

## THE LORD'S DEALING WITH THE BELIEVERS AT HIS COMING BACK

*Scripture Reading: Matt. 24:39b-44; 1 Thes. 4:15-17; 1 Cor. 15:50-54; 2 Thes. 2:1-4, 8; 1:5-10; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 2:25; 3:3; 16:15; 19:11-16; 22:7, 12*

All the verses in the Scripture Reading reveal how the Lord will deal with the believers at His coming back. The way will be **by judgment, by rapture, and by choosing**.

The rapture of the believers is likened to the harvesting of wheat. According to this picture, **the rapture is not something that can be accomplished all at one time**. In ancient times the harvest of the wheat was done in three stages: the firstfruits were gathered, the general harvest was gathered, and then the gleanings were gathered. According to this illustration, we can also see that the rapture is not something which will occur as an accident. Rather, **it comes as the result of the maturity of life**. If we are not mature in the Lord Jesus, surely we will not be reaped. As the Lord's crop of wheat on the earth, we need to be ripe, to be mature. Why has the Lord delayed His coming for such a long time? It is because of the lack of adequate maturity among His saints. **Our progress and maturity determine the speed of His coming. If we mature faster, surely His coming will be sooner. In a sense, we are not waiting for His coming; rather, He is waiting for us to be fully matured. We need the maturity of life.**

How can we be transferred from the reality of the kingdom into the manifestation of the kingdom? **It is only by the growth of life and maturity of life**. To use our illustration once more, the crop can be transferred into the barn only by growing and becoming ripe. Once the crop is ripe, it will be transferred into the barn. **We all need the maturity**. The proper maturity will issue in the transfer.

## THE GLORIFICATION OF OUR BODY

At the time of the transfer, there will also be the need of a kind of work by the Lord. **Philippians 3:20-21** tells us that at His coming back **He will transfigure our body, conforming it "to the body of His glory."** We have been regenerated in our spirit, and we are under the process of transformation in our soul. When the transformation has been completed, we will have the maturity of life. This means that **we will be ready to be reaped by the Lord Jesus, and He will come to change our body**. This is the point that must be worked out by the Lord. Suppose that you are a mature saint, regenerated in your spirit and transformed in your soul. You have been fully saturated and possessed by the Lord Jesus. What more do you need? **You need to have your body transfigured.**

We may use the apostle Paul for an example. As a saint who died in the Lord, he is sleeping until the time of his resurrection. While he was living on the earth, his spirit was fully occupied by the Lord, and his soul was fully saturated and occupied by the Lord. But today he is under the earth waiting for the transfiguration of his body. His body is still something old, something of the old creation. Although his spirit was regenerated and his soul was transformed, his dead body remains in the old creation. **When the Lord Jesus comes back, He will change the bodies of both the living saints and dead saints. Both the living ones and dead ones will be transfigured. The Lord will do a work of transfiguration upon our bodies.**

The application of the Lord's power to our bodies is, in a sense, the rapture. When the Lord Jesus will catch us away into the air, **He will not only move us positionally from the earth to the air, but He will also change our vile bodies into glorious ones**. Our vile bodies may be likened to ugly worms and our changed bodies to beautiful butterflies. Do not ask me what kind of glorious bodies we shall have. I do not know. But I do know that this vile body will be changed into a glorious one. I do know that our bodies will be like His resurrected body. After the Lord Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected, His physical body, the flesh, was transfigured into something that was still physical, yet mysterious and glorious.

