

PRE-ETERNITY EVENTS

The Rapture

So what about Christ's return? What does this mean? First of all we need to get an idea of what happens to us when we die. Although there are different views of what happens to us when we die, the following is a brief explanation of what I understand to be true. When we die, our physical body remains on earth, whether buried, entombed or cremated. Our spirit remains an individual identity and goes to be with our Lord Jesus in heaven if we have accepted Jesus as our personal savior, otherwise our spirit joins other lost spirits in a temporary abode called Hades. Hades or the present "hell", also called "the pit" or "the abyss", is supposedly somewhere in the heart of the earth itself, according to Scripture. The temporary spiritual bodies of the unsaved dead will not be consumed in the fires of Hades, since they are not physical bodies. Nevertheless, their spirits are real, continuing to exist in this real world even after the body is dead and will undoubtedly be subject to intense suffering. (from "The Bible Has the Answer" by Morris & Clark p312) At some time in the future after Christ first returns, our spirits will be reunited with physical bodies and we will be given a new final eternal home. Whether this eternal home is heaven or hell will depend on whether or not we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Now we call the next coming of Christ His second coming since His life and death on earth 2000 years ago was His first coming. Forty days after the resurrection of His death, Jesus ascended into heaven surrounded by a cloud. At some point in time, probably in the near future, while the end time prophecies are being fulfilled, Jesus will return in a cloud to our earth's atmosphere - not to earth's surface. Many people call this time "the rapture". Jesus' second coming will not be a single instantaneous climactic event terminating history, but will encompass a period of time and a series of events, just as did His first coming! (Answers p338) Some of these signs even now are being fulfilled in their beginning phases. Christ will return first to earth's atmosphere to catch up all Christians into heaven before some signs of the end of time will even begin. Christ will later return with His Christians to earth's surface after the seven year tribulation when all signs have been completed.

When Jesus was resurrected, three days after His brutally bloody death, He arose with a new perfectly glorious body. The first Christians to be caught up to Jesus in the clouds will be all those who have died who accepted Jesus as their personal Savior. Then all the Christians who are still living at the time of Christ's return will arise to be with Jesus in heaven. At this point all Christians, which Jesus will call His saints, will each be given a new everlasting, perfectly glorious body as Christ received at His resurrection. There will be no more defects, diseases, imperfections of any kind. This new perfect body will last for eternity.

Although no one really knows what happens to us when we die, I believe that it is possible that this is our rapture moment. We know that God and Jesus are outside of time. They know the past and have always known the future. I believe that it is possible that when we die, time stops for us too, and we leap from the present to the future rapture. Reports from many people who have encountered life after death experiences, say that they saw a bright white light with the figure of a person in it. As they drifted near this figure, the person told some of them something like "We are not ready for you yet" and "you will have to go back." Also reports from people who have witnessed the death of loved ones and friends, have said that before the person died they would look up and report seeing a bright light and /or loved ones who had passed away or groups of people. Sometimes they would even call out the name of a deceased loved one as saying something like "Well George, there you are." I believe that when we die Jesus is there shining brightly calling us to Him alone or with other loved ones by His side as a welcoming committee. During the rapture it is said that Jesus will catch up those Christians who have died first before the living Christians are taken from earth. Could this mean that as soon as we die we are called to Him instead of waiting for a mass catching up at some future point in time. Also, if our spirits are jumping to the future as soon as our body dies, then we may receive our glorious, new, defect-free body soon after we join Jesus instead of waiting around in a spirit form until all other Christians are raptured and Jesus returns to earth with us Christians - His saints.

Tribulation

Once all Christians who ever lived are removed from earth, Jesus and the Holy Spirit will also leave the earth to allow Satan to rule the earth for the next seven years without the Holy Spirit's influence. This seven year period is called the "tribulation" and will be a time of devastation to the earth itself and all its inhabitants. Immediately after the rapture of all the Christians, the antichrist will rise. Scripture refers to antichrist as the beast since he will be a man of great strength and ability to force his will upon the world, but in such a way that he will be admired, feared and worshiped as a god. He will dominate the world scene with a cleverness the world has never known. There will also be a rise in false prophets during this tribulation. Many people will die with large scale wars and earthquakes. Also massive disasters will destroy much of the earth. Then one third of the earth's plants will be burned and destroyed from falling hail, fire and blood. A burning mountain will be plunged into the sea destroying much sea life, polluting one third of the sea and sinking ships. Blazing objects will strike the earth polluting one third of the fresh water on earth. Then one third of the sun, moon and stars will be struck and darkened. Then demon possessed locusts will be released destroying crops and one third of mankind will be killed. All of these things are to occur within the first 3 ½ years of the tribulation. You definitely do not want to be around during the tribulation but the only way to avoid it is to be raptured or die before it happens. The next 3 ½ years will bring on ugly, painful sores and further pollution of the sea, killing sea life. All fresh water on earth will turn to blood. Then the remaining people will be scorched as the sun grows very hot. (Revelation - God's Word for the Biblically Inept series p334) So as you can see, by the end of the tribulation period, the earth will be a very changed devastated place for only a few unfortunate remaining souls to dwell.

