

A Rapture You Can't Miss (1 Thess. 4:13-18)
A Judgment You Must Face (2 Cor. 5:10)
A Supper You Will Want to Attend (Rev. 19:1-10)

By: Dr. Daniel L. Akin, President
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, North Carolina

We live in a time when the study of eschatology is not popular. Prophecy conferences and the study of the end times were far more prominent in previous decades. The doctrine of last things is not only placed at the end of systematic theology books, but it is often put at the end of our own theology as something not worthy of great study and detailed investigation. Yet, I am encouraged that there are still some schools that are very clearly marked by their eschatological positions and, in particular, the perspective I affirm—the pre-tribulational, pre-millennial view. This affirmation is found in the doctrinal statement of Cedarville College, Columbia International University, Dallas Theological Seminary, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, and the Master's Seminary.¹ These schools require the faculty to be both pre-tribulational and pre-millennial. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School still requires their faculty to affirm the pre-millennial understanding of our Lord's return. The six Southern Baptist Seminaries do not require a particular stance. Thus, we have a variety of views represented by our faculties, though the predominant one is pre-millennial with varying views on the tribulation (primarily pre-trib or post-trib).²

¹ For decades, “ground zero” for the defense of the pre-tribulational, pre-millennial view was Dallas Theological Seminary. Names like Dwight Pentecost, Charles Ryrie and John F. Walvoord immediately come to mind. These men represent the “classic dispensational” position. In recent years, a variation of this position has emerged called “progressive dispensationalism.” Advocates of this view include Craig Blasing, Darrell Bock, Robert Saucy, and Bruce Ware. I personally find progressive dispensationalism to be more persuasive both biblically and theologically. For further study by these fine scholars see: C.A. Blasing and D.L. Bock, eds. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1993); J.D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957); C.C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* rev, and exp. (Chicago: Moody, 2007); J.F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957).

² *Southern Baptist TEXAN*, April 9, 2009, covered multiple stories regarding this issue, David Roach, “Experts: Eschatological views varied within bounds of orthodoxy,” 1, 10, 11; Gary Ledbetter, “Eschatology does

It is very interesting to study the history of Southern Baptists over the last three or four decades because you discover that before 1990 there was a significant disconnect between Southern Baptist seminaries and the people in the pew. At that time, the predominant view of the seminaries was amillennial. There was a small number of pre-millennialist, but they were historical pre-millennial (or post-tribulational, pre-millennial). The reason for this was the liberalism that had seeped into our seminaries. Now, to be fair: not all amillennialists are theological liberals, but almost all liberals are amillennial. If one denies the full truthfulness of the authority of the Bible and rejects inerrancy and infallibility, it cannot help but impact their hermeneutic. Because of this, they do not usually honor the historical grammatical approach to the Scriptures or the literal, plain sense meaning of the text. Or, if they do honor its meaning, they reject its accuracy and truthfulness as to what will actually occur in the future. As a result, they tend to gravitate away from a pre-millennial understanding.

Most of the professors in our SBC seminaries today are pre-millennial. I had the wonderful opportunity of pointing this out to a more liberal professor who was bemoaning what he considered Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's "obscurist myopic fundamentalism," which he thought had begun with the presidency of R. Albert Mohler Jr. After listening for a few minutes, I asked him how it felt to know that he had made virtually no impact on the 44,000 churches of Southern Baptist Convention while teaching for more than a decade at one of our six seminaries. The example I offered was eschatology. While many seminary professors during this time held to amillennialism, the people in Southern Baptist churches were decidedly pre-millennial, and the majority of them were also pre-tribulational. I am not making a value judgment at this point, but simply making an observation. However, I do think there are some

matter," 4; Mellissa Deming, "Humility accompanies prof's eschatology views," 1, 9; "Generations view eschatological doctrines through different lenses, observes claim," 8; Norm Miller, "Q&A: OT scholar responds to questions on premillennial dispensationalism," 11; Jerry Pierce, "Book outlines major millennial views," 13.

really good reasons why the pre-tribulational, pre-millennial view is true. I will address these below.

