

Will you meet the Lord in the "Rapture" or in Reality?

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air... (I Thess. 4:17)

When we put together the concept of being caught up into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air together with the idea of an instantaneous transformation, the result is spine-tingling. We will suddenly one day just blast off into space... The hope of the Rapture is a very practical force in my life... It motivates me to win as many to Christ as possible before it is too late. I want to take as many with me as I can. Although I grieve over the lost world that is headed toward catastrophe, the hope of the Rapture keeps me from despair in the midst of ever worsening world conditions. (Hal Lindsey, The Rapture)1

Then, when the Antichrist is about to come, there will be many false christs and false prophets... So if the righteous were not sober-minded, even they would be deceived. But, behold, I have foretold these things to you; you have no excuse, for it is within your power not to be deceived...at the Second Coming He [Christ] will appear in a twinkling of an eye. And as the eagles, that is, the vultures, swiftly converge on a corpse, so to all the saints, who soar in the heights, will come where Christ will be and they will be snatched up into the clouds as the eagles. (The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of The Holy Gospel According to Matthew, ch. 23, verses 23-28)2

Whether our end comes during the reign of Antichrist or before, it is a certainty that the earthly life of each one of us will end. For all those who consider themselves to be Christians there is an expectation that if they have believed in Christ and have been faithful to His precepts they will in some manner meet the Lord and remain eternally in His presence.

As the culmination of Christian faith it is crucial that we understand first what Saint Paul was referring to by the phrase to be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, who in fact are those who will meet the Lord, and finally how one must truly prepare for this meeting. The differences in approach, attitude and belief between Protestant and Orthodox teachings on the Second Coming of Christ, our resurrection, and our means of sanctification as reflected in the above quotations reveal the great abyss separating the two faiths. Examining the Protestant-inspired doctrine of the Rapture allows us not only to develop an appropriate Orthodox Christian response to preparation for the reign of Antichrist, but also to soberly prepare for our own death. We will realize that the hope of "meeting the Lord" rests not in a simple proclamation of belief in Christ and acceptance of Him as Saviour within a community of like-minded "believers," but that the power of a discerning Orthodox Christian and his hope of meeting the Lord rest in the sacramental life of the true Church, in the worthy partaking of the actual Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, for it is through this partaking that we in reality meet the Lord, now and forever.

As outlandish and sensationalistic as Hal Lindsey's above comments may seem to some, they tap into a very strong current in American religious thought - apocalypticism and prophecy belief. Memories of the FBI's fiery confrontation in Waco, Texas almost two years ago with David Koresh, a Bible-quoting prophet of the apocalypse and his Branch Davidian followers still linger in our nation's consciousness. According to Gallup polls 62% of Americans believe that Jesus will literally return to earth, and there is a thriving audience eager to keep abreast of the latest insights of self-professed biblical interpreters as to how current historical events, i.e., wars, earthquakes, world financial crises, etc., portend the imminent return of Christ to rescue "believers" from the disasters brew ing on earth.3

The Rapture is just such a scheme for rescuing believers. It was a belief first espoused by John Nelson Darby, a 19th century British Plymouth Brethren preacher, and had a heavy influence on such prominent American Protestants as the evangelist D. L. Moody, founder of the Moody Bible Institute, C. I. Scofield, compiler of the Scofield Reference Bible, and the popular evangelist Billy Sunday, not to mention his present-day counterpart, Billy Graham. Indeed, Wacker claims, "it was the unique version of premillennialism nurtured by Darby and brought to these shores after the Civil War that helped form the doctrinal core of virtually all fundamentalist and many evangelical churches."⁴

While there are a number of variations in the details of the doctrine, (chiefly concerning when the Rapture will occur with respect to the Tribulation) as Lindsey notes, all who literally interpret the Bible believe in the fact of the Rapture. The doctrine of the Rapture is based on an interpretation of I Thessalonians 4:17 and refers to the coming of Christ for the Church in which He will instantly snatch up all living believers to meet Him in the air and translate them into immortal bodies without experiencing physical death.

