

**THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**

August 12, 2007  
No. 3371

*The Final Gathering of the Church*  
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Dear radio friends,

**W**hat will happen when Jesus comes again? That question is answered, in part, in the passage we have chosen out of I Thessalonians. We read in I Thessalonians 4:13-18: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which 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. Wherefore comfort one another with these words." In

these verses the apostle Paul is not interested in *all* the events that take place on that day of Christ's return. He concentrates his attention on those events that pertain to the gathering in of the elect church. He does not focus on the destruction of the creation or on the resurrection of the wicked in that day. Paul intends to answer one question: How will God, through Christ, gather His church to Himself in that day of Christ's coming? And the reason for this is to comfort the hearts of the saints in Thessalonica, and our hearts today too.

You see, because of their ignorance of the final resurrection, the saints in Thessalonica were mourning over the death of their loved ones as those who had no hope. The thought that their loved ones would in no way participate in the victory and glory of the final gathering in of the church bothered them. Their loved ones were dead and buried, never to see in their bodies the great Day of the Lord. So Paul, in order to comfort God's people, instructs them

in the blessed truth of the final resurrection. Not only those who are alive and remain on the earth will be present when Christ returns, but the entire church, from the beginning of time to the end of time, will be present in that day—even the saints that long ago have died and whose bodies are long gone. When Christ returns, then His shout will go forth, and the dead in Christ shall rise. Their bodies, reunited with their souls, will be taken with all God's saints to heaven. Such is the fact of that great and notable day. All God's people, those living when Christ comes again and those who have died, will all participate in the gathering in of the church.

But there is a significant part of this passage that we have not yet covered. And that is the manner of this gathering in of the church. How will Christ gather together the church at the end of time? And what will be the order of events in that day? This, too, Paul lays

out for us, especially in verses 16 and 17 of the verses that we read. This, and the great comfort that all this affords us in life and death, will be the focus of our attention in this broadcast.

What will happen when Christ returns? What will be the order of events in that day? As clear as these verses are, we must bear in mind that there will be much happening in that final day of Christ's return. To attempt to order each one exactly and to understand just how all these events could possibly happen in a day, almost simultaneously, is difficult.

Perhaps this is so because in that day, time will be swallowed up in eternity. And it is hard to understand the order of events, especially when we start speaking of eternity. Nevertheless, the events that are involved in the gathering in of the

church in our text are clear enough.

Christ shall literally return to the earth, even as He went up. When Christ ascended into heaven, He did so by merely floating up into the sky and disappearing into the

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clouds. And while the disciples were staring after Him, two angels appeared and made this promise (Acts 1:11): "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come *in like manner* as ye have seen him go into heaven." When Christ returns finally at the end of time, it will be in contrast with His ascension. Instead of seeing Him ascend into the heavens, as did the disciples, we will see Him descending from heaven. That is what Paul also teaches us in verse 16 of this passage, the very first part: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven." Jesus Himself instructs us in Luke 21:25-28 that when all the events of that day begin to transpire, then we should look up, that is, cast our eyes to heaven, because it is from heaven that our final redemption comes.

The miracle of that day, of course, is that when Christ descends, all the world will see Him. His coming will shine as the lightning from the east unto the west and every eye shall behold that coming. This means that when Christ returns He will not come to stand in any particular place or locale on the earth itself. No specific country will receive that honor. In verse 17 we learn that the saints will be gathered together and shall be caught up into the clouds to

meet Christ in the air. The picture that the words of this passage draw for us, then, is that Christ shall descend from heaven and remain in a certain point in the skies where all will be able to behold His presence. And from there, from that vantage point, He will gather together all His church. Even this, of course, implies a miracle beyond all human comprehension. But it is there that Christ shall stand in the sphere of the earth and shall gather His own unto Himself.

There will be three signs that will accompany that return of Christ to the earth. These are recorded for us in verse 16: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first." With Christ's visible return, we shall hear three things: a great shout, the voice of an archangel, and the sound of a trumpet blowing.