**At His coming back this troublesome physical body will be transfigured into a wonderful, mysterious, and beautiful body.** At that time it will no longer be ugly. Both the brothers and sisters will be so pretty. At that time we will be as pretty and glorious as the Lord Jesus was after He was resurrected. That glory will be simply the Lord Himself. Christ within us is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). He Himself is the glory. **When He comes back, He will be glorified in us. This means that His glory will come out of us.** Today the glory of Christ is hidden and

concealed in our spirit and even confined within our soul. But at His coming back His glory will spread from within and saturate our whole body. This saturating of our body with the indwelling glory of the Lord Jesus will be the changing of our body. Do not think that the Lord Jesus will simply come from the heavens to change your body and catch you away. It will not occur in that way. Rather, the Lord Jesus will transfigure your body from within. He has already entered into your spirit and has begun to transform your soul. But there is one part of you which He has not yet saturated; that is your physical body. When He comes back, He will saturate your body and be glorified in you. This is the rapture. The rapture is not merely a kind of catching away into the air but a catching away with the transfiguration of the body. At the time He comes to catch us away, He will also come out of us and swallow up this body of death. Our body is subject not only to illness and disease but also to death. The Bible even calls it a body of death (Rom. 7:24). At the Lord's coming back this body of death will be swallowed up with life. According to **1 Corinthians 15:50-54**, our physical body of flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom. To inherit the kingdom we need another kind of body, a glorified body. Our body must be transfigured by being swallowed up by the Lord's life. Today the Lord within us is our life and our glory. One day this life will swallow up our body of death. Our whole body will be saturated, fully possessed, and fully transfigured by the Lord Jesus as our life and glory.

Many Christians consider that the rapture will occur as a kind of accident and a great surprise. Their thought is that while we are working here on the earth, suddenly the Lord will come back and snatch us away to the heavens. They would exhort people not to go to the movies lest, when the Lord Jesus comes to snatch them away, He find them there. Rather, they would encourage people to be praying and reading the Bible and worshipping the Lord. This thought neglects the subjective side of the rapture—that the Lord Jesus will come out of the spirit and the soul to swallow up the body. This is the meaning of **1 Corinthians 15:50-54**, which says that death has been swallowed up unto victory. He will be glorified from within us. He will do two things at once: while He is taking us away to the air, He will come from within us to swallow up our bodies. Then we will be changed! Our bodies will be transfigured, and we will be fully and absolutely the same as He is (1 John 3:2). Inwardly and outwardly we will match Him.

### THE PRINCIPLE OF THE HARVEST

Other Christians consider that the rapture will occur with all Christians simultaneously. They think that when the Lord Jesus comes back, all the real believers will be taken suddenly from the earth into the air at the same time. This concept fully neglects the principle of the harvest. The principle of the harvest is that fruit is harvested as it becomes ripe. Some of the crop ripens first and is reaped as the firstfruits. This is a minority. Then comes the harvest of the majority of the crop. Finally, comes the reaping of the gleanings, or the remainder. These are at least three different stages of harvest. This picture in the Bible is an exceedingly clear type. In kindergarten classes many pictures are used to teach the little ones. In the same manner the Lord uses the picture of the harvest to clearly portray the matter of the rapture. If we only pick up the clear words in the New Testament, we may not understand the rapture so well; but if we look at the pictures, it is very clear. We have a clear picture of the rapture of the believers in the type of the reaping of the harvest. This is a type in the Old Testament, and it is fulfilled in the New Testament. In **Matthew 13** there is the harvest, and in **Revelation 14** there are both the firstfruits and the major part of the harvest. Eventually, the major part of the crop will become mature, and the harvest time will come. Very close to this time, a few will become mature early. They will become the firstfruits. The major part will then ripen later and will be the general harvest. However, some who are at the corner or the edges of the field will still be green and need a further time to become mature. These are the gleanings or the remainder.

Why has the harvest time of the Lord not yet come? According to the situation today, there is hardly any possibility for the Lord Jesus to come back because the major part of the crop is still green and not ripe. We need to be desperate with the Lord to be saturated and to be matured. When the major part of the crop is ripe and ready for the harvest, that will be the time for the Lord Jesus to come and reap. Just before this reaping, some who are matured early will be reaped as the firstfruits.