There are many factors that contribute to the popularity of the pre-tribulational, pre-millennial view of the end times. For example, there is no way to overstate the impact of the *Scofield Reference Bible* on the people in the church concerning their eschatological understanding.³ This was followed by the *Ryrie Study Bible* and later the *Believer's Study Bible*. Moreover, there is no way to really measure the tremendous influence of men like Billy Graham, John MacArthur, Warren Wiersbe, Chuck Swindoll, David Jeremiah, W.A. Criswell, Adrian Rogers, Jerry Vines and Paige Patterson, all of whom believe in a pre-tribulation, pre-millennial eschatology. Here's an interesting historical fact: beginning in 1979 with the Conservative Resurgence in the SBC and moving into the present, with only one exception, every President of the SBC has been pre-tribulational and pre-millennial. The one exception happens to be one of my closest friends, James Merritt.

Furthermore, there is no way to overestimate the impact of works like *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series. In terms of recent historical events, we have to acknowledge that the return of the Jews to the land of Israel changed everything in terms of perspective for many concerning particular texts of Scripture. An example would be Rom 11:25-26, where the Bible says there is coming a day when all Israel will be saved. We must not spiritualize this text into being the church. We believe it to be Israel. Another text is Rev 7:1-8. Here you have twelve thousand sealed from the twelve tribes of Israel. The natural reading of the text is to see this as a reference to literal Jews. When you read something like Zech 12:10 which says, "They will look upon him whom they pierced and weep as for an only son," you begin to

³ See Todd Mangum and Mark Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Carlisle, U. K.: Paternoster, 2009).

understand that God is not finished with the Jewish people and plans to use them in an extraordinary way as we move toward the end of the age.

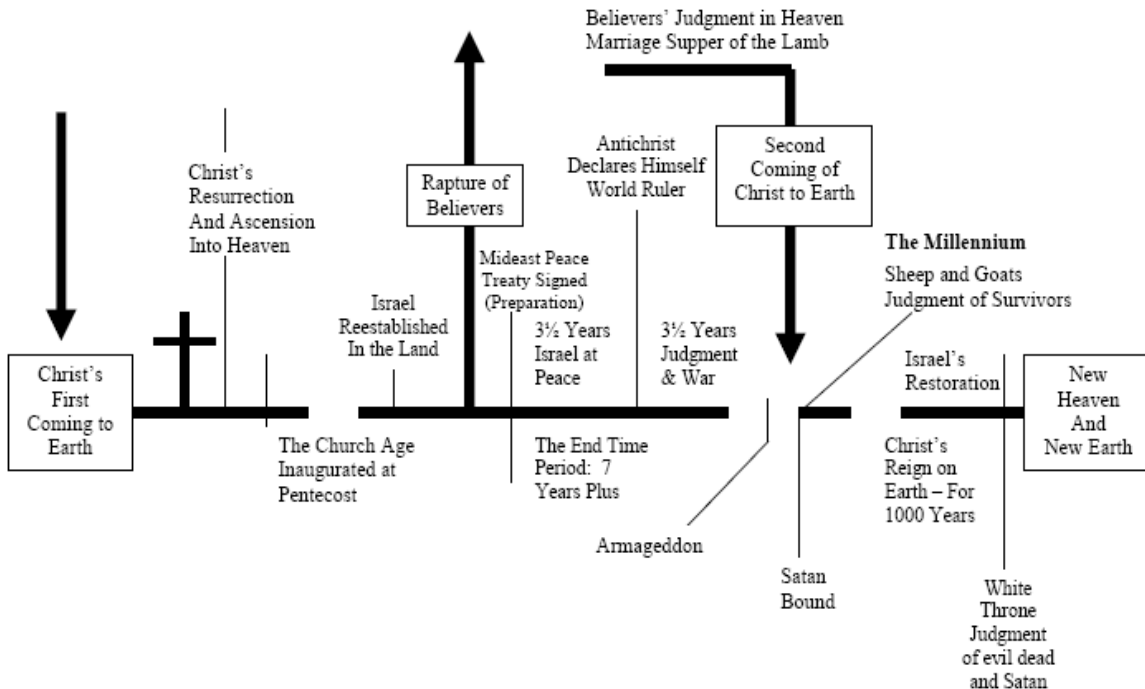
While I do believe there is in some degree a growing opposition to the pre-millennial position, it is clear that the pre-tribulational position is more assailed in our particular day. You can find a significant number of defenses for historic pre-millennialism. In recent years at Denver Seminary, there was an international conference on historic pre-millennialism.⁴ The subtitle was, “Historic Pre-Millennialism: A Biblical Alternative to Left Behind Theology.” There was also a recent conference at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, where John Piper held a round table discussion with three other men where one defended post-millennialism, another defended amillennialism, and the third defended historic pre-millennialism.⁵ The pre-tribulation view was not even up for discussion. There are some people so jaundiced toward the Left Behind series, especially among some of our Presbyterian brothers and sisters, that they have forbidden them from being sold in their book stores.

