven are going to get rewards, but no crown.

So, this is a very significant remark when the Lord says, "I'm coming at any moment. I can pop in on you when you least expect Me. If you are not ready, My sudden arrival is going to be kind of a sad event for you, because it's going to cost you something very dear in terms of crowns that are going to be very important to you through all eternity. We're going to look in detail at what that is in the near future.

But the point I'm trying to make now is that the doctrine of imminency is clearly taught in Scripture. Jesus Christ is going to come before the tribulation. That's the whole point of Revelation 9:10. He's going to come suddenly. You are just, all of a sudden, going to find yourself flying out through outer space into the presence of Jesus Christ. That can happen at any moment. But when it does, certain things will then have been settled for all eternity.

The denial of the concept of imminency and the concept of post-tribulationism goes together. If you're going to say that Christians have to suffer the tribulation, then, of course, you can't have the doctrine of imminency. If you know that what you have before you is that seven-year horror period, then you cannot say, at any moment, "I'm looking forward to Jesus Christ coming to receive me." Imminency means that there is no predicted event or sign which must be fulfilled before Christ raptures us. So, don't fall into the trap about talking about the signs that indicate that the rapture is near. There are no signs for the rapture. There are only signs for the Second Coming of Christ. Of course, it is true that when we see these signs of the Second Coming of Christ shaping up, then we know that seven years before that, the rapture is going to take place. When you see such tremendous signs being fulfilled, like Israel being a nation, and all of the other things that are shaping up in today's world, and the power structures (the four main power blocs) that are existing in the world, this is the tribulation world we're looking at. And that world indicates that the return of Christ (the rapture event) is very near, but there are no signs for the rapture event. So, if no prophecy must be fulfilled before the rapture, it has to come before events which are predicted in association with the rapture. That is still future.

However, imminency, I should warn you, does not imply a time period for any single person. Imminency does not imply a time period for you as an individual. It implies a time period relationship only for the body of Christ as a whole. For example, if the Lord should suddenly speak to me in some way, and give me a revelation (like He supposedly gives all the time to the charismatics), and tell me that I am going to have a very long life teaching doctrine, then imminency is removed for me – me, but not for you, as a whole. But if he tells me that I'm going to have a long life teaching Bible doctrine, and that long life is well ahead, then imminency is removed for me. Imminency is also removed for any Christians to whom I tell that secret. I may tell somebody that, "The Lord just told me that I'm going to have a long life teaching Bible doctrine before He returns." Now, if I'm going to have a long life teaching Bible doctrine before He returns, then, you know that as long as I am alive, Christ cannot return. During my lifetime, imminency would simply mean that no Scripture prophecy is to be fulfilled before the rapture. But the rapture itself would be held in abeyance. Once I'm gone from this life, then imminency becomes a reality for everybody once more.

So, the limitations upon the imminency of any certain individual does not imply limitations for the body of Christ as a whole. Church saints are regularly told to look for the return of Christ, while the saints who live in the tribulation are never told to look for the return of Christ. Now, this denial of imminency to an individual is one of the arguments, then, that the post-tribulationists like to bring up. They will point to John 21:18-19 to show that the doctrine of imminency is false. I'm going to call this to your attention so that you'll be prepared if somebody tries to spring this on you. In this passage, Jesus Christ promises Peter that he would die in old age. When he said this to Peter, Peter was in middle-aged: "Verily, verily I say unto you, 'When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you wanted to. But when you shall be old, you shall stretch forth your hands, and another shall gird you, and shall carry you where you don't want to go.' This spoke He, signifying by what death he should glorify God. When he had spoken thus, he said unto him, 'Follow Me.'"

Now, what we were just talking about is exactly what the Lord did to Peter. He said, "Peter, you're going to have a long life." The minute the Lord said that to Peter, Peter knew that, therefore, for him, personally, imminency was delayed. The return of Christ could not have been during the lifetime of Peter. Anybody else who got this information from Peter knew that as long as they saw Peter walking around alive, Jesus Christ would not return. Peter was already in middle-age. So, it wasn't very long before he was dead, and the any-moment return principle was in effect once more for everybody. The rapture again became momentarily possible once Peter was dead.

