

Glorification and the Rapture

In light of the fulfillment of certain prophecies concerning the nation of Israel and in consideration of the intensity and nature of the current world situation, many genuine and Bible-believing Christians today are studying the second coming of Christ with renewed interest. Central to the prophecies concerning the Lord's coming and our blessed hope at His appearing is the rapture of the saints, as described or alluded to in several texts throughout the New Testament. Perhaps no single passage of Scripture is quoted in this regard as much as 1 Thessalonians 4:15 to 17:

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are living, who are left remaining unto the coming of the Lord, shall by no means precede those who have fallen asleep; because the Lord Himself, with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are living, who are left remaining, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and thus we will be always with the Lord.

It is not sufficient that we who love the Lord and seek Him merely go about our life here on earth. We must diligently prepare ourselves, because our adequate growth in the divine life is a natural and necessary prerequisite for our rapture.

The rapture texts are of particular interest to modern evangelicals, some of whom approach the subject with scholarly care, while others treat it with a more free-wheeling excitement. Much has been said and written concerning the major details related to the Lord's coming and the rapture of the saints. In addition, the subjects of a premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial advent and a pretribulation, posttribulation, or midtribulation rapture provide much opportunity for study and debate. However, almost all Bible students presume the same impression as to its nature. It is generally accepted to be a single, self-contained event that will happen without notice, conveying the believers into a sudden, surprising, and uncharacteristic ecstasy. This view of the rapture has been sensationalized and popularized by writers such as Lindsey, who calls the rapture "The Great Snatch," as the

church "goes extraterrestrial" (*Coming* 61). Encouraging the believers to "prepare for liftoff," he says,

Just think of it. In the flash of a nanosecond, every living believer on earth will be gone, vanished, bye-bye, sayonara, outta here....As for us, one moment we will be going about our life here on earth, and the next moment we will be hurtled into the presence of Jesus....We are snatched away before we even know what hit us. (*Apocalypse* 300-301)

LaHaye dramatizes the rapture as being "electrifyingly sudden," producing a "titanic chaos as Christian auto and bus drivers, train engineers, pilots and others suddenly vanish," creating "the greatest freeway gridlock in history!" He even proposes that at that moment unsaved mothers will sorrow intensely over the loss of their children, as babies under the age of accountability vanish with the true believers in the great event (40-41). As we shall see in this article, while we acknowledge entirely that we shall be changed "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52), we shall point out that the rapture of the believers is in actuality the consummating stage of a life-

long process of growth in the divine life. It is not sufficient that we who love the Lord and seek Him merely go about our life here on earth. We must diligently prepare ourselves, because

our adequate growth in the divine life is a natural and necessary prerequisite for our rapture. It is a practical fact reflected in the New Testament that some believers will thus prepare themselves while others will not. Since the rapture, as the glorification of the believers with the divine glory, requires our diligence and faithfulness, the truth of the rapture should be considered with respect to the "word of righteousness" in the New Testament (Heb. 5:13), the truth concerning the believers' responsibility and accountability to God for their life in the church age.

Three Stages of Our Full Salvation

In Mark 16:16 the Lord Jesus says, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved," and in John 10:9 He says, "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be

saved." In Acts 8:37 Philip declares, "If you believe from all your heart, you will be saved," and Paul says very clearly, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). As we know, salvation as spoken of here is by grace through faith. It is a free gift that we receive at a distinct moment in our life. A number of passages in the New Testament, however, speak differently concerning salvation. First Peter 2:2 says, "As newborn babes, long for the guileless milk of the word in order that by it you may grow unto salvation." In this verse, salvation is something that the believers who drink the milk of God's word grow into. The phrase *grow unto salvation* plainly indicates that salvation also is a matter of progression. Not only so, but in verse 5 of chapter one Peter reminds the believers that they are "being guarded by the power of God through faith unto a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time." Here salvation is something that will be revealed in the future, at the time of the Lord's coming. Obviously then, salvation is a rich and full reality, not a simple one.

