

Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

Study #9: "Caught to Heaven!" (Revelation 4:1-14)

Have you ever wished you could see into the future? You know, gain a little insider information or assurance that you and your loved ones will be safe and secure five or ten, or twenty years from now? Those wishes, of course, fall into the category of fantasy or science fiction, because no one, no matter what they claim can tell you what tomorrow holds. But still aren't there at least a few things you'd like to know about the future? For example, I'd like to know when the Seattle Mariners will finally win the World Series, or at least play in it? I'd also like to know when the next economic crash is coming, so I can invest our savings in the wisest way possible? But most of all, I'd like to know what our grandson Malcolm will be doing twenty-five years from now and what our granddaughter Moriah will look like in her wedding gown! Because given my family's medical history, it isn't likely that I'm going to be here twenty-five years from now! In fact, given the anti-God direction our world has taken, it is quite possible that none of us will be here twenty-five years from now, because Jesus is coming soon!

The Bible, of course, condemns all occultic attempts to see into the future. Moses warns in Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." So with all the passion and compassion within me, I say, "Burn your Ouija Boards, your tarot cards, your horoscopes, and no more credit card calls to the psychic hotline, because all these things are under the curse of God and act as an open invitation to the devil and his demons. Therefore what Moses tells us to focus on are the things God has revealed. Those are the things we are to treasure and teach to our children and grandchildren, so they too will love the Lord and obey all His commandments. At the same time, however, God doesn't want us to be entirely ignorant about the future. We're His friends. So the most important things He has revealed to us in order to inspire our faith and faithfulness. One of those things is His promise to send Jesus Christ into our world again, this time to reward the righteous, punish evildoers, and set up a kingdom of righteousness that will never end. And I realize that may sound very general to you, because what you're interested in is what the future holds for you. But God has revealed that too!

In fact, that's the focus of our study today. In Revelation chapter 4, God opens a portal into the future, revealing what you and I will be doing very soon if we love the Lord Jesus Christ as we claim. The Apostle John, who has just finished writing seven letters to seven churches in Asia, is suddenly interrupted, and like only three other believers in all of history, is caught up to heaven where he witnesses what the church will be doing next. By the way, can you name the three other believers who visited heaven while still living? That's right! Enoch, Elijah, and the Apostle Paul. We can't pass through that portal with him today, but we too can witness what he saw and look forward to the day when the entire church will be caught up together to heaven.

By way of pre-travel information, let me remind you that Revelation chapter 4 begins the third major section of this book. In Revelation 1:19, John was told to "write the things you have seen" (His vision of the glorified Christ), "the things which are" (the conditions and actions of the churches on earth), and "the things which will take place after this." That is where John

picks up the action in this study. He says in verse 1, “After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven.” In other words, what we’re about to witness is the future of the church, not on earth, but in heaven. In particular, we’re going to be see ourselves in the very near future worshipping around the throne of God. To clarify why I say that and what will be involved, there are two key questions I want to answer in this study, each one a major help in explaining the next event on God’s prophetic calendar. The first question is this—

1. Where Will the Church Be During the Tribulation?

Because beginning very soon in Revelation 6, God is going to pour out His judgment on the earth, and it’s important to know where we the church will be at that time. That, by the way, is the big controversy in prophetic circles today. Some insist that the church will remain on earth throughout the Tribulation undergoing the wrath of God. Others say we’ll only suffer the first 3 ½ years of judgment and then be taken out of the world before “the great tribulation” begins. But I, for one, don’t believe that either one of those views is accurate. John’s experience indicates that the church will be removed from earth to heaven before “these future things” begin.

A. The “Rapture” of John

John recalls in verses 1, “After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.’ Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne.”

Four important facts are revealed about heaven here. First, it reminds us that there is a door to heaven. People wonder and atheists scoff, “Where is heaven? After all, we’ve been to the moon, sent satellites to the end of the solar system, and have telescopes that penetrate the deepest recesses of the universe. But we’ve never found heaven!” You may remember that that was the comment of the Soviet cosmonauts when they orbited the earth. They said, “We have been in outer space, and we didn’t find God!” But that shouldn’t have surprised them. Man can search the universe from one end to the other, and he’ll never find God. Why? Because heaven is a different dimension, and there’s a door to it which remains firmly shut. One day it will open briefly to admit the church. And later, Revelation 19:11 reveals, it will open wide to let the King of glory and His holy retinue return to earth. But, and this is the second fact, there is only one way into heaven, and that’s through Jesus Christ who said, “I am the Door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.” (John 10:9)

A third truth is also pictured here. A change is required to enter heaven. The phrase, “I was in the Spirit” means more than being Spirit-filled. “Was” should be translated, “became.” Nor is the definite article “the” found in the original language. In other words, John is saying, “I entered the spiritual realm.” That explains how he was caught up so quickly to heaven. His was not a physical journey through space. It was a spiritual change to another dimension.

By the way, the Bible says a similar change is required of us. First, an inner change is necessary. Jesus said, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” There is also an outer change which is necessary. 1 Corinthians 15:50 adds, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” For Paul explains, “this corruptible must put on incorruption, and

this mortal must put on immortality.” Paul is describing the glorification of our bodies which will take place “in the twinkling of an eye” when Jesus returns for us at the Rapture.