As I begin a defense of the pre-tribulational rapture position, let me lay out in chart form my understanding of what the Bible says about end times events. After all, all pre-tribulationists have to have a chart. Then, we will move to examine the timing of the rapture, and seek to understand the best position in light of the biblical evidence that is available.

⁴ For example, see Craig Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung, eds., *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to “Left Behind” Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

⁵ The audio and video of this event are available online. [cited 22 Mar. 2010].
http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/2009/4262_An_Evening_of_Eschatology/

Order of Events of Bible Prophecy According to the Pretribulational/Premillennial Understanding



This chart provides the big picture of the pre-tribulational, pre-millennial understanding of eschatology. As the chart demonstrates, Israel being reestablished in the land heightens our expectancy for the imminent rapture of the church, though I believe the rapture could have happened anytime following the ascension and before Israel was reestablished in the land. I do expect a seven year tribulation and then the glorious Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us begin with the rapture.

The Rapture Is an Event of Comfort (1 Thess 4:13-18; cf. 1 Cor 15:50-58)

There is a tombstone in Indiana, right across the river from Louisville, Kentucky, that has the following inscription: "Pause, stranger, when you pass me by; as you are now, so once was as I. As I am now, so you will be; so prepare for death and follow me." Some unknown witness came along and added an interesting comment, "To follow you I am not content until I know which

way you went.” We are all going to go somewhere when we die. Death is not the end. We are either going to heaven or hell. We are going to spend eternity with a gracious and glorious God or with the evil one the Bible calls Satan or the Devil. For Christians, there is no doubt or debate about which way we are going.

First Thessalonians 4 contains a wonderful word of hope and encouragement to our souls. In 1 Thessalonians, which is one of Paul’s Eschatological Epistles (along with 2 Thess), every chapter ends with a reference to the return of Christ. I believe each of these references refer to the rapture. The key text is found in 1 Thess 4:13-18 where an interesting dynamic occurs. There are those who are coming with Christ, and there are those who are going up to meet Christ. What I think you have here is the souls of those who have died coming with the Lord. Their bodies are now brought up out of the grave in the twinkling of eye (1 Cor 15:52) and they are wonderfully and magnificently glorified. They come up 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 (v.17). The key to the passage is verse 18 where the Bible says, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” The rapture is indeed an event of comfort.

However, it is also an event of controversy. Recent surveys indicate that 18% of Americans believed Jesus will return within their lifetime.⁶ Even amidst the apostasy of our nation and the decline of study in eschatology, there is still a great deal of interest among common people. It is amazing how the biblical memory is still present throughout the land, so that a large number anticipate the end of history as the Bible depicts. They even believe the particular events described in books like Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation and 1 and 2 Thessalonians

⁶ Kenneth L. Woodward, “The Way the World Ends,” *Newsweek*, (1 November 1999); also a 2004 *Newsweek* poll (24 May 2004) found that 36% of Americans believed that the Book of Revelation contains “true prophesy;” 55% think the faithful will be taken up in the Rapture; 17% believe that the end will of history occur in their lifetime.

could happen in their lifetime. In light of this controversy, we must first define the rapture. Then we can proceed to a survey of the various views. Finally, I will present why I believe the pre-tribulation perspective concerning the rapture is the most biblically defensible view.

