

Concerning a Pre-Tribulation Rapture of the Church

by T. L. Marshall

The study of end-time events is necessarily difficult because they are, well, *end-time* events. They haven't happened yet. Thus, we can only know what the One who knows everything chooses to reveal to us. Plainly He is willing to share His knowledge, and has in very truth done so. I have stated the obvious for the purpose of making a very elemental point -- that while God shares some knowledge of future events, He doesn't share it all. His revelation does not come close to exhausting the subject, and leaves out many very important (by our estimation) details. And therein lies the source of so much of our difficulty. It is not that what He shares is defective in itself, but rather that it is only enough to satisfy *Him* and fulfill *His* purposes. We, on the other hand, are seldom satisfied with "enough". We want it all!

What is His purpose, that so little revelation (again, by our reckoning) can do the job? We are embarrassed by the Bible's oft-repeated answer: **So That We Will Be Ready!** He has revealed enough details to make us realize how desperately we need to do so, for both the eternal consequences and the temporal ones are at once glorious and horrendous beyond description. We can never complain about a lack of revealed motivation!

Nonetheless, we give not a second thought about going beyond "enough". Way beyond! Of course we do not do this as an act of conscious rejection of God's revelation, or of its sufficiency for His expressed purpose. Even the most immature believer recognizes that for the outright sin that it is. But at the same time even the most mature believers happily tinker with what He has revealed in hopes of filling in the gaps with a few "implicits".¹ We attempt to construct interpretive models that *satisfy us*, but we do so with such unconscious, artless, unaffected ease that it can only be seen as pure innocence. We would not dream of casting the Lord's revelation in a negative light, and we certainly would never stand for anyone to call it "insufficient". Yet, we continue to tinker. For one thing, our model building is immensely satisfying as a mental gymnastic. And so long as it is nothing more than that I am convinced that God not only does not disapprove of it but is delighted to see His children taking His words so seriously. But there's the rub. That is precisely where the heart of God can be broken... We can take it all entirely too seriously; even to the point of quarrelling over details and forgetting, or at least not stressing sufficiently, the whole point of it all: *to be ready!*

Now, I know of no one who needs to guard against this vulnerability more than I. I consider myself something of an expert in that field. So I offer this five-point ...something... that I found to be of help, a check against runaway model-building:

1. I try to remember to pray before I start, asking Him to help me stay within His boundaries;
2. Promising Him that if I later learn of a deficiency within my model that makes it impossible (or even nearly so) I will chuck it;
3. That I will never allow anyone to think that my model must be learned and received as soul-saving truth;²
4. That I reaffirm the lesson God wants me to learn from His revelation, viz., to **BE READY!**

¹ Yes, I made a noun out of it.

² "Soul-saving" truth is what the "gospel" is all about for it alone is God's power unto salvation (Rom 1:16). End-time teachings are not an essential element of the gospel (see 1 Cor 15: 1-4).

5. That as an act of deliberate obedience I affirm Paul's teaching (1 Tim 3:16) that the mystery of godliness is "great" [inscrutable], so much so that it is to be "without controversy" [beyond fellowship-breaking quarrels]. And I include all end-time revelations in that mystery. (If *they* don't belong there, nothing does!) Therefore I will not participate in any "discussion" that degenerates into a fancy-worded fight between brothers and sisters in Christ.

So with all this said, I offer an interpretive model that I feel strengthens the concept of a Pre-tribulation Rapture of the Church. It includes (see items #1 and #2 below) a coupling of two of our Lord's teachings about His return: 1) those whom He instructs *to be ready with their loins girded and their lights burning* when He returns *from* the wedding; and, 2) the *five foolish virgins*.

Before going any further, please note a very important presupposition in this study: that Jesus' teachings were "trans-dispensational."³ He taught truths that His disciples needed to hear right then, while He was still with them in His mortal body, i.e., while they were still under the law and while He was in the process of offering the Kingdom to the leadership and the masses of Israel. Then, following their rejection of Him and his weird ideas about what a Kingdom should look like ("turn the other cheek, indeed"!), He taught his disciples what they would need to know when they would be occupied with laying a firm foundation for the newly formed Church. Finally, He taught truths that a yet future generation of disciples will need to know after the church is taken from the earth, but they have been left behind; when they will still be very much here and charged with the duty to await their King's return.