Christ Returns to Earth

After all the end time prophecies have been fulfilled, the tribulation will be over and it will be time for Christ to return to the earth to deal with the remaining spirits. All unbelievers will be slain and sent to hell. All people who died during the tribulation but chose to accept Christ as their personal savior will be known as the "Tribulation Saints". Jesus will catch them up at the end of the tribulation as He did the Christians before the tribulation. Also Jesus will catch up the remaining Old Testament saints, those who were faithful to God before Christ's first coming.

According to Billy Graham "The Bible teaches that man is so rebellious against the laws of God that someday (after the tribulation) he will mass his armies against God Himself. This will be the last great conflict, called Armageddon. This will be the final war, the last convulsive effort of fallen man against the law of God. This will be a time of judgment for non-believers. God has offered His love and mercy and forgiveness to men. From the Cross, God has said to the entire world, "I love you". However when that love is deliberately rejected, the only alternative is judgment. So antichrist, Satan in human form, will wage war with his followers and demons against Christ, God in human form. Christ will easily win the war with all His Saints safely behind Him. Satan will be bound then Satan, antichrist, and the false prophets will all be cast into the "Lake of Fire".

The Thousand Year Reign

Once the world is free from Satan's influence, Christ will rule over all the earth from the earth's surface with His Christian Saints. Remember, Christ and all His saints will have new, glorious, defect-free, perfect, everlasting bodies. They will not die. They will dwell on earth for one thousand years before the earth is transformed. This thousand year span is to be called "the Millennium". For an eternal existence in heaven to be perfect, we must learn how to get along with each other and love each other. Peace and harmony are impossible without respect and love. If God were to grant us eternal life without teaching us how to love each other, He would be committing us to live forever in confusion and chaos. I believe that the millennium will be a time when Christians will continue to grow in spiritual maturity and develop Christ-

like character. The more mature Christians will teach and be examples for the less mature. Before the end of the millennium, all Christians must be perfect examples of Christ-like behavior and thought. Therefore by the time the New Jerusalem and new heaven appear, all Christians will be able to live in perfect harmony and peace.

If Christ is to return to earth and rule over earth with His saints, who will they be ruling over? Since it is not recorded in the Bible, we can only speculate what might happen. So keep in mind that these explanations are only ideas. Ultimately we won't really know what will happen until it happens. I have heard of three possible explanations. The first is that in the past God has always made sure that a remnant of His people, the Jewish nation, has remained after devastating events, as the holocaust. Therefore after the tribulation, a remnant of the Jewish nation will survive to begin repopulating the earth. They will fill the earth over the next 1000 years while the resurrected Christian saints rule over them with Jesus teaching them about Jesus.

The second is that only the Christian saints will inhabit the earthly kingdom. At death we are all at different levels in our spiritual maturity. Therefore the more mature Christians will rule over and teach and be examples for other less mature Christians. Each saint may be put in charge of a certain number of other saints depending on their level of spiritual maturity and past level of obedience and loyalty to God. By the end of the millennium all Christians will be spiritually mature and ready to enter the new heaven, new Jerusalem, and new earth as mentioned in Revelation.

The third explanation is the idea of second chances. Jesus stated in the Bible that the only way to the Father (God) is through the Son (Jesus). So we must except Jesus as our Lord and Savior to be able to live in the heavenly kingdom of God. But what about people around the world who are very devout and dedicated to their god or those who live very Christ-like lives but have not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. And what about people who have never heard of Jesus Christ or the gospel of Christ or gentiles who lived before the time of Jesus. Will God condemn these people to eternal hell and damnation? Some people believe that such people (or all non-believers) may be resurrected to live on earth during the millennium to be given a chance to know Jesus Christ through Christian, saint teachers. If they truly accept Christ during this time then they may be saved and be accepted into God's family along with all the other Christians. But if they still reject Jesus Christ and choose to live a life separated from God, then they will be condemned to the everlasting hell upon the judgement day at the end of the thousand years reign.

The Bible says that it is better to never have known Jesus than to have known Him and rejected Him. So if you have had the opportunity to accept Jesus but you don't, you may not get another chance. Since we do not know if there will be a second chance and we know that we must accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior to be saved, I recommend that everyone accept Jesus while here on earth. Also since we do not know when we are to die, this decision to accept Jesus needs to be as soon as possible. Why take a chance with your eternal life?

Judgement Days

Now what about Christ's judgment upon mankind? Every person is a sinner and deserves to be judged for his sins. The penalty for sin is death (separation from God). Christ came to earth and paid the price of sin for all sinners. All who accept Christ as their savior and redeemer will be pardoned of their sins and not be judged for them. Christians **will** be judged not for their sins but for their good works. Christians will receive rewards in heaven for work done to the glory of God. They will lose rewards when good works done on earth are done for personal ambition or self interest. ("World Aflame" by Billy Graham p220)

The bodies and spirits of all unbelievers remain on earth until the end of the millennium. By rejecting Jesus and therefore Jesus' sacrificial death for the sin of all men, unbelievers remain separated from God. No matter how good a person has been, all men are still sinners and no amount of good deeds can earn their way into heaven.

At the end of the millennium, Satan and the spirits of all unbelievers will be released from Hades, the temporary hell, and reunited with their dead bodies, then they will be judged by Jesus and sentenced to spend all eternity in the final hell called Gehenna.