Defining the Rapture

The phrase “rapture” comes from the Greek word *harpazo* and the Latin word *raptus* meaning “to catch up” or “snatch away.” It refers to the time when believers, both dead and living, will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. The bodies of the dead in Christ will be united with their souls and all believers at that particular moment will receive their glorified bodies. We are to comfort each other with this promise that we will always be with the Lord. The two primary texts are 1 Cor 15:50-58 and 1 Thess 4:13-18.

It is important to keep the right perspective on this particular issue. The truth of the rapture is a non-negotiable tenet of the faith. The timing of the rapture is not. One’s position concerning the time of the rapture should not be a test of fellowship. It can, however, be the occasion for healthy and even spirited discussion and debate conducted in a manner that honors Christ. I have said to my theology students now for 20 years, I will not fight you over the timing of the rapture, but I will shed my blood and your blood for the truth of the rapture. The latter is a tenet of orthodoxy. It should not be negotiated.

This caution and call to extend Christian charity in regards to the issues of eschatology was noted by Charles Spurgeon. He was a pre-millennialist, although he was not pre-tribulationist. In one of his sermons, Spurgeon said the following:

If I read the word aright, and it is honest to admit that there is much room for difference of opinion here, the day will come, when the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven with a shout, with the trump of the archangel and the voice of God. Some think that this descent of the Lord will be post-millennial—that is, ‘after the thousand years’ of his reign. I cannot think so. I conceive that the advent will be

pre-millennial—that He will come first; and then will come the millennium as the result of his personal reign upon earth.⁷

Spurgeon had theological convictions as it relates to eschatology, but he wisely noted that “there is much room for difference of opinion here.”

Five Views on the *Time* of the Rapture⁸

As one examines the terrain of eschatological options when it comes to the time of the rapture, five basic views occupy the land. A brief description of each is noted:

1. Post-Tribulation – The rapture occurs after the tribulation and is synonymous with the second coming of Jesus.
2. Mid-Tribulation – The rapture occurs during the tribulation at the halfway point of the seven year period (Daniel’s 70th Week/The time of Jacob’s trouble).
3. Pre-Tribulation – The rapture occurs before the beginning of the seven year tribulation.
4. Partial Rapture – Believers will be raptured at different times just before and during the tribulation based upon their faithfulness to Christ.
5. Pre-Wrath Rapture – The rapture occurs after the midpoint of the seven year tribulation but before the “day of God’s wrath,” which is the more terrible time of God’s eschatological judgment.⁹

We could spend multiple chapters looking at these different perspectives, but time and space will not allow. Instead, let me explain why I think believers will be raptured out and taken up into the air before Daniel’s 70th week, the time of Jacob’s trouble, the tribulation period.

First, the natural chronological reading of 1 Thess 4:13-5:11 presents the rapture before the “Day of the Lord.” In other words, if the rapture was to occur after the Day of the Lord, it

⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Justification and Glory,” in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1901; reprint, Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publishers, 1982), 11:249.

⁸ For a helpful defense and critique of the Pre-, Mid-, and Post-Tribulational views, see G. L. Archer, P. D. Feinberg, D. J. Moo, and R. R. Reiter, *Three Views on the Rapture*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

⁹ Marvin Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).

seems that Paul would have first discussed what he talked about in 5:1-11. Then, he would have talked about the rapture afterwards (4:13-18). However, he addresses the rapture in chapter 4 and then examines the Day of the Lord in chapter 5. A natural reading of the text would see the rapture preceding the Day of the Lord.¹⁰

Second, 1 Thess 5:9 teaches that believers are not destined for wrath. Some might say this refers to the wrath of hell and eternal judgment. However, the context of that promise is the wrath of the “Day of the Lord.”¹¹

Third, the “restrainer” of sin who is taken out in 2 Thess 2:6-7 is best understood as referring to the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit as embodied in His presence in the Church. This is often met with the criticism that if the Holy Spirit is taken out then no one can be saved during the tribulation. This deserves a point of clarification: while the Spirit’s restraining work is removed, His convicting work will continue as an untold number of people will come to Christ during the seven year tribulation. The reality is that the Holy Spirit is God, thus omnipresent, and He is never taken out of anywhere. In fact in Rev 7:9-17, John saw a multitude around the throne that was so great that he could not number them. The text is crystal clear that this multitude came out of “the Great Tribulation.” There is a double dynamic that takes place during the end times where we see both a great revival and God’s judgment on a world that has said “no” to his Lordship.