It is an extremely important presupposition (hence, the big deal I'm making of it) because otherwise we are required to consider all of our Lord's teaching as being not only *for* us but also *to* us. And that misconception has led to endless confusion down through the Church Age.⁴

That there must be this third group – the ones awaiting their Lord's return *from* the wedding – is a certainty in my mind (regardless of whether they have seven years to wait, or three-and-a-half, or just a few months). That is why they are first in the batting order.



1. **"Returns from the wedding..."** (Lk. 12:35,36) Here our Lord speaks to people who are awaiting His return *FROM* the wedding. The only significant end-time wedding mentioned in scripture is that of Christ to His Church. Thus, it appears perforce that there will have to be a period of time following the Church Age when these "friends of the groom" can be gathered out of the world and made ready for their ministry of welcoming the newlyweds and assisting in the celebration. Obviously, they weren't ready *before* His return; otherwise they would be a part of the Bride herself (i.e., the five wise virgins), and would be returning *with* the Groom *from* the wedding. If we say they are the Old Testament saints then we have to explain why the Lord told them to wait and be watchful, emphasizing the great jeopardy of eternal consequences that would result from their failure to do so. Surely *resurrected* OT saints will be beyond the possibility of

³ Hey! No red squiggly on that one.

⁴ Examples: do we freely receive His salvation, or do we go out and "*buy*" it? Or, are we assuredly safe because He has saved us, or are we incapable of certainly knowing our eternal destiny until all is said and done and we find out if we were able to "*endure to the end*" (Matt 24:13)?

faithlessness or dereliction in their watchfulness. But if not OT saints, then *who* in a model that provides no period of time following the rapture of the church; no period when the gospel of the kingdom can be preached throughout the world (Matt. 24:14) and thereby lead that innumerable multitude to faith in Christ? (Rev. 7:9, 14) A multitude that pass the extremities of testing and are rewarded with the great privilege of being permitted to join the wedding party as invited guests?

Partial Rapture... Before going further, we should note that there is a school of thought that offers an alternative identification for the people who fill the ranks of this third group. And to my mind it is nothing less than astonishing, for according to this view they are a part of the **church!** They somehow get left behind. This is known as the doctrine of a Partial Rapture, and, in my opinion, it is fraught with impossible difficulties, the most important of which is the fact that the Bible does not give so much as a hint concerning the criteria our Lord would use to determine who would be taken, and who would be left. What could be more disastrous for us? Without His revealed checklist we (and I mean every one of us!) would get at least one thing wrong! Depend on it! Result? NO ONE would be raptured! Various guesses (that is all I can bring myself to call them) from this camp might be the following:

Spiritual vs. Carnal - The “spiritual” believers are taken, the carnal ones left behind. But the difficulty is glaringly obvious when we ask the simple question: “When?” ***When?*** During the course of a believer’s driftings in and out of spirituality? Is there a formula of some sort? Is it posted for all to see? Or, is it a simple matter of quantitative analysis: more spirituality than carnality? How much more? A simple majority? A super majority? Same question, but what, if at the moment of the rapture, he just happens to be into carnality? Even though the vast majority of his life in Christ has been spiritual? *Ad infinitum.*

Lost all over again? And if he is left behind, what is his state? Lost all over again? If not, does he feel that Jesus has broken a promise to him? If so, can he ever be saved again? Or is Christ content to return for only a part of His Bride – His Body – while the rest of it languishes in some limbo where there exists a very real possibility that He will never see it again?

It contradicts all Evacuation Types (see Section #4 below). **ALL** of Noah’s family were taken on the ark. **ALL** of Lot’s family were taken.⁵ **ALL** of the good figs were removed from Jerusalem. Now, it is not conceivable that, at the moment of their evacuation, at least **one** of those family members, or at least **one** of the many, many citizens headed for Babylon had not backslidden into carnality! Nonetheless, **ALL** were taken out of harm’s way.

No, to my mind the problems with a partial rapture are simply imponderable. It is a hopelessly inadequate option.⁶

2. ***“While they went to buy...”*** (Matt. 25: 1-13) This identifies the people mentioned in #1 above. They are the five foolish virgins. They had lamps but no oil. “Lamps” could refer to their natural life (body and soul with an unregenerate spirit – in

⁵ Lot’s wife was included in the rescue mission. Her destruction resulted from her own willful disobedience.