A major reason for the popularity of this doctrine is that in a book on the Rapture you will not find much discussion of what happens to a person after he dies. Wacker observes, "Prophecy belief... allayed the fear of death. Hope for the resurrection life always had been an integral part of the Christian message. But this version of premillennialism offered a more radical promise: that the saints who were alive in Christ at the time of the Rapture would be spared the sting of death entirely." In his book *The Rapture* Hal Lindsey fairly gushes out the words, "The truly electrifying fact is that many of you who are reading this will experience this mystery. You will never know what it is to die physically."⁵

All who believe in the Rapture are premillennialists, that is, they believe that Jesus will return to earth and set up a 1,000 year earthly kingdom followed by a final judgment where all unbelievers will be condemned. This idea of a 1,000 year earthly kingdom is known as chiliasm (from the Greek *chiliasmós*, a thousand years) and was condemned as a heresy by the Orthodox Church in 381. Formally it is based on a misinterpretation of the twentieth chapter of Revelation which speaks of the souls.. who lived with Christ a thousand years (20:4). Archbishop Averky in commenting on this verse writes:

*From this it is clear that these saints who participate in the thousand-year reign of Christ are reigning with Christ and performing judgment not on earth but in heaven, for it speaks here only concerning their souls which are not yet united with their bodies. From these words it is evident that the Saints take part in the governing of the Church of Christ on earth, and therefore it is natural and proper to appeal to them with prayers, asking their intercession before Christ with Whom they reign.*⁶

Fr. Seraphim Rose forcefully refutes the notion of the Rapture and a millennial kingdom saying: *The Second Coming of Christ will be unmistakable: it will be sudden, from heaven and it will mark the end of this world. There can be no preparation for it save only the Orthodox Christian preparation of repentance, spiritual life, and watchfulness. Those who are preparing for it in any other way who say that he is anywhere here who preach that Jesus is coming soon without warning of the great deception that is to precede His Coming: are clearly the prophets of Antichrist, the false Christ who must come first and deceive the world, including all Christians who are not or do not become truly Orthodox. There is to be no future millennium. For those who can receive it, the millennium of the Apocalypse is now; the life of Grace is the Orthodox Church for the whole thousand years between the First Coming of Christ and the time of Antichrist. That Protestants should expect the millennium in the future is only their confession that they do not live in it in the present -that is, that they are outside the Church of Christ and have not tasted of Divine Grace.*⁷

A brief discussion of the Rapture will show how valid Father Seraphim's last words are. For instance, how does one become one of the believers taken up in the Rapture? One is made worthy by simply (verbally) accepting Christ as his Saviour and trusting that his sins are washed away by virtue of Christ dying on the Cross - the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. As Billy Graham writes, "You do not have to do some wonderful thing to be saved. All you have to do is accept the wonderful thing Christ has done for you. After you have this assurance in your heart, tell other people about it. Also show by your daily life that Christ has changed you for His own glory."⁸

Precious little else seems to be necessary to be taken up with Christ and accorded the blessings of eternal life. According to Lindsey, "We need not fear being judged by the Lord for the result of substitutionary atonement is we can't be condemned. The significance of all this as far as achieving victory over the flesh is concerned is that it gives us the right motivation for living for Christ. We don't have to walk in fear of being condemned and disowned for our sins. Satan just loves to get the Christian focused inward upon his sins and failures. Our motivation must not be duty, obligation, or fear of rejection."

The Protestant path to sanctification then involves no sense of struggle with sin, hence no need for real repentance, and no need for the Sacraments in order to be united with Christ for eternity. Furthermore, the Rapture is an eschatological doctrine, one that by definition should be concerned with death, judgment and the future of the soul. Yet books dealing with the Rapture devote very little space to these topics. There is little discussion about heaven or hell, indeed one cannot help but come to the conclusion that Christians who accept this doctrine are completely disassociated from the heavenly realm. From the beginning Protestantism has been so bound to the sensual world and the rational mind that it cannot accept the notion that one, for example, can pray for the dead or petition the saints in prayer. Lutheran scholars writing to the Patriarch of Constantinople in 1580 stated:

Therefore it is necessary for the living to pray for the living; and consequently, they can accomplish something. For we also pray for one another; and we are convinced, or rather, we perceive by reality that our prayer shall be heard. Therefore, this example cannot properly be applied to the saints who have died. For the saints, when they die, even if they indeed live in the presence of God according to the testimony of Christ, yet it does not follow from this that they know specifically each thing that was done by us on earth...