Fourth, Rev 3:10 promises that the church will be “kept from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world.” Although this particular promise was given to a particular church

¹⁰ In his commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians, John MacArthur provides nine arguments for a pre-tribulation rapture during his discussion of 1 Thess 4:13-18. See *1 & 2 Thessalonians* in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 135-138. A number of MacArthur’s arguments line up with my own.

¹¹ See D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Chicago: Moody, 1971, 1992), 217-219, 238-241.

at the end of the first century, the final phrase in 3:10 would cause us to see that promise extend past that particular moment and that particular church.

Fifth, Israel, the people with whom God made an eternal covenant, becomes prominent and the focal point of much that occurs at the end of the age (Rom 11; Rev 7).

Sixth, the doctrine of imminency is the crucial and decisive argument.¹² Titus 2:13 admonishes us to look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of the Savior. Paul does not tell us to look for signs of the tribulation, the antichrist or even the false prophet. John Calvin did not speak much to the theme of eschatology nor did he write a commentary on Revelation because he said he could not understand it. However, he did not ignore the fact that the doctrine of imminency is woven throughout the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation. In fact, Calvin stated, “Be prepared to expect him every day, or rather every moment. . . . As he has promised to return to us, we ought to hold ourselves prepared at every moment to receive him. . . . Today we must be alert to grasp the imminent return to Christ.”¹³ In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4, Calvin said that Paul “means by this to arouse the Thessalonians to wait for it, nay more, to hold all believers in suspense, that they may not promise themselves some particular time. . . . that believers might be prepared at all times.”¹⁴ The fact of the matter is either you have to deny imminency if you are going to reject pre-tribulationism or you have to redefine the tribulation. For example, J. Barton Payne held to imminency but said we are now in the tribulation.¹⁵ He spiritualized his understanding of the tribulation to be the period of time from

¹² John MacArthur argues this point concerning the imminency of Christ’s return in *The Second Coming: Sign of Christ’s Return and the End of the Age* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 51-68.

¹³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* [Matthew 24:37] or cited in Todd Strandberg, “Imminency: The Rapture of the Church is an Imminent Event,” <http://www.raptureready.com/rr-imminency.html>; Internet, accessed February 22, 2010.

¹⁴ Quoted in Renald Showers, “The Imminency of Christ’s Return,” in *Israel My Glory*, (Feb/March 1996), 8.

¹⁵ J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962). See in particular 40-42, 156-59, 164-65.

Christ's ascension to his Second Coming. However, if you take the natural straight-forward reading of the text, utilizing a historical-grammatical hermeneutic, you cannot spiritualize the tribulation.

Seventh, there are numerous differences between the rapture in the clouds and the second coming to earth that are consistent with a pre-tribulational understanding of the rapture event.

The following chart highlights these differences:

The Rapture and Second Coming Compared

Phase One (The Rapture)	Phase Two (The Second Coming)
Christ comes to receive His church in the air.	Christ returns with his bride and angels to the earth.
The seven year tribulation begins shortly after the rapture of the church.	The millennial kingdom (1000 years) of Christ is established after the second coming.
The event is imminent; it could happen at any time.	Numerous signs precede this event (cf. Rev. 6-19).
This is a message of comfort for believers.	This is a message of judgment (and warning) for unbelievers.
The church is of primary importance.	Israel is of significant importance.
The rapture is a mystery.	The second coming is predicted in both the Old and New Testaments.
The judgment seat of Christ for believers occurs (Rom 14:10; 1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10).	1) The sheep and goats judgment occurs (Matt 25:31-46) 2) Antichrist and the world are judged (Rev 19:11-21).
Only believers are affected.	All people are affected.
The church is taken into the Lord's presence in heaven.	All believers are brought into the millennial kingdom to reign with Christ on earth.

