

23rd Sunday After Pentecost, October 16, 2005, Liturgical Year "A"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: 1 Thess. 1:9-10; Rev. 6

"The Great Rescue: Are You Ready?"

WILL YOU BE LEFT BEHIND?

At the end of this week the premiere of the movie "Left Behind: The World at War" will be shown in many churches across the country. This Christian based movie is from the best-selling "Left Behind" series of books. The series deals with the premise that before the end times there will be a "rapture" of believers and then a period of time known as the Great Tribulation during which the "Antichrist" will rise to power culminating in a cataclysmic conflict known in the Bible as "Armageddon" and then the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those "left behind" to deal with such hardship are those not taken by the "rapture."

The idea of the rapture is popular in many churches in the United States. Usually you will find it taught in Baptist, Pentecostal, Independent Bible, and Non-denominational churches. In fact, some of you may have seen the bumper sticker that says: "***Warning: In case of the rapture, this car will be unmanned.***" Actually I like the bumper sticker that reads, "***Warning: In case of the rapture this car will swerve as my mother-in-law takes the wheel.***"

So where does the term "rapture" come from? The term is actually not found in the Bible but comes from the Latin word "rapere," which means rapid and is used to translate the Greek expression, "caught up" in **1 Thessalonians 4:17**. Read **1 Thess. 4:15-18**. So the idea is that God will rapture all believers on earth before He pours out His wrath upon the earth. We will be "caught up" or translated from this world into heaven.

Now I think we can see why the rapture theory is so popular. Who wouldn't want to leave this earth before things get really bad? But what does the Bible have to say concerning God's wrath and His rescue? Please turn with me to our second lesson, taken from 1 Thessalonians. Here we have a foundational passage for understanding what will be coming and what we should be doing in the meantime. In this passage the Apostle Paul commends the believers in Thessalonica and writes: "***...how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, who He raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.***" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.)

THE WRATH TO COME

I want us to first look at the last part of the passage – "***Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.***" Dark days are coming to this planet. Days are coming that will make what is going on now look like a Sunday school picnic. Paul is not talking about the wrath that is coming, but he says the wrath that IS coming. The prophet Daniel wrote "***There shall come a time of anguish, such as never occurred since nations first came into existence. (Daniel 12:1)***" Our Lord Jesus Christ referred to this same time when He spoke of the things that would happen before His second coming. He said in **Mt. 24:21-22**: "***For at that time there will be great tribulation (also translated "suffering"), such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.***"

Think about that for a moment; a time that never has been and never will be. And except those days be shortened, no one would be saved. In other words, if God in His mercy didn't cut those days short, everybody would be destroyed. It is this time period that is often referred to as the "Great Tribulation," as indicated by Jesus' own words.

Now let's turn to **Rev. 6:16-17** the Apostle John speaks of a time when *"all the peoples of the earth will be calling on the mountains to fall on them to hide them from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"* The answer, of course, is no one.

Now many believers equate the Great Tribulation with God's wrath. But the simple truth is that all the suffering that happens in the Great Tribulation is not the result of God's wrath being poured out. In other words, we're going to see that the Bible doesn't necessarily indicate an early rapture because much of what happens in the Great Tribulation is man's doing. In fact, let's look at what precedes **Rev. 6:15-17**.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

John first sees a book with seven seals. The first seal is opened and John says, *"And I looked and behold, a white horse and he that sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him; and he went forth conquering, and to conquer."* (**Rev. 6:2**). A white horse speaks of victory. We find later in **Rev. 19:11** that John sees Christ riding a white horse but the rider here in this vision isn't Christ, rather it is a false Christ. This is a person imitating the Lord Jesus. The bow is a weapon of war. It symbolizes strength and power. A crown means having authority and dominion. So this leader comes to conquer and rule. And all the earth will follow him.

And if you really think about it, the white horse is being formed right now. It's called the one world government. We see all the pieces of the puzzle coming together: fast travel, free trade, instant communication, common currencies. We hear more and more of terms like globalism and the global village. The Internet unlike anything else is making us a global community. We now have a generation that does not worship Father God but worships Mother Earth. Now we have earth day. We are told our children cannot celebrate Easter, but they can celebrate Earth Day.

After the white horse, John's sees a red horse: *"And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men should slay one another; and a great sword was given to him."* (**Rev. 6:4**). In other words, war will break out as hatred inflames men's hearts. Jesus warned that there would be wars and rumors of wars. The world will have rejected the Prince of Peace, and so Jesus will step aside.