In Matthew 25:14-30, you have the parables which teach that there is a long interval between the time that the lord leaves, and that the lord returns. This lord goes on a long journey, but a long journey would require only a few years in the frame of reference of New Testament times. So, the rapture, even then, is not in the distant future. The post-tribulationists take this parable and say, "You see, the lord in this story was gone a long time. All of these parables suggest a short delay, but they don't really affect the principle of imminency.

There are intimations that the program of the present age is extensive in various passages in Scripture, but there are none of them that could not be fulfilled in a few years' time. Some of these are Matthew 13:1-50, Matthew 28:19-20, Luke 19:11-27, and Acts 1:5-8. Any of those passages, that may be brought to your attention, could be fulfilled in a very short time. So, they do not significantly restrict the doctrine of imminency.

Paul himself had long-distant plans for missionary work. Furthermore, he had the knowledge of his own approaching death. The Lord told Paul that he was going to die at his second imprisonment. At the first imprisonment, the Lord indicated: "Paul, you're going to be set free." Nero is not going to be able to pin this on you. At the second imprisonment, Paul was told, "You're not going to be freed this time, Paul. You are going to die." So, immediately, what did Paul know? Paul knew that after the second Roman imprisonment, that the imminency of the return of Jesus Christ was removed from him. He knew that he was going to die physically. He knew that he was not going to be caught up in the rapture.

So, imminency does not mean lack of long-range planning for the Lord's work. Paul was still planning long-range effects. So, we don't know when it will occur, even though it's imminent. So, this is another thing that you must be careful of. While we see the world's picture coming into focus for the tribulation world, it's very tempting for us to say that we should do certain things. In our own hearts, as we think about erecting a school building, somebody someplace is going to come and say, "Do you think we ought to be putting up a school building when the Lord Jesus is going to return in a few months?" The point is that it is imminent, but we don't know when it will occur. And we have to follow the principle that, while we may at any moment be caught up in the Lord's presence, we have to live as if we're going to be here for another hundred years. That's why the Lord set the principle down: "Occupy till I come." The Greek word for "occupy" means "keep doing business until I come."

I think what we should look forward to is to find ourselves caught up to meet the Lord in the air while we're laying the foundation, or putting up the brick walls of that new school building. That is doing business until He comes. And this is a subtlety of Satan that has hindered the Lord's work. There have been people since the first century who sat around on their hands, waiting for the rapture, because they knew it was just around the corner, and did not proceed to engage in long-distant planning and long-distant projects in behalf of the Lord's work.

So, most of the objections to the doctrine of imminency have ceased to exist after the first century. After the first century, we had none of these temporary situations like: Peter is going to grow old and die; or, Paul is going to die immediately. All those things have passed off the scene. As far as our situation is concerned, there is no question that the doctrine of imminency is upon us.

**Resurrection**

The post-tribulationists have some resurrection claim. The post-tribulationists also teach that all the saints are going to be raised at the tribulation – not in the stages of the first resurrection. This is another argument which will be brought to you. Every now and then, we've had people in this congregation that have gotten trapped into Covenant Theology. Periodically, they will contact members of our congregation. One of their primary thrusts is that there is no rapture. They say that everybody is going to be raised at the same time. Adam is going to be raised when you're raised. Abraham is going to be raised when you're resurrected. The concept of a universal resurrection is being imposed upon believers when that is not what the Bible teaches. The post-tribulationists like to use Revelation 20:4 to show that the resurrection of the saints is after the tribulation, at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ: "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them, and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the Word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads or in their hands. They lived and reign with Christ 1,000 thousand years."

Now, Daniel 12:1-2 do indicate that Old Testament believers will be rest resurrected after a time of unprecedented tribulation, and after the fall of the antichrist. But the term "dead in Christ" is used to refer to church saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, and it does not include Old Testament saints in the body of Christ. That is because the church is different from Israel. And the church has a resurrection that is different from that of the Old Testament believers. This concept of the first resurrection is a series of events. The first one was Jesus Christ. The second event in the resurrection (called the first resurrection) is going to be the church. That's the next group to be resurrected from the dead. Then there will be, after the tribulation takes place, another resurrection, and that will be the tribulation saints and the Old Testament saints. They will be raised, and they will be part of the first resurrection.