To these seven arguments, my mentor, Paige Patterson adds three others for our consideration. First, there is what could be called the superfluous nature of the post-tribulational rapture view. Why would believers be taken up in the air only to do a u-turn and immediately

come back down to the earth? Second, one must note the complete absence of the church after Revelation 3. One could make more of this than they ought, but the fact is the church does not appear by name at all from chapter 4 until the very end of the book. Third, who populates the millennium? It is very clear that people will be born in the millennium, but with the believers having glorified bodies this will not be possible for them. Furthermore, when you look at Revelation 19:17-21, every one that opposes Christ is wiped out. How is it that there are persons born in the millennium? How is that people born in the millennium will rebel in the end (Rev 20:7-10)? Where do these people come from? If there are people converted during the tribulation and by God's amazing grace survive the tribulation, they will go into the millennium with natural bodies and will be able to have children. Amazingly, in this ideal environment, some are still going to reject King Jesus as He rules and reigns from Jerusalem. This is a problem that is almost insurmountable in my judgment for the post-tribulational view. While we should not fight over the timing of the rapture, the biblical evidence is best understood to support a pre-tribulational understating of the time of the rapture.

**The Judgment Seat of Christ Is an Accounting We Must Give to Our Savior
(Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:9-10)**

The Judgment Seat of Christ comes from the Greek word *bema*. It is an accounting given by believers for their works and faithfulness during their Christian life. The quality and character of these works will be tested, even the heart motivation. An important word for all of us is that we can do the right thing in the wrong way. God is concerned not only with what we do, but also why we do it. This is not a judgment of salvation but one of service. It stands in stark contrast to the "Great White Throne" judgment of unbelievers revealed in Rev 20:11-15. The time of the judgment is uncertain, though it must take place after the rapture and before the Second Coming.

Some believe the Judgment Seat of Christ and the Great White Throne Judgment are synonymous. However, as the following chart shows, there are enough differences to see them as distinctive and separate judgments.

A Comparison of “The Judgment Seat of Christ”
and “The Great White Throne Judgment”

Issue	Judgment Seat of Christ “Bema” Seat Judgment	Great White Throne Judgment
Persons	Believers Only	Unbelievers Only
Scripture	Rom 14:10; 1 Cor 3:10-15 2 Cor 5:10	Rev 20:11-15
Basis	Faithfulness in Christ and Resultant Good Works (Even to Our Motivations)	Rejection of Christ and Thus One’s Own Righteousness
Time	Between Rapture and Second Coming, or at the Second Coming	End of Millennium and Just Prior to the Eternal State
Results	Gain or Loss of Rewards	Eternity in the “Lake of Fire” (Hell)

We must remind believers that their salvation is a signed, sealed and secured reality. Yet every believer will stand before King Jesus and will give an account for their faithfulness of service during the time that they were in Christ. This is a sobering reality, and should move us to good works for God’s glory.

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb Is a Day of Glorious Celebration (Rev 19:1-10)

Finally, believers in Christ will experience a day of glorious celebration when they enjoy the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. A couple of contrasts help us gain perspective concerning this magnificent event. First, the bride of Rev 19:1-10 stands in stark contrast to the great whore of Revelation 17-18. The contrast is intentional and it is striking. The “Marriage Supper of the Lamb” of Rev 19:7-10 also stands in stark contrast to the “Great Supper of God” (“the bird feast”) of Rev 19:17-21. I often say that there is one supper you want to attend and there is another you wish to avoid. At one you will be sitting at a table, at the other you will be on the table! At one you will be feasting with the King, but at the other the birds will be feasting on you.

While the “Marriage Supper of the Lamb” will certainly be a glorious celebration, there is some question as to its timing. However, the chronology of Rev 19:1-20:15 supports the pre-tribulational view of the rapture. It is at the least, consistent with it. Following the rapture of believers, the sequence of events is clear and straightforward:

1. Marriage Supper of Believers in Heaven (19:1-10) then...
2. Second Coming (19:11-21) then...
3. Millennium (20:1-6) then...
4. Final Rebellion (20:7-10) then...
5. Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15) then...
6. The Eternal State (21-22)

There seems to be a very clear chronological progression with one event naturally following after the other.