⁶ I am reminded of the old saw: “We can never out-parent God.” **We** would never leave one of **our** children behind, regardless of their current state of obedience.

other words, everyone) or to a certain class of them, viz., those who have a “form of godliness” [the lamp] but deny [have not] the power thereof [the oil] (2 Tim. 3:5). Either way, they are lost and have not the Spirit of God. The fact that they are a part of a group similarly denoted (“virgins”, all of whom are looking for Jesus’ return)) may give a bit more support to the latter explanation. Consider: all “Christendom” pays lip service to the return of Christ, but only His Bride is truly ready for His return. This is made clear by the Lord’s answer to the pleas of the foolish virgins: “I know you not”. Now He can’t be guilty of gleeful maliciousness; He will not go out of His way to insult them. So if His answer is not that of a childish smart aleck, then we must conclude that something else is intended. What? Well, remember that He certainly will know *who* they are (after all, He is omniscient). But He will not know them as a husband *knows* his wife. And that kind of knowing is what the wedding/marriage event is all about. Remember, many of them will have grown up in the church culture, but because they have never received Christ as their personal savior they will have been left behind at the time of the rapture. But now they will be challenged to make a life changing decision to make the best of a bad situation. Why? And, why now? I think it’s very likely that it will be because they will remember Jesus’ words (see #1 above). They will understand that the messiah had spoken those words for their sake. So they will go out and “buy” oil for their lamps. How? By committing their lives to Jesus, their King, the sovereign monarch of the promised Kingdom! Now, they too will have the Spirit of God. They will not be the Bride and Body of Christ, but they will cling to the hope of qualifying as invited guests, as “friends of the groom”.

Which introduces one of the most *important distinctions* that scripture makes between the church and the saints of all other ages. The Church is family – royal family! All others, while assuredly part of the citizenry of heaven, are not part of the royal family. It was for this reason that, after He praised John the Baptist, calling him the greatest of the prophets, Jesus then added that even the least in the kingdom (the royal family) is nonetheless greater than even John, who despite his unparalleled greatness was still outside that family (Matt. 11: 7-14). Why? Because he died prior to Pentecost, prior to the formation of the Church (Acts 2:1). It is a matter of position, of relationship to Christ. The Bride and Body of Christ (the church) are positionally greater than all other inhabitants of heaven! Why, *positionally* we are already seated in heaven at the right hand of Christ (Eph. 2:6). In the throne room! Where all others, including dignitaries of the highest order, are standing!

This is further seen in the fact that they will have obtained the Spirit in a different way than that prescribed for the church. The church has never been under the command to “buy” the Spirit (oxymoronic in the extreme! – Acts 8: 17-20). He is ours to receive freely, or not at all (Rom 8:15). But these who will hope to be friends of the groom will have to labor for that great privilege. They will have to “endure to the end” (Matt 24:13). They will have to “buy” with the price being their own lives if necessary (Rev 6: 9-11).

And for all that, they will not have the Spirit in the same way that we have Him. He *dwells in us* (1 Cor 3:16), having made our hearts his permanent residence (Rom 8:11). They, on the other hand, will have Him related to their lives in the same manner of the OT saints: as a companion, a helper, but not a family member.⁷ For that matter, it is the

⁷ Clearly I am splitting hairs with these prepositions (“in” vs. “on”), so we should not be surprised to find an OT text in which “in” is used. The key is this: on the Day of Pentecost, following our Lord’s ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit moved His permanent dwelling place – His *home* – from heaven to our hearts! Before that His dwelling place was heaven.

same way the disciples had the Spirit related to their lives when, still weeks before Pentecost, the Lord Jesus breathed on them and said “Receive ye the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22). He came *upon* them and remained *with* them until the day of Pentecost, at which time He dwelt *in* them. Likewise, He will be *upon* and *with* these tribulation saints, but not dwelling in them. (Jdg 6:34; 1 Sam 10:10).