And then John sees the third seal opened and there is a black horse: *"And I looked and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay and three quarts of barely for a day's pay and do not harm the oil and the wine.'" (Rev. 6:5).* During those days, there will be famine, and food will carefully rationed out. In other words, people will have to work just to survive. And yet, there still will be those who are rich and will say "do not hurt the oil or the wine."

And then John sees the pale green horse: *"And I looked and behold a pale green horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. And authority was given to*

them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.” (Rev. 6:8). The Greek word that we translate as pale green is “*chloros*” – the same root word for chlorine. It means a ghastly green. It speaks of putrefaction and death. The Bible says over a quarter of the world’s population will be killed during this time. And so we have the coming of the Antichrist, war, hunger, and death, and Hades (hell) followed after them. And on top of all that, the fifth seal is opened and John sees the martyrs – those murdered for their belief in the Lord.

Now what we have just seen isn’t God’s wrath upon man, but rather man’s wrath towards man. It is only after such conflict that God’s wrath will be poured out. Then there will be cosmic disturbances in the heavens and natural disturbances on earth (the sixth seal). Then there will be the final conflict of Armageddon. These days will be so terrible, so horrible that men would rather die than live. But listen, we need not be afraid, God has not destined us for wrath; He has destined us for salvation. And He will rescue all the saints. But the question is when? We don’t know exactly when.

THE WAIT FOR JESUS

And that’s why there is to be an expectant wait. We are always to be waiting for Christ’s return and rescue. St. Paul said we are “*to wait for His Son from heaven.*” Now some believe in a pre-tribulation, others a mid-tribulation and others a post-tribulation rapture. Either way we are to be waiting for the Lord Jesus. We have already seen that terrible times are coming; times when mankind turns completely away from God. And yet, the Bible promises that we will be delivered and we are to wait for this deliverance, this rescue. But we need to be ready.

The Apostle Paul wrote in **1 Thess. 5:1-4, 9:** “*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, “There is peace and security,” then suddenly destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman and there will be no escape! But you are in darkness for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light...So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but lets us keep awake and be sober...For God has not destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with Him.*”

Our Lord Jesus Christ warned in **Mt. 24:36-42:** “*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father of Man. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*”

And so we need to stop just looking for signs and start looking up. We need to be waiting for Jesus to come. He is going to come as surely as He went away. But there is something else that we need to be doing while we wait.

THE WORK TO BE DONE

The Apostle Paul commended the Thessalonian believers because they “*were examples to all that believe.*” There is the wrath, there is the wait, but there is also the work to be done. What was the example that they set for us? What was the work they were to do? **Verse 9** tells us: “*how (they) turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God*”

How do we wait on the Lord? We are to serve the living and true God. And how do we serve the living and the true God? You turn from idols. Some may think, well I don’t have any idols. An idol is anything you love more, trust more, or serve more than God. America is filled with idols; we’ve just changed the names. The ancients used to have an idol named Bacchus that was the idol of drunkenness. America is serving that idol. They had idols called Aphrodite and Venus. They were the goddesses of lust and sensuality; the world is serving those idols today. They had a god they called Mars. That was the god of violence. The world is serving that idol today. They had an idol they called Sophia – that was the goddess of knowledge and sophistication. The world is serving that idol today. They had an idol they called mammon - money and riches. The world is serving that idol today.

And so if we expect Jesus to come we need to turn from idols and serve the living and true God. That’s why it’s not enough to know Bible prophecy, we need to be waiting for Jesus with anticipation. We are to be longing for Jesus, looking to Jesus, learning from Jesus and loving Jesus. And as His coming gets nearer, we should be moving upward in our focus and in our life. You see it is one thing to expect Him; it is another thing to anticipate Him.

There were two people waiting for a train to come at the train station. One was the stationmaster, the other a young lady. The stationmaster knew exactly when the train was to arrive. He knew the number of the train. He knew the engineer. He knew the number of cars. He knew the passengers. He knew all those facts because he had his chart and he had his schedule. The young lady, on the other hand, did not know nearly as much as the stationmaster knew, but the young lady had her fiancé on that train. She was waiting for *him* to come because they were going to get married and hopefully live forever after.

You see we don’t study Christ’s return like a train schedule. We’re not just trying to get facts in our head; we are anticipating the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the heavenly bridegroom. We’re going to be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. What a day that will be! God forbid that we should be careless and carnal, and selfish and sleeping when the Lord comes. The Bible says “*every man that has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure.*” (1 Jn. 3:3). We are waiting on the bridegroom. We are waiting on Jesus. And it will be Jesus who will rescue us. That’s the reason the last prayer in the Bible is “*Even so come Lord Jesus.*” (Rev. 22:20).

“They turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” May that be true of us, today, and always. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!