

The Blessed Hope -- 1 Thess. & Some non-Pauline passages

Comments on J. Sidlow Baxter's View of the Return of Christ --

(From "Explore the Book," volume 6) ¹

By pointing out similarities between 1 Thess. 4:13 - 18 on the one hand, and John 14:1 - 3 and chapter twenty-four of Matthew on the other, the conclusion is drawn that all three passages are speaking of the same event.

Similarities, however, do not prove identity. One difference (unless it has a satisfactory explanation) can offset a whole page of likenesses. Think of the resemblances existing between identical twins. Yet one small mark can distinguish one from the other and prove there are indeed two people involved.

Also, things may be made to sound similar when they are not. This can be done by careful choice of words, emphasizing correspondences, and ignoring or playing down contrasts.

John 14:2, 3 compared to 1 Thess. 4:16, 17.

Only three similarities are listed in Explore the Book (vol. 6, page 218), and they lack real significance.

The first pair: "*I will come again*" (John) and "*The Lord shall descend from heaven*" (Thessalonians). In each case, who could be coming but the Lord, and where could He come from but heaven?

The second pair: "*And receive you unto Myself*" (John) and "*Then we ... shall be caught up ... to meet the Lord in the air*" (Thessalonians). To "receive" is hardly the same as catching up. One is passive and the other active. The Greek word translated "caught up" in Thessalonians means "to rescue from danger of destruction ... to carry off by force." ² The Greek word for "receive" does not contain this idea.

The third pair: "*That where I am, there ye may be also*" (John) and "*So shall we be ever with the Lord*" (Thessalonians). The similarity here means little. Grant for a moment they are two different events -- could one imagine, in either case, that He would come to, or for, His own and then just go off and leave them?

Now notice the differences.

In John fourteen there is no reference to bringing back those who have fallen asleep, the "change" of the living, nor to a shout, a voice, or a trumpet. There is no mention of being

¹ "Explore the Book" is an excellent Bible study help. Do not allow my remarks here to discourage you from profiting to the full from his most helpful teaching in the rest of his book.

² "The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament" by Kenneth S. Wuest, pages 96, 97.

caught up into the air.

In First Thessalonians four there is no promise of a dwelling place being prepared.

These passages might be thought to be complementary to one another, but other Scripture forbids this.

Christ's return in glory is to be as He went away (Acts 1:11). In order for the Rapture to be a replay in reverse of the ascension, Christ, at the ascension, would have had to take the disciples with Him in the air and then send them back to earth while He continued on to heaven. But He bade them farewell while they stood on the Mount of Olives -- and thus must return to them there. This fits with what they had been told to expect, "And His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives" (Zech. 14:4).

It is almost universally assumed that when Christ spoke of preparing a place for the disciples He had heaven in mind. As John F. Walvoord writes, "This passage [John 14:2, 3] mentions the translation, and the destination is the Father's house, which most expositors recognize as a reference to heaven."³

It would be strange indeed for Christ to be speaking of heaven in such a context. Walvoord admits: "The idea of going to the Father's house in heaven was quite foreign to the thinking of the disciples ... The thought of going to heaven first was a new revelation and one that apparently was not comprehended. In Acts 1:6 they were still asking about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel."⁴

As far back as Abraham the hope set before believers was not heaven, but a heavenly city (Heb. 11:10, 14 - 16). In the New Testament, Jewish believers were to be gathered "unto the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22), and were seeking a city to come (Heb. 13:14). This city, while prepared by God in heaven (John 14:3; Heb. 11:10, 16), will be located on (or possibly in synchronous orbit over?) the earth (Rev. 21:2, 10 - 27). When Christ added "that where I am there ye may be also," He had the New Jerusalem in mind. He will be there (Rev. 21:22, 23) and so will they. We must not read Paul's epistles back into Christ's pre-Cross ministry -- or a ministry specifically to Israel (Rom. 15:8). The secret of the Rapture was revealed through the apostle Paul, not by Christ in His earthly ministry before the Body of Christ was formed (1 Thess. 4:13; 1 Cor. 15:51).