But the most important truth pictured here is the church’s removal from the earth to heaven. The theological term for this event is the Rapture. 1 Thessalonians 4:16 describes it like this: “The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will 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.” That’s where we get the term “rapture.” It comes from the Latin word *rapare*, meaning to be “caught up.” That same word could have been used to describe John’s experience. For after hearing a voice from heaven and the sound of a trumpet, he was literally “caught up” to the throne of God. What was that to symbolize? We cannot be dogmatic about it. But I think it’s a picture of the church being caught up to heaven, that after the “church things” found in chapters 2 and 3 and immediately prior to the Tribulation events of chapters 5 through 19, the church will be safely removed from earth to heaven, so they do not suffer God’s judgment of unbelievers.

You say, “Is there any evidence besides John’s ‘Rapture’?” There are many evidences. Let me mention just four at this point. First, as we learned in Revelation 3:10, Jesus promised His church that He would deliver them “the hour of trial which is about to come upon the whole world to test those who dwell upon the earth.” And here there are two other evidences.

B. The Conspicuous Absence of the Church on Earth.

Up until now, the church has been the central focus of Revelation. 19 times in chapters 2 and 3, the word “church” was used. But no longer! From now on, there is absolutely no mention of the church on earth. That is hard to explain if the church is still on earth when the Tribulation begins. After all, wouldn’t you expect some word from Jesus to let us know how the church is weathering the Tribulation if they are still on earth? But the rest of the Revelation is absolutely silent on the matter. The only other reference to the church in Revelation comes in chapter 19, following the Tribulation, at which time we will return to the earth in glory and victory with the Lord Jesus Christ. Those are just three of the reasons I believe the church will be raptured prior to the Tribulation—the promise of Revelation 3:10, John’s symbolic experience, and the conspicuous absence of the church on earth. But the most important and impressive argument is reason #3—

C. The Description of the Twenty-Four Elders in Heaven

John continues in verse 4, “Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments with golden crowns on their heads.” Who are these twenty-four elders? Many opinions have been given. But those of us who have studied chapters 2 and 3 have no problem identifying them. Three details make their identity clear. First, they’re sitting in God’s presence. That’s something never said about angels. Angels do not sit; they stand in God’s presence. But in Revelation 3:22, Jesus promised this to His church, “The one who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne.” Second, they are wearing white robes. And twice in His letters to the churches, Jesus said, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments.” Third, they are wearing crowns on their heads. This was Jesus’ promise to His church in Revelation 2:10, “Be faithful until death and I will give you the

crown of life.” So it’s very clear who the twenty-four elders are. In fact, there’s no question about it. They are a picture of the church worshipping together at the throne of God.

Why is that important? First, it reminds us that Jesus will keep everyone one of His promises. Second, it reveals that the Church will already be judged, rewarded, and rejoicing in God’s presence when the judgments of the Tribulation begin. And that ought to do two things for us: 1) It ought to fill us with relief, joy, and gratitude knowing that we won’t have to endure the suffering of the Tribulation; and 2) It ought to fill us with soberness knowing that the first order of business when Jesus returns will be to judge us for the things done in our bodies. 2 Corinthians 5:10 warns us, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, whether good or bad.”

Now my question: Will you be ready for that day? The story is told of Queen Victoria, how at an early age her parents wanted her to know that one day she might become queen of the British Empire. So they instructed her governess to explain it to her. She, in turn, inserted in the princess’ history book a listing of the Hanoverian rulers, at the end of which she wrote the name “Victoria.” The governess then watched as the little princess studied her lesson. When she read down the list and found her name, she looked up and asked with surprise, “Is it true that I may become the Queen of England?” He governess replied, “Yes, in all likelihood you will.” After a pause, Victoria said thoughtfully, “Then I must be very good.”

Friends, the same is true of us. The Bible says that one day Jesus is coming back to take us to His throne in heaven, where He’ll give us crowns and robes and other honors. So how do we prepare for that day? 1 John 2:28 says, “And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” That is to say, given where and what we’ll be forever, the only choice that makes sense today is to be very good for Him. That’s where the Church will be during the Tribulation—gathered around the throne of God in heaven. Now let’s answer a second important question.

2. What Will the Church Be Doing during the Tribulation?

John’s vision suggests two answers. First—

A. We’ll Be Seeing Things We’ve Never Seen Before.

Back up to verses 2 and 3 for a moment. John says, “Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne like an emerald in appearance.” And he continues in verses 5 and 6, “Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.”