It is very clear, from Matthew to Revelation, that the New Testament teaches that the rapture will occur not merely once but several times. The rapture of the firstfruits will be a short while before the tribulation. The

tribulation will be mainly a period of seven years. In the book of Revelation there are seven seals, and the last of the seven seals consists of seven trumpets. The last of the seven trumpets will be sounded quite close to the end of the tribulation. By reading Revelation carefully, we can realize that the great tribulation will probably begin from the first trumpet. It will not begin from the time of the first seal. The first seal has nearly been fulfilled already. The second, third, and fourth seals have begun to be fulfilled and are still being fulfilled. Once these four seals are completed, the fifth and sixth seals will come, and after these are finished, the seventh seal will come. The seven trumpets are the content and the totality of the seventh seal. Remember that the great tribulation will begin with the first trumpet and will continue until the last trumpet.

With this in mind we need to read **1 Thessalonians 4:15**: “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.” **This means that the dead believers will be resurrected first, and then the living believers will be raptured.** It is not that we will be raptured first and then the dead ones will be resurrected. When will this occur? Verse 16 says, “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.” The time that we will be raptured will be at the trumpet of God. Is this at the time of the first trumpet or of another trumpet? To answer this question we must read 1 Corinthians 15:52: “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed.” This verse clearly says that we will be changed at the last trumpet. It also says that the dead will be raised at the last trumpet. This last trumpet is no doubt the seventh trumpet. All the dead believers will be resurrected, and all the living believers will be raptured at the seventh trumpet. The last trumpet, of course, is sounded very close to the end of the tribulation. This strongly indicates that **not all the believers will be raptured before the tribulation.**

A further indication of this fact is found in **2 Thessalonians 2:1-5**. Verse 3 says, “Let no one deceive you in any way, because it will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition.” The “son of perdition” is the Antichrist. It refers to the day of the Lord’s coming. This verse tells us that the day of the Lord’s coming cannot occur unless the Antichrist comes first. Our gathering together to the Lord cannot precede the appearance of the man of lawlessness, the Antichrist. These two points, the time of the seventh trumpet and the appearing of the man of lawlessness, prove that not all the Christians will be raptured before the tribulation.

However, this does not mean that all the Christians will be here at the time of 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15. The exceptions are the firstfruits, which are taken away beforehand. This is seen in **Matthew 24**, where two are working in a field, but one is taken and one is left. Two are grinding at home, but one is taken and one is left. This is a parable which indicates that two Christians are there working together. One will be raptured, and the other will be left. This is the pure word of the Bible. **Some of the saints who will be matured prior to others will be taken away. When they are taken away, it will be like precious things being stolen.** **Revelation 3:3** indicates that the Lord will come as a thief to steal something. When we are not aware of Him, He will come, not to steal junk but precious things. **Only those who are matured in life and transformed in soul will be precious enough for the Lord to steal.**

## THE HOUR OF TRIAL

**Revelation 3:10** says, “Because you have kept the word of My endurance, I also will keep you out of the hour of trial, which is about to come on the whole inhabited earth, to try them who dwell on the earth.” No doubt, the trials that will come to try all the inhabitants on the earth will be the tribulation. In this verse the Lord Jesus promised that the church in Philadelphia would be preserved from the period of tribulation. This indicates that before the period of tribulation begins, the Lord will take them away from the earth. This is a rapture before the tribulation. To say, however, that the whole church will be raptured before the tribulation has no scriptural ground. This verse tells us that the overcomers, such as the church in Philadelphia, will be taken from the earth before the time of tribulation and kept from the hour of trial.

If some seeking ones are taken away before the tribulation and you are left, what will be your attitude? Will you still love the world? The tribulation will be full of all kinds of sufferings and troubles. From at least three

directions the damages and sufferings will come to mankind. They will come from God, from man, and from Satan. At that time God will exercise His judgment over the heavens and over the earth. Because of God's judgment, much natural phenomena will be changed. The sun will become dark; the earth will be shaken with earthquakes; rains and floods will come. In **Matthew 7:24-27** the Lord Jesus said that the rain would descend, that the rivers would come, and that the winds would blow. **The rain descending signifies testing from God; the river rising signifies testing from man; and the winds blowing signify testing from Satan, because Satan is in the air.** That trial in Matthew 7 is a little miniature of the tribulation to come.