Also, when the disciples were watching Christ ascend, the angels said, "Why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" In Luke 21:28 they had been told *when* to look up. There was no need for gazing heavenward until the signs of Luke 21:25 - 27 began to occur. He *cannot come* (in glory) until *then*. But we, all through this age, do look up to "heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). Also the early Christians "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven" (1 Thess. 1:9, 10). They were not waiting for certain prophesied events to transpire -- but for *HIM!*

³ "The Rapture Question" by John F. Walvoord, pages 187, 188.

⁴ Ibid. Page 71.

Matthew twenty-four and First Thessalonians 4:16, 17.

Even though both Matthew twenty four and First Thessalonians four are extensive and include many details, only five parallels are called to our attention by Baxter in his *Explore the Book* (vol. 6, page 219). Again, they only have a surface appearance of importance.

The first pair: *"They shall see the Son of Man coming"* (Matt. 24:30) and *"The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven"* (1 Thess. 4:16). *Of course* it is the same One who comes, and *of course* He comes from heaven. Who else could it be? where else could He come from? But it is as the "Son of Man" that He comes in Matthew. This title looks back to Dan. 7:13 where it is His coming as King which is in view. Paul never calls Christ the "Son of Man" -- though, of course, teaching His true humanity. It is as "the Lord" He comes in Thessalonians.

The second pair: *"His angels, with a great voice"* (Matt. 24:31) and *"With the voice of the archangel"* (1 Thess. 4:16). By cutting off the verse in Matthew between associated words, it is made to sound as if it is the voice of angels -- but it is the "voice of trumpet" (Williams), or "a loud trumpet call" (Berkeley). Where is the parallel between the voice of a *trumpet* and the voice of the *archangel*? No archangel is mentioned in Matthew, and only the archangel is mentioned in Thessalonians.

The third pair: *"With a great trumpet"* (Matt. 24:31) and *"With the trump of God"* (1 Thess. 4:16). In Matthew angels are sent with the voice of a trumpet, and in Thessalonians it is specified as the trump of God -- with no reference to any angels.

The fourth pair: *"They shall gather His elect"* (Matt. 24:31) and *"Caught up together with Him"* (1 Thess. 4:17). In Matthew the elect are gathered FROM one end of heaven ("the sky" -- NASB) to the other, but there is no mention of a resurrection. In Thessalonians the living believers are caught up INTO the clouds with the newly resurrected believers who have died.

At the mid-point of the Tribulation the unbelieving nation of Israel will be gathered into the wilderness where they will be protected from the wrath of Satan for three and a half years (Rev. 12:13, 14). Because Satan cannot touch them, he will turn his wrath against the company of Jews who are not in the wilderness, the 144,000 who "have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17). They evidently have been scattered over the whole world⁵ in their testimony, protected by the seal of God (Rev. 7:2, 3). When they have won "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and people, and tongues" (Rev. 7:9), these elect Jews will be gathered back to Jerusalem where the action is, where Christ is soon to appear, because their work will have been completed.

⁵-- The four winds ... one end of heaven to the other" is a figure of speech denoting a scattering over the face of the earth -- not in the atmosphere. God said to Elam, "I will bring the *four winds* from the *four quarters of heaven*, and will scatter them toward all those winds" (Jer. 49:36). God made a specific promise to Israel. "If ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast unto the *uttermost part of the heaven*, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there." (Neh. 1:9) See also Deut. 30:4; Isa. 13:5; Dan. 7:2; 8:8; 11:4; Zech. 2:6.

The fifth pair: "*In the clouds of heaven*" (Matt. 24:30) and "*In the clouds, to meet the Lord*" (1 Thess. 4:17). In Matthew the clouds are where *all men on earth* SEE Him. In First Thessalonians they are where *believers only* MEET Him. There is a strong possibility that 1 Thess. 4:17 should read, "we ... shall be caught up together with them in clouds" (see the margin of the revised Scofield Bible on this verse). That is, the clouds are clouds of believers. The same figure is found in Heb. 12:1 where it speaks of "so great a cloud of witnesses."