God’s throne is to heaven what the North Star is to sailors on earth. It’s the one sure reference point to which everyone looks for direction. As we peek over John’s shoulder, four sights will grab our attention. 1) We will see flashes of lightning and thunder. This is a symbol of

the judgment about to pour forth from God's throne. 2) We will see the most beautiful rainbow that's ever been seen. This is a symbol of God's mercy in the midst of judgment—that just as He once destroyed the world with water but saved Noah and his family (of whom we're all a part), so He'll judge the world a second time with fire but save a countless multitude of sinners. 3) We will see a sea of glass like crystal. Ancient kings often paved the area in front of their thrones with marble or another special stone to set themselves apart from their subjects. This too is a sign of God's majesty. 4) We will see four living creatures. Who are they? A comparison with Ezekiel's prophecy reveals that these are cherubim—a special class of angels who guard the holiness of God. In fact, Ezekiel 28 says that this was Lucifer's position before his fall. He was a covering cherub who guarded the holiness of God. What a fall came from his pride!

B. We'll Be Worshiping in Ways We've Never Before Worshiped.

First, we'll worship without the help of human leaders. Today we're dependent on pastors to teach us, worship leaders to guide us, and musicians to inspire us. But one day none of that will be necessary. For one thing, our worship will be led by four cherubim who's been worshiping from the dawn of creation. Verse 8 says, "And the four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night saying, 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come! Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever.'" But even more to the point is the fact that our worship will be spontaneous. No longer will we see through a glass darkly and worship based on what we've read or heard from others. Then we will see face to face, rendering all human leadership needless.

Second, we'll worship without distraction or pride. Today, no matter how sincere our efforts, something usually sneaks in to spoil our worship—a little worry or doubt, a jealous or impure thought, or even a whisper of congratulations from our enemy. "You ought to be proud of yourself! Look how well you're worshiping now!" But there'll be no hint of impurity or pride then! All the glory will go to Jesus Christ alone. Even the crowns we've been rewarded will be cast at His feet in worship. And we'll say, "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created."

Again, Queen Victoria provides the example. One of her advisors, Dean Farrar, told of a conversation they had after hearing one of the queen's chaplains give a sermon on the Second Coming of Christ. "Oh, Dean," the queen exclaimed, "how I wish He'd come in my lifetime!" "Why does your Majesty feel this way?" he asked. Victoria's queenly countenance lit up with strong emotion as she replied, "Because I should so love to lay my crown at His feet."

Is that your impulse as you look forward to His coming? Are you looking forward to an opportunity to tell Him how unworthy you are but how good He is for saving you? Remember, that's why we're here. Not to collect personal accolades with which we can impress each other. We're here to declare His infinite worthiness and to adore Him for His grace.

Kierkegaard talked about this in his "Drama of the Worship Service." He said when many people come to church on Sunday, they think of themselves as the audience, the ministers as actors on the stage, and God as the prompter giving us cues for worship. That's the legacy of

television, by the way. It's trained us to think of ourselves as the audience, the ones everything is produced to please. So when we come to worship, the idea carries over. In fact, sometimes you can actually hear someone grumble after a worship service, "Boy, I sure didn't get much out of that!" Well, now you know how to answer them. Because what we do on Sundays isn't meant for our pleasure, because we aren't the audience! As Kierkegaard correctly explained, "We are the actors on the stage, the ministers are the prompters giving us cues for worship, and God is our great audience watching and listening for any sign of praise.

In fact, one of the things that's helped me worship is remembering where I am when we are worshiping. Hebrews 4:16 tells us that because of our High Priest, Jesus Christ, who passed into heaven, we should now "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." This means that even though our bodies remain on earth, our spirits have been transferred to another dimension. We're in the throne room of heaven worshipping in the presence of God. If that isn't enough to transform your worship, I don't know what is! Armin Gesswein, in his book "Seven Wonders of Prayer," writes:

"By prayer we enter into God's holy temple and penetrate at once to the throne of grace. Prayer is not only the shortest distance to God's mighty throne, it is the only way in! To think that this supreme wonder could take place so suddenly with one bold, blood-bought step! There we see the Lord Jesus ever living to pray for us and giving us His Spirit to pray with us. Glorious discovery. HE IS ONLY A PRAYER AWAY! The veil of sense and space that hides Him within His temple-universe is suddenly removed as we pray. We enter silently into His temple, and lo, suddenly we are before His throne—priests before our Great High Priest! There, too, we are suddenly in the presence of angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven we worship and adore Him. Only there do we discover the wonder of worship, that worship is before work, and that all His works are done in the spirit of worship. There are many churchgoers, but worshipers, because there are few pray-ers!"

But I hasten to add that the most glorious sight in all of heaven will be the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Verse 3 says of Him, "He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance." Jasper is a clear green stone that symbolizes the purity of Christ. The sardius, on the other hand, is a deep red stone reminding us of the blood of Christ that was shed to purify us from our sins. Both are finite human attempts to describe the infinite glory of God. But what is certain is that the presence of God is the most beautiful sight that human eyes can ever see.

Fanny Crosby, the prolific hymn writer, knew this. Asked on one occasion if she regretted being blind, she replied, "No. I wouldn't change a thing," and went on to say, "Even if God offered to restore my sight, I'd decline." Why? She explained, "The first thing I want to see when my sight is restored is the face of my Savior in heaven." That's what theologians call the Beatific Vision—the face of God in Christ, which is without question the most glorious sight that human eyes can ever see, so glorious John says in another place that it will instantly transform us into His likeness and should impact everything we think, do, or say. "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." 1 John 5:2-3