**A great part of the coming tribulation will be the phenomenal changes in the earth and the heavens.** These changes will be from God; God will shake the earth. The sun which has been so pleasant will become an enemy, and the moon will be darkened. There will also be the trials from man. The Antichrist and all his army will persecute anyone who is related to God. The Jews and the Christians will all suffer persecution from the Antichrist and his army. In addition to this, **Revelation 12** tells us that Satan will damage the earth with great wrath.

If you are on the earth at that time during all these trials, and you realize that some of the believers have been taken by the Lord, what will you do? **You are the Lord's crop, but you are not ripe and ready for harvesting. The tribulation will be like the hot sun to dry all the water of the world out of you and to mature you and make you ready to be harvested. Surely the believers at that time will be ripened quickly!** Perhaps within the first few years a good number of Christians will be matured. They will be so clear at that time that **they should not love their education, their jobs, or their homes.** They will be so clear that **they need to love the Lord and to eat of Christ, not only three times a day but perhaps ten times a day.**

## THE LORD'S COMING

The New Testament uses several different words to describe the Lord's coming. One is the ordinary word for coming. Another is a special Greek word, parousia. Parousia means **"the Lord's presence."** This word parousia is used in **Matthew 24:39 and 44.** The Lord's presence, or parousia, is His gradual coming and begins from the third heaven. **When the firstfruits are taken into the house of God in Revelation 14, the Lord's parousia will begin.**

Many years ago, with Brother Watchman Nee's help, we published several papers on the matter of the rapture. According to our study, we realized that the Lord's presence, His parousia, will begin from the time that the firstfruits are brought up to the third heaven. At that time, in a sense, **the Lord will not have left the third heaven, but His parousia will begin.** The parousia of the Lord will last at least three and a half years. By studying all the verses that use this word parousia, we can see that the parousia of the Lord is a long-term matter. It begins from the time that the firstfruits are brought into the heavens, and it will continue until the Lord appears physically to the world. **The firstfruits will be taken away before the tribulation, and the Lord's appearance to the earth in a physical way will be after the tribulation or at least at the ending of the tribulation.** As the firstfruits, the mature ones will be taken up to the third heaven. Then they will come back with the Lord to the air. Then the majority of the Christians as the harvest will be reaped and caught up to the air where the Lord Jesus will exercise His judgment at the judgment seat of Christ. This is not the judgment at the great white throne, which will occur after the millennium (20:11-13). **The judgment at the great white throne will be upon the unbelievers related to salvation, whereas the judgment at the judgment seat of Christ will be upon believers related to reward and punishment.** At His judgment seat Christ will determine who among the believers will be rewarded and qualified to come with Him to the earth to defeat His enemy. At that time the Antichrist with his army will be on the earth fighting against the Lord and the Lord's people. Then the Lord will come with His army, the overcoming saints. After the rapture and after the judgment seat, the Lord will choose all the overcomers to come with Him to fight against the Antichrist (19:11-16).



## A COMPLETE PICTURE

This is the rapture as revealed in the New Testament. **Some Christians would argue for a pretribulation rapture, and others would argue for a posttribulation rapture.** Why do they argue? It is because they each have seen **only a part of the whole picture**. Those who have seen something related to the pretribulation rapture hang on to that, and those who have seen something of the posttribulation rapture cling to that. **We must realize, though, that the matter of the rapture is like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. We should not cling to one piece, but put all the pieces together until we have a complete picture. Then the picture will make sense and be quite logical.**

At harvest time in a field there are surely the firstfruits, the harvest, and the remainder or the gleanings. The rapture of a small number of mature saints will occur before the tribulation. **The majority will be raptured during the tribulation because they need the tribulation to cause them to mature.** Finally, the last of the crop will be harvested after the tribulation. The harvest of the crop is not in chapters 7 or 8 of Revelation but in **chapter 14**. This means that it occurs in the midst of the tribulation.