CONTRASTS between Matthew twenty-four and First Thessalonians four.

Matthew twenty-four is Tribulation from beginning to end, with the coming in glory at its close. If that is our hope, there must come a time when we stop preaching the gospel of the grace of God and preach the gospel of the kingdom "unto all nations" (Matt. 24:14)! There are other problems just as serious in this interpretation. They will receive more attention in another place. First Thessalonians has the coming spoken of in chapter four in *contrast* to the Day of the Lord (here, at least, the whole seven years of Jacob' trouble), which is presented in chapter five. So also Second Thessalonians places the situation of the believers of this age of grace in *contrast* to the Tribulation, as we will see later.

In the context of these contrasts Baxter remarks, "All are agreed that there are not two returns predicted. So if there is a preceding descent for believers, it must necessarily be secret."⁶

It is true that only one return, the "coming in glory" is predicted in the non-Pauline Scriptures. This is why the coming related in First Thessalonians four is specifically called a "secret" ("mystery" in the King James Version) in 1 Cor. 15:51. For this reason the Thessalonians would have been ignorant of it if Paul had not told them about it (1 Thess. 4:13). Not being a subject of prophecy (prior to Paul) the Rapture was indeed a secret.

Can the Rapture happening secretly -- so no one who does not take part in it will be aware of it? There is no way millions of loved and respected people should suddenly disappear without the whole world knowing *something* of vast importance has taken place. However, those left behind may not know, even from the shout and the trumpet blast, *what it was*. It has been assumed the Rapture would happen quietly, but no verse says it will. Even very meaningful sounds from heaven have been heard by unbelievers and understood to stem from natural causes (John 12:28, 29; Acts 22:9). However, neither in First Thessalonians four or First Corinthians 15:51, 52 is there any indication of others actually looking on or listening. This is in contrast to the coming in glory (see Matt. 24:27 - 30; Rev. 1:7; 19:11 - 14).

The lack of a verse which specifies "two comings" (following the incarnation), a "third coming" (including the incarnation), or some such expression, does not prove much. The Old Testament will be searched in vain for any specific reference to Christ's "first coming" or His "second coming," even though neither was a secret. It only speaks of His *coming*. Partly because of this, the leaders in Israel did not believe Christ, in His incarnation, could really be the Messiah -- because so many prophecies about His "coming" were left unfulfilled. If someone had told them there were to be *two* advents of the Messiah, they would have been challenged with the

⁶ "Explore the Book" by J. Sidlow Baxter, vol. 6, page 218.

reply, "Where do you find a verse which speaks of the 'first coming' or the 'second coming' or the 'two comings' of the Messiah?" Yet there *were* two! They should have been able to expect two appearances due to the differences in the circumstances in various passages. Christ asked, "Ought not Christ to have suffered [first coming] and to enter into His glory [Second Coming]?" (Luke 24:26). He scolded them gently for not believing *all* God said about this matter, and "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). They had believed the passages that spoke of His appearing in power and glory and neglected or explained away the others.

The mention of the "trump of God" (1 Thess. 4:16) and the "last trump" (1 Cor. 15:52) has been a problem to many. The presence of a trumpet in these verses is often used to link them to Matt. 24:31, or Rev. 10:7 and 11:15. One proponent of the Post tribulation Rapture states, "The trumpet has to do with judgment, and that relates to the nations (Rev. 8)." ⁷ How strange to so dogmatically restrict the use of the trumpet in view of its primary use -- to assemble Israel, whether for peace or for war (Num. 10:2 - 10). A trumpet was also used for many other purposes, such as announcing the Year of Jubile (Lev. 25:9), the beginning of the reign of a king (2 Kings 9:13) or to terrorize the enemy, as Gideon did (Judges 7:18). There are many passages that show the several uses of the trumpet.