Given this Protestant preoccupation with the carnal, it should be no surprise then to read Billy Graham's idea of what the world to come will look like: It boggles the mind to try to imagine the kind of earth it is going to be when God eliminates the devil and sin. Our minds are staggered at the thought of 'Christ on the throne.' The great southward moving Sahara Desert of Africa will bloom and blossom. Mankind will be able to grow new foods; land that today is useless will grow twelve crops a year. The urge in man's heart toward immorality will have vanished. In that day the great drive in man will be a thirst for righteousness. It takes a great deal of faith in these days of despondency to believe this, but it is the clear teaching of the Bible.¹¹

This vision is no more than a projection of an earthly kingdom and reflects how ill-prepared Protestants are for the real life after death, and hence why so many are eager to accept any doctrine that lets them think they can avoid it.

The Orthodox Church on the other hand is rich in information about the afterlife. Let us first consider how Saint Paul's words from Thessalonians (from which the idea of the Rapture is derived) are interpreted in the light of Orthodox Tradition. This moment is most definitely understood as the Second Coming of

Christ and is immediately followed by the Last Judgment when all mankind will be assigned to their eternal resting places in either heaven or hell, depending on how they have conducted themselves in this life. At this time all people will be resurrected, and their souls reunited with their bodies; however, not all are going to be resurrected to glory. The New Testament mentions two different kinds of resurrection by use of Greek words that translate to "resurrection" and to "resurrection-from-out-of." Saint Theophylact of Bulgaria writes, "Whereas all men will be resurrected, but all will not have the... (resurrection-from-out-of). Indeed the sinners remain down on earth, awaiting the Judge. But the saints and the just, when they are gloriously resurrected, are caught up in the clouds, high in the air, in order to meet the Lord coming from the heavens to judge the world. For it is said: Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air (I Thess. 4:17)."12 How does one become one of those caught up? St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain states, "It should be noted that the glory and Grace of the Holy Spirit which the souls of the saints receive even while they are here... this same glory will cover and clothe their bare bodies in the resurrection and make them to be caught up to heaven."13 Saint Nicholas Cabasilas is even more specific:

Those who have the body of Christ within them will rush to Christ with an irresistible motion in order that they may receive their proper place. Accordingly Paul, as he shows that this rush cannot be restrained, called it a carrying up [rapture], for he says, we shall be carried off in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air... So they will move from one table to another, from that which is still veiled to that which is already manifested, from the bread to the Body. While they still live the human life Christ is bread for them, and He is their passover for they pass from here to the city which is in heaven... This earthly banquet brings us to that Body. Apart from it we cannot receive the Body, any more than it is possible for one to look at the light whose eyes have been gouged out... Accordingly, those who depart this life without the Eucharistic gifts will have nothing for that life. But those who have been able to receive the Grace and preserve it have entered into the joy of the Lord.14

So those who have worthily partaken of Communion and guarded that Grace will stand to glorify Christ at the Second Coming and will be in His presence for eternity. And what does it mean to worthily partake of Communion? St. Theodore of Studium admonishes us: "He who defiles his flesh is not a member of Christ; he who is rancorous is not a member of Christ and is unworthy of Communion; and neither is he who nourishes any other passion a member of Christ. Therefore everyone must examine himself and thus not be impure and rancorous. When he is cleansed and corrected through confession, then let him partake of the Body and Blood of Christ."15

In contrast to Protestantism as we said, Orthodox Tradition is full of material on the life to come. How vitally important it is for us to heed St. Theodore's words on struggling with the passions and living an earthly life of repentance becomes apparent when we consider what the Orthodox Church teaches on the soul after death.

There will be a Last Judgment of all men at the Lord's Second Coming where each will receive either their reward or punishment, but previous to this, each person at their death will go through a particular judgment and pass through the toll-houses. We find in the book, *The Soul After Death*:

After our redemption by Jesus Christ, "all who have openly rejected the Redeemer comprise the inheritance of satan: their souls, after the separation from the body, descend straight to hell. But Christians who are inclined to sin are also unworthy of being immediately translated from earthly life to blessed eternity. Justice itself demands that these inclinations to sin, these betray als of the

Redeemer should be weighed and evaluated. A judging and distinguishing are required in order to define the degree of a Christian soul's inclination to sin, in order to define what pre dominates in it - eternal life or eternal death. The unhyprocritical Judgment of God awaits every Christian soul after its departure from the body, as the holy Apostle Paul has said: It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27).