So, there's a series of resurrections. All of this is the first resurrection. The first resurrection is only of believers. The second resurrection is unbelievers. But it's not all one bowl of wax that takes place all at the same time. If you fall into that trap, then you fall into a lot of confusion. New Testament passages that are dealing with the resurrection of church saints do not indicate that Old Testament believers are resurrected at the same time. No Scripture ever associates the transfer of living Christians and the resurrection of dead Christians with the Second Coming of Christ after the tribulation. The Second Coming of Christ is only associated with the resurrection of dead saints, but not with the catching away of saints to be caught up to meet the Lord in the air.

So, what we have here in Revelation 20:4 is obviously people who were killed during the tribulation. They are the ones who are being resurrected after the tribulation. Resurrection for them is totally different from the resurrection which is unique for the body of Christ. So, this first resurrection has these stages.

So, the Word of God has no conflict over the fact that it teaches that we are going to be preserved from the tribulation. The Lord Jesus says, "When I come to preserve you from it, it's going to be a sudden, unexpected event." That is, it's not going to be a thing that is going to be sounded. You're not going to be told that Jesus Christ is returning in three hours. You're not going to be told: "The Lord is coming. Everybody gather at a certain point on a certain high hill. He's coming to receive you." It is going to be ... instant, unexpected, and there. That means that it can happen at any moment. There is no prophetic event to be fulfilled before you are caught up to meet the Lord.

So, your exit into His presence will either be through death (the time period of which, from this point of time, in your case, no one knows), or it will be through the catching up of the rapture (and the time period of that, from this point of time, no one knows). In any event, you will be, at that point, at the end of the line in anything that you can do in terms of preparation for your eternity. And there is preparation for eternity. Not everyone is going to enter with the same capacity to what God has before you. That capacity is being built in your soul now through the intake of the Word of God – through doctrine. That's why the Lord Jesus immediately warns: "When you come into My presence, by the event of My coming to snatch you off the face of the earth, there will be nothing more that you can do to prepare for your eternity. Be sure that someone doesn't take your crown." Putting that in its broader scope means: "Be sure someone doesn't take your reward."

That is happening every day of our lives. How many Christians are having their reward taken away from them? Here comes somebody into your circle of association. The conversation moves toward the issue of spiritual things. Suddenly, you have an opportunity to witness to this person. Do you witness? Do you give them a tape on the gospel? Do you explain the gospel? Do you alert him to the dangers that he faces? No. Is that person going to go to hell? How many preachers have you heard say, "Here's that person that will look up from hell and say, 'If only you had told me the gospel, I wouldn't be lost?' The Lord led you to him, and you didn't speak?" No, the Lord is going to come around, and He's going to take another believer, and he's going to bring that believer in contact with that person and say, "This person is destined for heaven. I had Sam Jones lined up to tell him the gospel to earn the reward, but Sam Jones closed his mouth, so, I'm going to get Susie Jones, and she's going to tell, and she will get the reward. So, the witness is given, and God's work is accomplished.

How many times has the Lord laid upon your heart to do something in the way of Christian service and you haven't done it? Then somebody else has come along, and they've done it. If you're a thinking Christian, you will look at the end of verse 11 and say, "There I am. Somebody walked right in and took my reward right out from under my nose." The Lord says, "My return is momentary. It will be very soon. Get yourself set. Get yourself ready. Don't stand there and be ashamed when I come because of the fact that you have not prepared."

So, be careful, when the Lord gives you opportunities for Christian service, how you treat it. Be careful that you pass off that investment of your life; that investment of your treasures; and, that investment of your testimony in some light way as if it didn't make any difference. You're too busy. You're going to get to it later. There isn't much more left for you to get to. The best of life that you have is that which you are preparing now for all eternity? And about the time you've finished doing all those marvelous, wonderful things that you're engaged in now, you're going to find yourself snatched away up into the Lord's presence, and then regret it for all eternity.

"Behold, I come quickly. Hold fast what you have" – doctrine, and its functioning, "That no man take your crown." And we'll look at that in greater detail next time.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1977

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