IF the trump of 1 Thess. 4:16 and 1 Cor. 15:52 must be linked to a series of other trumpets (as the expression "last trump" is said to indicate), it would seem more sensible to link it to the annually recurring Feast of Trumpets than to make it the last of the seven trumpets in Revelation. The latter series of trumpets had not yet been revealed as Paul was writing.

The next feast of Israel to be fulfilled is the Feast of Trumpets. The trumpets have sounded out every year for centuries, anticipating Israel's future re-gathering at the beginning of the Tribulation. Some day the last of these trumpets will sound as the feast finds its fulfillment. It will be God's trumpet this time, an *invitation* for Israel to return to the land.⁸ "And it shall come to pass in that day ... ye shall be gathered one by one, O ye *children of Israel*. And it shall come to pass in that day, that a *great trumpet* shall be blown, and they shall come who were ready to perish in the land of Assyria, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the Lord in the Holy mount of Jerusalem." (Isa. 27:12, 13) Notice also Joel 2:1, where a trumpet is to be blown in Zion to introduce the Day of the Lord.⁹

IF this is to be the "last trump" of 1 Cor. 15:52, the Rapture (to end this age) and the recalling of Israel (to open the Tribulation) would coincide. I am *NOT* saying this *IS* the meaning of the expression in Paul's writings, but *IF* there *MUST* be a link between the last trump

⁷ Ibid. Page 200.

⁸ They evidently will have the *opportunity* to return to the land under the terms of the covenant signed by the Beast (Dan. 9:27), but -- as in the return related in Ezra and Nehemiah -- few will take advantage of it. At the midpoint of the week God will force them to reassemble, not in the land, but in the wilderness (Ezek. 20:33 - 36). Evidently it is the wrath of Satan against Israel, inciting the Beast to persecute them, which God will use to accomplish this (Rev. 12:13, 14).

⁹ In this case the Day of the Lord refers to a great plague of locusts (see the following description) -- though it serves as the basis for revelation concerning the still future Day of the Lord presented in the book of Revelation.

here and some series of trumpets in other passages of Scripture, this explanation is the most logical, and has the fewest problems. This does involve some difficulties however. It would tie the Rapture down to a certain day of the year -- the day the Feast of Trumpets begins. It also would rule out any passage of time between the Rapture and the beginning of the Tribulation. Since certain preparations must be made in the world situation to make possible the events of the seventieth week of Daniel nine, it would mean, not that these preparations *might* take place before the Rapture, but that they would, *of necessity*, take place before we were caught away. This would tie the Rapture down, to a degree at least, and indirectly, to the prophetic program.

There is another distinct possibility that has no problems for the Pre-Tribulationist position, does not tie the Rapture down to a Jewish feast day, and does justice to the Scriptures involved. J. Dwight Pentecost writes: "The word 'last' may signify that which concludes a program, but not necessarily the last that will ever exist. Inasmuch as the program for the church differs from that for Israel, each may be terminated by the blowing of a trumpet, properly called the last trumpet, without making the two last trumpets identical and synonymous as to time." ¹⁰

He also points out "the summons for the church is called the 'trump of God,' while the seventh trump is an angel's trumpet." He quotes J. F. Strombeck as writing, "In the search for the 'last trump' one must, then, be guided by the fact that it is God's own trumpet, sounded by the Lord Himself ... Both men and angels are creations of God. They cannot sound the trumpet of the Creator." ¹¹

Thus the word "last" does not require a preceding series of trumpets. It only indicates the finality of the event heralded.

J. Sidlow Baxter is an outstanding teacher. Disagreement on this matter should not dim one's appreciation for his dedicated and exceedingly helpful ministry, even though this doctrine is one of importance.

¹⁰ "Things to Come" by J. Dwight Pentecost, page 189.

¹¹ Ibid. Page 190. Citation taken from "First the Rapture" by J. F. Strombeck, page 109.