For the testing of souls as they pass through the spaces of the air there have been established by the dark powers separate judgment places and guards in a remarkable order. In the layers of the under-heaven, from earth to heaven itself, stand guarding legions of fallen spirits. Each division is in charge of a special form of sin and tests the soul in it when the soul reaches this division. The aerial demonic guards and judgment places are called in the Patristic writings the toll-houses, and the spirits who serve them are called the tax-collectors.¹⁶

The Orthodox Lives of the Saints contain numerous accounts of how the soul passes through the toll-houses after death. One such account of the Soldier Taxiotes (Lives of the Saints, March 28) is as follows:

When I was dying, I saw Ethiopians who appeared before me. Their appearance was very frightful; my soul beholding them was disturbed. Then I saw two splendid youths, and my soul leaped out into their arms. We began slowly to ascend in the air to the heights, as if flying, and we reached the toll-houses that guard the ascent and detain the soul of each man. Each toll-house tested a special form of sin: one lying, another envy, another pride; each sin has its own testers in the air. And I saw that the angels held all my good deed in a little chest; taking them out, they would compare them with my evil deeds. Thus we passed by all the toll-houses. And when, nearing the gates of heaven, we came to the toll-house of fornication, those who guard the way there detained me and presented to me all my fleshly deeds of fornication, committed from my childhood up to now. The angels who were leading me said: 'All the bodily sins which you committed in the city, God has forgiven because you repented of them.' To this my adversaries said to me: 'But when you left the city, in the village you committed adultery with a farmer's wife.' The angels, hearing this and finding no good deed which could be measured out for my sin, left me and went away. Then the evil spirits seized me and, overwhelming me with blows, led me down to earth. The earth opened, and I was let down by narrow and foul-smelling descents into the underground prison of hell.¹⁷

In an era when we hear so often that Christians who profess a belief in the Trinity are "all the same," whatever particular denomination they happen to belong to, our analysis of the Rapture makes it abundantly clear that this truism is simply not so. How, for example, do we account for these differences in eschatology between Orthodox Christianity and Protestantism?

While the specific doctrine of the Rapture is relatively recent, it is simply a symptom of the Protestant disease of vanity of the mind. A vainglory validated by their doctrine of sola scriptura (relying solely on the Bible as an authority), which allows for private interpretation of the Bible and replaces the mind of God, as expressed through the Church Fathers, with the mind of man. Saint Simeon the New Theologian writes of the dangers of private interpretation, "Especially do those who have gone astray in ignorance corrupt the meaning of divine Scripture and interpret it according to their lusts. For them the power of divine Scripture is inaccessible... One who has the whole of Divine Scripture on his lips cannot understand and attain to the mystical divine glory and power concealed in it if he will not fulfill the commandments of God and be vouchsafed to receive the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth Who might open to him the words of Divine Scripture as a book, and show him the mystical glory which is within them and might at the same time show the power and glory of God."¹⁸

Footnotes:

1. Lindsey, Hal. *The Rapture*, New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1985, p.46.
2. Theophylact, Blessed. *The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of The Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew, Vol.1*, House Springs, MO: Chrysostom Press, 1992, p.208.
3. Wacker, Grant, "Planning ahead: The enduring appeal of prophecy belief," *Christian century*, January 19, 1994, p.48.
4. *Ibid.*, p.49.
5. *The Rapture*, op. cit., p.43.
6. Averky, Archbishop. *The Apocalypse of St. John: An Orthodox Commentary*, Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1985, p.198.
7. Rose, Fr. Seraphim. *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1983, pp.214-215.
8. Graham, Billy. *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Waco, TX: WORD Books, 1983, p.205.
9. Lindsey, Hal., *Combat Faith*, New York: Bantam Books, 1986, p.176.
10. Mastrantonis, Fr. George. *Augsburg and Constantinople*, Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982, p.270.
11. Graham, Billy. *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1975, p.139.
12. Rallis, George, "Two Different Kinds of Resurrection in the New Testament," *Orthodox Life*, March-April, 1983, p.15.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
14. Cabasilas, St. Nicholas. *The Life in Christ*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974, p.146-148.
15. St. Theodore of Studium, "That We Must Communicate in the Most Pure Mysteries with Pure Thoughts," *Orthodox Life*, March-April, 1969, p.30.
16. Rose, Fr. Seraphim. *The Soul After Death*, Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1993, pp.65-66.
17. *Ibid.*, pp.75-76.
18. Rose, Fr. Seraphim, "How to Read the Holy Scriptures," *Orthodox America*, March, 1989, p.11.