Now let us read **Revelation 16:13-15**: “I saw, out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits as frogs; for they are spirits of demons doing signs, which go forth to the kings of the whole inhabited earth to gather them to the war of the great day of God the Almighty. (Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he who watches and keeps his garments that he may not walk naked and they see his shame.)” **We need to note at which point in time the Lord said, “I come as a thief.” It is at the time that the three evil spirits go forth to collect the army of the Antichrist to Armageddon.** For the Lord to say, “Behold, I come as a thief,” indicates that some believers are still left on the earth even at that time. This means that they have not yet been matured and are still on the earth under the bright sun to hasten their maturing. **To say that all the believers will be raptured at one time before the tribulation or after the tribulation is absolutely unscriptural.** The warning of the Lord to His people given in chapter 16 is very close to the end of the tribulation. This indicates that some of His people will be left on the earth during the tribulation.

According to all these verses, we can see that the rapture of the believers will not be accomplished all at one time but rather during a period of about seven years. When will you be raptured during that seven-year period? It depends on the degree of your maturity. If in the Lord’s eyes you are mature and ripe, surely He will take you away before the tribulation begins. This is the way the Lord will use to transfer the reality of the kingdom into the manifestation of the kingdom. In other words, **we all must be matured. If we desire to be matured, we must take Christ in again and again, eating of Him, and allowing Him to saturate us all the time. This is the kingdom life that is described and defined in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, a life that is always taking Christ as its nourishment. It is always being saturated, occupied, and possessed by Christ. This is the reality of the kingdom. This is real maturity.** If this is our case, when the Lord Jesus comes back, we will be taken as the firstfruits. This means that we will be chosen and selected by Him to be in His army (Rev. 17:14; 19:11-15). The fighting army of the Lord Jesus is composed of the overcoming saints who are living in the reality of the kingdom. They are living in the reality of the kingdom; they will become the fighting army, and after the fighting, they will be the manifestation of the kingdom. As His army they will come with the Lord Jesus to destroy the Antichrist and his army. Then the nations of the earth will become the kingdom of Christ, and the army composed of all the overcoming saints will become co-kings with Him to rule over the earth. They will be transferred into the manifestation of the kingdom during the millennium.

## THE DEFEATED CHRISTIANS

What then will happen to all the defeated Christians? **They will have no share in reigning as co-kings with Christ during the millennium.** Where shall they be? While we do not know the details, the principle is clear. When the Lord Jesus returns, the false believers will be bound into bundles and cast into the fire, terminating all the tares in Christianity. The overcoming ones will be chosen to fight the battle with the Lord to recover the earth for the Lord’s reigning. They will be the co-kings with Christ in the manifestation of the kingdom. **The defeated Christians will be neither burned up nor enter into the kingdom to reign with Christ.** According to **Matthew 22:13** and **25:30**, these will be **cast into the outer darkness where there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.**

In summary, today's Christendom is composed of both false Christians and real Christians. The false Christians are the outward appearance of the kingdom. Among the real Christians, a few are the overcoming ones, and most are the defeated ones. When the Lord Jesus returns, He will first terminate the false Christians, burning up all the false Christians, the tares. Then He will take up all the real ones into the air according to their maturity. At His judgment seat in the air, He will exercise His judgment over all the real Christians to decide who will be selected and chosen. Those will be the overcomers who will return to the earth and fight against the rebellious army of Antichrist. After defeating Antichrist and his army, the overcomers will be Christ's co-kings, reigning with Him in His kingdom on the earth. That will be the manifestation of the kingdom. That also will be the transfer of the reality of the kingdom into the manifestation of the kingdom. Only the overcomers, those who are living in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today, will have a share in its manifestation. The manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens will be a reward or prize given to the overcomers.

*(The Kingdom, Chapter 40)*