Now, before going into these individually, we must understand the significance of them. These sounds herald the gathering in of the church. That is the significance of these signs from Old Testament history itself. In Leviticus 10, we learn that Moses made for himself two

beautiful silver trumpets. These silver trumpets were made for the particular purpose of calling the people of Israel together unto an assembly. We notice in particular in verses 1-3 of Numbers 10 concerning this whole matter: "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Make thee two trumpets of silver; of a whole piece shalt thou make them: that thou mayest use them [and here is the significance of these trumpets] for the calling of the assembly, and for the journeying of the camps. And when they shall blow with them, all the assembly shall assemble themselves to thee at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation."

The instruction of this chapter in Numbers does not stop here. There was something else of significance that took place in Israel at that time. When the children of Israel gathered together to depart from a particular camp, a shout went forth. In verses 35 and 36 of Numbers 10 we read, "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee. And when it rested, he said, Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel." Here, too, we

find that Moses' shout was an indication that the church as a whole was to take up its journey toward the promised land.

Now, at the end of time, these same signs accompany the gathering in of the church of Jesus Christ. First of all, we read that a shout will be heard. Literally, this term shout means "command." A command will be heard. And that command will proceed out of the very mouth of Jesus Christ Himself. It will be an effectual command that will set the events of the gathering in of the church in motion. It is a command that will cause the dead in Christ to rise. Christ will shout forth, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead." But that shout of Christ shall also be a command to His angels that they now go forward and gather together all the saints that are still alive on earth and waiting for Christ's return to journey to that heavenly land of Canaan.

This latter task of gathering the saints still living at Christ's return, we learn from Matthew 24:31, will be fulfilled by the angels. That explains as well why the voice of the archangel will be heard in the day of Christ's return. The archangel is an angel of higher rank among the angels, prob-

ably the highest rank. That archangel will take charge of the sending out of the angels in an organized manner to gather together all the saints that are yet alive on the earth unto the assembling together of the church.

As we have noticed already, the sound of the trumpet will be a summons, too. The church will recognize the meaning of that sound and, when it is heard, all the saints will be waiting, even preparing themselves, for that greatest assembly of the saints in heaven.

These are the signs, then, that accompany the coming of Christ from heaven to the earth.

There is more, of course. There will be a certain orderly way that the saints are gathered. We are told in verse 16 that the “dead in Christ shall rise first.” And then in verse 17, “Then we which are alive and remain” will be gathered together. Verse 15 points that out to us as well. We read there: “We which are alive and remain...shall not prevent them which are asleep,” that is, “will not precede those that are asleep.” That is what that term means, literally. “We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep.” In other words,

the gathering in of the dead in Christ shall precede the gathering in of those that are yet alive at Christ’s coming.

Again, although this is so hard to understand, because all these events are rushing in upon themselves, evidently the order of events would be something like this. When Christ’s shout goes forth, with the sound of the trumpet, the dead in Christ shall rise from the dead out of the graves and be gathered with Christ in the air where He is performing His work. At the same time, the angels will be sent out by Christ to do their work. These will gather together the saints who are still living—while the dead in Christ are ascending into the air to be with Christ. We are taught in verse 17: “We which 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.” In this way God will bring, through Jesus and with Jesus, both those who are dead in Christ and those who are yet alive at His coming, to be with Him in the air, and He will take the entire church to be with Him forever in heaven.

Those are the events of that day.

The explanation of this passage of God’s Word is

simple and plain enough. It is. But there are those who grossly misconstrue what this passage teaches. Some teach that there are several comings of Christ before the end of the world comes. The second coming of Christ, they say, will be what is called "the rapture." This will be a quick, unexpected, secret coming of Jesus, which will gather together only the church saints, that is, the saints that are called church in the new dispensation, and yet will not include the gathering together of the kingdom people of the Old Testament. Of this, this passage, they say, makes reference—a sudden return of Christ in rapture. These New Testament believers of the church will then go to live with Christ in the air for a period of seven years. And during that seven years there will be a great persecution in the earth. And through that persecution others will be brought to Christ, especially the Jews. Then Christ will return again with His New Testament saints, who were with Him somewhere in the air these seven years, and then Christ will establish at that point an earthly kingdom, where He will sit upon His throne on earth and will reign for a thousand years. After that thousand years He will be taken up to heaven again and the wicked will come to do

battle with this kingdom of Christ. In this battle the wicked will be destroyed and the final resurrection of the wicked unto hell will take place. And then at that time Christ will *again* return and usher in His eternal kingdom in heaven.