The “Marriage Supper of the Lamb” symbolizes the intimate relationship between God and His people. The image appears several other times in the Bible (Is 54:5-7; Hos 2:19; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25-27). There were three distinct stages to a Jewish Marriage that are reflected in Scripture:

1. Betrothal took place from God’s perspective in eternity past and from our perspective at the time of our conversion.
2. Procession to get the bride – the rapture (1 Thess 4:13-18).
3. Wedding Feast/Celebration – There are 3 views that have stood out on this issue.

Some say it is the 7 years in heaven during the tribulation. Others argue that it is the millennial kingdom. Some stretch the event to include the eternal state. My view is that the feast begins at the rapture and extends through the millennial kingdom (1000 year reign) of Rev 20:1-6. Note that it says, “The Marriage of the Lamb has come.” The implication is that the celebration that has begun is going to continue on for a wonderful period of time.

On that day we will join the multitude in heaven crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure” (Rev 19:6-8) The angel in Rev 19:8 sums it up quite well: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” It is truly a supper that you will want to attend.

Conclusion

God in his providence gave me a remarkable wife. Charlotte was born into this world with two strikes against her and a broken bat to use a baseball metaphor. She was born into the home of

alcoholic parents. When she was seven, her parents divorced, and she was bounced around from one home to another. At the age of nine, my wife, her sister, and her brother were placed in a Baptist Children's home in Palmetto, Georgia. She lived there until she was eighteen. During those years she never saw her mother. In fact, the last time she saw her mother she was sitting on a bench on the front porch when her mother walked out and slapped her in the face, knocking her off the bench into the yard below, and said, "All of this is your fault." She turned around and walked back into the house. She would not see her mother again until she was eighteen.

Her daddy came to visit a couple of times the first few months she was in the children's home but then he stopped coming. She would not see him again until after we were married. We were married for twenty-five years before she told me that she used to call her daddy and ask him to come see her on the weekend. He always said the same thing every time, "Yeah babe, I'll come and see you." So she would wait on the front porch, sometimes up to four hours, for a daddy who never showed up.

When we got married, she called her daddy and asked him to give her away at our wedding. As I was standing beside her, I could hear the silence on the phone. As tears started to run down her face, she said, "I know you're shy so if you don't want to give me away, that's okay. I just want you to come to my wedding." Even though he only lived about ten miles away, he said, "I won't be able to make it, but I hope you have a great day." Charlotte's daddy died lost. He is in hell today. He died prematurely because of this evil, wicked thing called alcohol. He died without telling his daughter that he loved her, but she loved him until the end.

Just a few years back, Charlotte and I received a phone call from Charlotte's sister who lives in Atlanta. She told us that we needed to know that Charlotte's mom had been in the hospital for three weeks in ICU—that is how dysfunctional her family is! Her sister wanted

Charlotte's signature to ensure that the doctors would not revive their mother if she stopped breathing because she had severe emphysema and her body was also racked by the ravages of alcohol. She simply did not have long to live. When Charlotte talked to me after the phone call, she said, "I think about my daddy being in hell all the time. I can hardly bear the thought of momma going there too." We got on our knees and prayed. Since we lived in Wake Forest, NC, we then called our dear friend James Merritt and asked him to visit Charlotte's mother and share the Gospel with her. He agreed to go see her after he returned from being out of town for a few days. After hanging up, Charlotte and I prayed again. Within ten minutes Dr. Merritt called us back and said he did not think he needed to wait but was going to go right away. He went to the hospital and shared the Gospel with Charlotte's mother and there on her deathbed she prayed to receive Christ and was saved. She died one week later and was buried in Atlanta, Georgia.

I believe when the trumpet sounds and the shout from heaven occurs, my wife will be looking over in the direction of a cemetery in Atlanta. She is comforted by the promise that when we go up to meet the Lord in the air she will be able to join hands with her mother who will likewise be headed to heaven with King Jesus. We do not grieve as those who have no hope and therefore, Paul says, "Let us comfort one another with these words." If heaven and hell are real and Jesus makes all the difference, may we make it our priority to share him as often as we possibly can that others might join us in that glorious day of rapture when we are caught up to meet King Jesus in the air.