The full salvation of the Triune God is in three stages and comprises many items (Recovery Version, 1 Pet. 1:5, note 5). In each of the three stages of God's full salvation, we are delivered from particular things, we experience certain matters, and we have definite results. Because we are of three parts—spirit, soul, and body (1 Thes. 5:23)—the Lord in His salvation takes three steps to deal with us: regeneration in our spirit, transformation in our soul, and transfiguration in our body. The corresponding stages of God's salvation may be called the initial stage, the progressing stage, and the completing stage. The initial stage of our salvation is the stage of regeneration. It is composed of redemption, sanctification (positional separation unto God), justification, and reconciliation, the result and totality of which is regeneration. In this stage God justifies us through the redemption of Christ and regenerates us in our spirit with His life by His Spirit (John 3:3-6). Thus, we receive God's eternal salvation and His eternal life and become His children, who shall not perish forever. This initial salvation has saved us from God's condemnation and from eternal perdition. As the result of regeneration we have received God's eternal salvation and His eternal life. In this sense, of course, we have already received God's salvation. There is no need to grow unto this stage, and it is not necessary for us to wait until it is revealed to us.

The progressing stage of our salvation is the stage of transformation, which is composed of freedom from sin, dispositional sanctification, growth in life, transformation, building up, and maturing. In this stage God is freeing us from the dominion of indwelling sin—the law of sin and of death—by the law of the Spirit of life through the effectiveness of the death of Christ working subjectively

in us (Rom. 6:6-7; 7:16-20; 8:2). In this stage God is also sanctifying us by the person of His Holy Spirit with the element of His holy nature. In the progressing stage of salvation God is also causing us to grow in His life, and He is transforming us by renewing the inward parts of our soul by the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 3:6-7; 2 Cor. 3:6, 17-18; Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23). Throughout the process of our Christian life, He is also building us together into a spiritual house for His dwelling (1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 2:22), and He is maturing us in His life for the completion of His full salvation and the fulfilling of His eternal purpose.

The final stage of God's full salvation is the completing stage, the stage of glorification, which is composed of the redemption (transfiguration) of our body, conformity to the Lord, glorification, inheritance of God's kingdom, participation in Christ's kingship, and the topmost enjoyment of the Lord. These three stages are not divided according to knowledge or merely according to objective aspects of God's salvation. Rather, they are arranged according to the experience of the divine life.

The Need for Transformation and Conformation

Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind." Not only so, 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "But we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit." Throughout the entire course of our Christian life, the believers must enjoy the dispensing of the Divine Trinity in the divine transformation for the divine conformation, as spoken of in these verses. To be transformed is to have Christ added into our being to replace what we are so that Christ may increase and our natural life may decrease. It is a divine, spiritual metabolism in which the old element of our natural being—the constitution of our old man in the old, fallen creation—is carried away, and the glory, the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit (v. 17; 1 Cor. 15:45) with all His riches, is added into us to replace the natural element. Thus, the Spirit's work in transforming us involves a change in our whole being—in life, nature, essence, element, form, and appearance. By the dispensing of Christ's element into us, we are being transformed metabolically to have His life shape by His life power with His life essence.

To be sure, to gain the filling of the Holy Spirit to this extent requires us to pay a price in our daily and lifelong pursuit of the Lord. We must give up the world, deal with our self, love the Lord above all, and count all things loss for Christ. Without gaining the extra portion of the Spirit in our human vessel in this way, we cannot experience transformation into His image to an adequate degree, and we will not be prepared for the next stage of our full

salvation, the glorification, the transfiguration—the rapture—of our body.