Now there are all kinds of different views that stand in connection with this, some speaking of Christ's return three or four times at the end of time.

We repudiate the complicated and far-fetched teachings of the premillennialists. Not only does this stretch the simple meaning of this passage of God's Word but it reads into this passage what simply is not there.

First of all, nowhere in these verses is there a separation made between the kingdom people of God in the old dispensation and the church of the new dispensation. That distinction is forced on this passage and is not supported by any Scripture. All are church. And God gathers His church from the beginning of time to the end of time.

Secondly, where does this passage speak of a secret, quiet return of Christ to gather His people in a rapture? There is recorded in this passage an open, visible, even loud return

of Christ. He descends with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of a trumpet. Christ does not silently snatch away His church to live with Him for a period of seven years in the air. He takes them to be with Him *forever*, this passage says. And not in the *air!* What a strange idea anyway. Who would live in the air somewhere for seven years? But the Bible certainly speaks of heaven, and that God's people will be taken with Jesus Christ at the end of time to be with Him forever in heaven.

So the instruction of this passage is clear and simple. And because it is, it provides for God's people of every age unspeakable comfort.

Now, let us not forget that these verses are practical in nature. Scripture here is meant to give comfort to God's people. And when we properly understand the events of the day of Christ's coming, this Word of God *does* provide the greatest of comfort. That is why Paul gives us the instruction of verse 18: "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." What words? Well, the words we have been considering. The dead in Christ shall rise, and shall take part in that final gathering in of

the church. Christ has become for us who are in Him, the resurrection and the life. God will indeed fulfill His purpose to take us to be with Christ in heaven. Our death will not prevent our awaking

at the end of time to the wonderful glory that awaits the church of J e s u s C h r i s t . The dead only sleep, Paul says.

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How do these words provide comfort for us? Well, what does this word say? If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also those that sleep will God bring with Him. Death and the grave are bitter enemies. They are harsh and hard, because they rob us of our loved ones. They take away the love and the fellowship that we shared with them in this life. How we hate to say our "good-byes" when a loved one is slowly taken from us in death. How we hate it that we could not say "good-bye" when a loved one is snatched from us suddenly by the hand of death. And the grave—how final it seems. When the bodies of our loved ones are left by the graveside, we know that we will never

see them again in this life. Many of us have experienced that death in one way or another—a grandfather or mother, a husband or a wife, a mother or a father. Maybe these were even taken from us while they were young. We know that God does not limit that to the old. He can claim an infant, a child, or even a teenager. And how death can hurt.

And it is in that time of our lives that the words of this passage provide for us the greatest of all comforts. Someday we, together with our loved ones, will stand before Jesus Christ. There will be no more death or the grave. These will have been finally conquered. We will stand, body and soul, alive and with each other. And all the saints will be taken into heaven. Our parting at death is only temporary, only for a short time. Death and the grave can actually serve us by transforming our vile and earthly bodies into that which is glorious and spiritual.

And it is with that hope that we lay our loved ones to rest in the grave. Do we mourn? Oh, yes! We do mourn. Sometimes we cry our hearts and souls out. But we are led to that hope, through the comfort of our fellow saints. That is why Paul says, “Comfort one

another with these words.” We are led there by our fellow saints. And we take turns, sometimes, doing that. We will not be left forgotten in the grave. We suffer silently because we rest assured in the final resurrection and the final gathering in of the church. We look forward to that one day. We patiently long for it. It will come. What a glorious day that will be, when my Jesus comes for me! A great rejoicing will be ours. Be still, my soul. Christ comes again. With uplifted head, I long for that coming. I pray for it.

And then we will see our final salvation, and forever we shall be with our Lord.

Let us pray together.

O Lord, our God and Father in heaven, we thank Thee that we can look forward to that final coming of our Lord Jesus Christ when we will be gathered together with all of Thy saints and taken to be with Thee forever in heaven. We pray that Thy Word might comfort us when we experience death and the loss of a loved one. We thank Thee for the resurrection of the body and for life everlasting. Forgive us of all sin, and guide us now in Thy grace. For Jesus' sake, Amen.