The Lord starts His salvation from the center of our being by regenerating us in our spirit. As a result, a change of life begins from the center of our being. This change of life continues by spreading into our soul so that our mind, emotion, and will may be transformed into His image. This transformation results in conformation. Transformation is inward and is a matter of the divine essence, and conformation is outward and is a matter of shape (Lee, *Conclusion* 1593 ff.). Transformation involves a change in form whereas conformation involves the shaping of this form into a certain image, the image of Christ as the firstborn Son of God. Romans 8:29 speaks of this stage of our full salvation, saying, “Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers.” Christ, the firstborn Son, is the prototype, and we, the many sons of God, are the mass production. Christ is the mold, the model, the pattern, and God has put us into Him so that we may be molded, conformed, into the image of the firstborn Son.

In many respects, however, we do not yet have the appearance of Christ, the Firstborn. For this reason, we need to be saved in the life of Christ (5:10) from self-likeness, that is, from the expression, the appearance, of the self in order to bear the appearance of God’s sons. To be saved from our self-likeness is to be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God. When we have been saved from our self-likeness and have been fully conformed to the image of Christ, we shall be sons of God in reality, and in every aspect we shall bear the appearance of His sons. In the light of the Scriptures, and in all soberness, we cannot expect to be “hurtled into the presence of Jesus” in our self-likeness, still marred with the spots and wrinkles of the old natural life (Eph. 5:27), that must not and cannot be found in the bride of Christ. Therefore, it is only at the conclusion of our progression of the experience of God’s full salvation that we shall be ready to be raptured and presented to Christ as His counterpart and bride.

The believers are presently in the process of maturity, that is, in the process of transformation and conformation. When this process has been completed, we shall reach maturity. Our maturity is the full extent of the process of transformation and conformation. This process of maturity involves the believers’ experience of the divine life, for conformation is actually the gradual shaping of life by the function of the all-inclusive, divine life within us. However, this process also implies a certain amount of suffering and the killing of our natural man. In Philippians 3:10 Paul says, “To know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings,

being conformed to His death.” We need to take the death of Christ as the mold of our life. The mold of Christ’s death was the continual putting to death of His human life so that He might live by the life of God. As our human life is conformed to such a mold, we die to our human life in order to live the divine life. The more our natural life is put to death, the more the divine life within us will be released. Then in our experience we shall be conformed to Christ’s death, and unless we are conformed to His death, we cannot be conformed to His image. Regrettably, not all believers receive the light that their self must be put to death, and even among those who have seen this truth, not many are fully willing to deny the self and stay in the mold of Christ’s death. Without being conformed to the death of Christ, we cannot be conformed to His image and thus prepared to be taken into His presence.

The believers must deny their self, take up the cross of Christ, and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). This is to identify themselves with the death of Christ, to allow the death of Christ to work on them continually, and to stay in the death of Christ (2 Cor. 4:10-12) to keep the self under the termination of death. We must also realize that our old man has been crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6), causing the body of sin to be made of none effect so that we no longer serve sin as slaves, having crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts, and putting to death the practices of the body by the Spirit (Gal. 5:24; Rom. 8:13). Moreover, the believers must lose their soul, that is, their soul-life (ψυχή). In Matthew 16:25 the Lord says, “Whoever wants to save his soul-life shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it.” To save the soul-life is to allow the soul to have its enjoyment in this age and not to suffer. To lose the soul-life is to cause the soul to suffer the loss of its enjoyment in this age for the Lord’s sake and for the sake of the gospel. In summary, in order to be conformed to the death of Christ we must deal with the old man, the body of sin, the flesh, the practices of the body, the self, and the soul. The more we deal with these things, the more we are conformed to Christ’s death that we may be conformed to His image as the firstborn Son of God. By all this we can see that to mature in Christ through transformation and conformation requires us to pay a price. For this reason, we are led to doubt that all genuine believers, if many at all, will be fully matured at the time of the Lord’s coming. Since conformation is the preparation for our glorification, this is equivalent to saying that not all believers will be ready to be raptured into the Lord’s presence.

The Glorification of Our Body

At the end of the progressing stage of God’s full salvation, the believers are transformed and conformed to the image of Christ, the firstborn Son of God, and they look

to and wait for the Lord Jesus' coming back to usher them into their glorious future. It is then that they are prepared, qualified, and ready to enter into the final stage of God's full salvation in His life. The completing stage of our salvation comprises our glorification (Rom. 8:30), the redemption of our body (v. 23), and our rapture. Glory is the expression of God. It is Christ Himself, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27), who has been sown into us as the seed of glory and who grows within us throughout our entire Christian life. For God to glorify us means that the glory which has been sown into us saturates our whole being and is expressed through us. When our entire being has been permeated and saturated with the element of glory, that glory will come out of us, even through our physical body. The seed of the divine life has been sown into our being, and now this seed is growing within us. As the seed grows, it develops gradually until it reaches full growth, the maturity in life. At that time there will be a "blossoming" of the divine seed within us. This is what it means for the believers to be glorified, which is the ultimate consummation of God's full salvation.

Romans 8:23 speaks of our full, divine sonship, which is "the redemption of our body." When we are glorified, our glorification will also be the redemption of our body. At the present time, our mortal bodies are of the old creation, weak, subject to death, infected with the sin nature, and under bondage and corruption. At the time of our rapture, however, our entire being, including our physical body, will enter into the divine sonship of the sons of God, and our whole being will shine with the glory of God.

Philippians 3:21 says that Christ will "transfigure the body of our humiliation to be conformed to the body of His glory." The indwelling Christ will saturate our entire being, including our physical body. This will cause our body to be transfigured and to become like His glorious body. Christ's body of glory is His resurrected body saturated with God's glory and transcendent over corruption and death. When we are transfigured, God's glory will be expressed from our spirit to our soul and through our body. The three parts of our being will be the same as Christ is and will be fully saturated with God's glory. Then "we will be like Him" (1 John 3:2) not only in our regenerated spirit and in our transformed soul but also in our body. At that time we shall be in His full likeness both inwardly and outwardly, from the center of our being to the circumference. This is the ultimate consummation of our full salvation, making our entire being—spirit, soul, and body—organically one with Christ and making Christ everything to us.

Being glorified, redeemed in our body, and raptured are actually three aspects of one thing. To be glorified is to be redeemed in our body, and to be redeemed in our body is to be raptured. As we have seen, the completion of our

salvation depends upon our experience of the previous stages of our salvation. To be sure, without being regenerated in our spirit we can never be transformed and conformed to the image of Christ in our soul. Likewise, without being transformed and conformed we cannot experience the spreading of the glory of Christ from our soul to our body. That is, without the maturity of life we are not ready, prepared, and qualified to be raptured.

Growth, Maturity, and the Harvest

The Old Testament contains a significant type of the maturity and rapture of the believers. Throughout the course of the year, the children of Israel sowed in the good land, nurtured the crops unto their maturity, and finally reaped the harvest. Among the harvest a certain amount of the produce ripened first. These first-ripe ones are called the firstfruits. Leviticus 23:10 says, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, When you come into the land which I am giving you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest." Exodus 23:19 speaks of these first-ripe ones, saying, "The first of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of Jehovah your God." The first of the crop to be ripened was set aside to be brought into the temple to be presented to God. At a later time, most of the remainder of the crop ripened. These were harvested when they were ready and brought into the barns. Toward the end of the time of harvest, another certain amount of the produce still remained in the field. Leviticus 23:22 says, "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not completely reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner; I am Jehovah your God." The gleanings were that part of the produce that took the longest to ripen. These were harvested last.

According to 1 Corinthians 3, God's people are His produce, His farm. In verse 6 Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth." Then in verse 9 he says, "For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's cultivated land, God's building." The concept of God's cultivated land is carried forward to Revelation, in which the believers are seen as the produce harvested at the end times, that is, at the time of the Lord's coming. There we see first the harvest of the firstfruits in 14:1 through 5 and later the general harvest in verses 14 through 16. In verse 15 we see the principle of the rapture. This verse says, "Send forth Your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come because the harvest of the earth is ripe." On the one hand, the rapture of the saints occurs in a hour, but on the other hand, the hour of the reaping depends on the ripening of the harvest. At His first coming to the earth, the Lord sowed Himself into His believers (Matt. 13:3-8, 24; cf. 9:37-38; Mark 4:26-29). All the

believers since that time, who have received Him as the seed of life, have become God's crop on the earth. At the end of this age, they will be reaped, that is, raptured, according to the extent and the time of their maturity in the divine life. D. M. Panton summarizes in this way:

Our general conclusion is now confirmed with astonishing clearness by the great Type designed to portray rapture. For the vital principle of all harvesting has been laid down

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by our Lord once for all:—"When the fruit is RIPE, *immediately* he putteth in the sickle" (Mark iv. 29). No farmer reaps his field because a fixed date is come, but because his corn is ripe; the reaping of unripe corn is utterly unknown.... Thus our Lord unfolds a momentous principle. It is not *wheat* that the Angels (Matt. xiii. 39) reap, but ripe wheat: neither the individual believer, nor the Church as a whole, is ripe simply because of being wheat. (25-26)

He continues by noting that even the timing of the Lord's coming is according to the principle of the maturity of the believers: "It is not Christ's return that rules the ripeness of the wheat, but the ripeness of the wheat that rules the date of Christ's return.... Christ is responsible for the sowing of the Wheat, but not for the date of its maturity" (26, 28). Lang says similarly: "It is ripeness, not the calendar or the clock, that determines the time of reaping (Mk. 4. 29). The Heavenly Husbandman reaps no unripe grain: hence, 'the hour to reap is come' when the harvest is 'dried up' (Rev. 14. 15)" (44).

According to certain passages in the New Testament, the rapture may appear to be a sudden occurrence. However, the entire revelation of the New Testament indicates that it will actually be the consummation of a process of gradual growth and development in life, our growth in the divine life unto maturity. A flower does not blossom until it has reached maturity, and in like manner, the believers will not be glorified until they reach maturity in the divine life. Based on the strong foundation of the organic aspect of God's full salvation, the aspect of our salvation that relates to our subjective experience of Christ and our growth in the divine life, the rapture of the believers is not an entitlement given freely by grace. To be sure, our justification is a matter of *sola fide*; it is by grace, through faith alone, and because of Christ's once-for-all work of redemption. Our rapture, however, our glorification and the redemption of our body, is the consummation of a process of salvation that we experience throughout

our entire life through the subjective operation of the Triune God. Neither is this to say that our rapture is according to "merit," as some have derisively misstated. The rapture of the believers at the end of this age is neither by faith alone nor by merit. Rather, it is according to and dependent upon their subjective, organic growth in life unto maturity through the processes of transformation and conformation to the image of Christ.

In this article we have not entered into the arguments concerning midtribulation raptures or partial or multiple raptures, but the exact eschatology of the rapture is not the point here. Let

the reader receive this principle: Our rapture will be the completion, culmination, and consummation of our maturity in the divine life. We can die in an immature condition and go to be with the Lord in Paradise, as many already have done. We can even be resurrected to stand before Him in an immature state, and indeed many believers will do just that. However, we cannot be raptured in an immature condition. To be raptured requires our full growth in life, including our transformation and conformation to His image. Only when we are matured and conformed to the glorious image of Christ will we be ripe and ready for the harvest at the end time. Let us receive this light and governing vision from the New Testament, and let us be desperate in these last days to pay the price, cooperate with the Lord, and gain Him to the fullest degree for our maturity in His life. Then we may look to Him for His coming, and we shall be ready, prepared, and qualified to be raptured into His presence.

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