Here is a good way to think of it: we have received the Holy Spirit (the oil of our lives) *by grace through faith* (Eph 2:8,9). They will receive Him *by grace through tribulation*. But note: **it is always by grace!** Regardless of the nature of the condition God lays down for sinners, He always provides the enabling grace for them to be obedient to that command. For the Tribulation saints it will to endure the tribulation to either the end of their martyred lives, or to the end of the tribulation itself. But it will still be God’s grace that saves them. It is only the administration of that grace (the dispensing of it) that has changed down through the ages. And consider what this means in its extension: **All saints** of every age have been saved by grace. By grace through *Innocence* (Gen 1:28); By grace through *Conscience* (Gen 3:7); By grace through *Human Government* (Gen 8:15); By Grace through *Promise* (Gen 12:1); By Grace through *Law* (Ex 19:1); and presently, By grace through *Faith* (Acts 2:1; Eph 2:8,9). Still to come: By grace through *Tribulation* (Rev 7:14); and finally, By Grace through *Kingdom Life* (Rev 20:4)!

Now, if the Lord intended for us to be guided by the math itself, then perhaps it is roughly half of “Christendom” (five of the ten virgins) who are ready and will be included in the rapture. Of the remaining half, certainly a significant portion will *not* be under the curse of the “strong delusion” sent by God (2 Thess 2:11), for they have never “*rejected*” [“*received not*” or “*believed not*”] *the love of the truth*. Indeed, many of them have never even *heard* the gospel from the pulpits of their so-called Christian churches, where “self-help” and “moral reformation” and “positive thinking” and “social activism” are all proclaimed without the least mention of the saving grace of God! Nor have they “*had pleasure in unrighteousness*” for many of them are as good and decent and as upset about the moral decline as are those who are born-again. (And more so in some instances!) And it is to these very people, who are free from that delusion, along with the innumerable multitude of people in cultures that are not a part of “Christendom” (Rev 7:9) that the Lord in His mercy holds out the possibility of redemption and a privileged position (“friends of the Groom”) in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. All it will take (pardon my facetiousness) is holding out until martyrdom, or the Lord’s glorious return from His wedding (Matt 24:13)!

3. ***The Wrath of God v. the wrath of man (or Antichrist)*** (I Thes. 5:9) - This portion of scripture guarantees us, the church, an escape from the Wrath of God. But when does His Wrath begin? And when *before that* does He evacuate the Church from this planet? Before offering a possible answer to the last question, let’s take note of the fact that the Book of The Revelation makes it clear that ***His wrath***⁸ ***is seen throughout the entire tribulation period***. For examples, note the horrors emanating from purely natural causes; events that the Antichrist cannot cause, nor would he if he could, for they wreak unparalleled destruction everywhere, including his own realm. These

⁸ *wrath* (lower case) as opposed to *Wrath* (upper case)... This spelling difference is used throughout to make clear the usage within the sentence. At the very least the entire Tribulation period is a demonstration of God’s *wrath* in its general sense. On this point, I expect, everyone agrees. After all, the *wrath* of God has been continuously demonstrated against all ungodliness from the beginning of time (Rom 1: 18-20). But is the entire Tribulation period the ***Wrath of God*** (a distinct epoch of history)? That is the question here.

come from God alone, and include the following judgements: the Third Seal, Fourth Seal, Sixth Seal, First Trumpet, Second Trumpet, Third Trumpet, Fourth Trumpet, Second Woe, Seventh Trumpet, and all seven Vials. And even the Fifth Trumpet/First Woe, and the Sixth Trumpet could be interpreted as either man-made or God-made. Only the First Seal, Second Seal and Fifth Seal appear to be man-made. But, our Lord said that *all of these would constitute a tribulation time*, the like of which had never been seen before and would never be seen again (Matt 24:21, 29-31). Thus, if God's Wrath is ever to fall, it must do so during this time, for there will be no further opportunities.⁹ And if the Church has been promised an escape from this Wrath, then it (we) must not be here for even the first God-made event, i.e., no later than the beginning of the Third Seal (Rev 6:5).

But what about this: "*For the great day of His wrath is come...*"? A reasonable objection to this model would seem to be found in Rev. 6:17 where, following the opening of the sixth seal, the chapter ends with the following: "*For the great day of His wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?*" That would seem to indicate that the Wrath of God (again, a distinct epoch of history) begins with the opening of the sixth seal; and indeed it may work out that way. But this verse is not a very good one upon which to base that interpretation. It all has to do with the verb "is come". It is written in the aorist tense, which is used for simple, undefined action. And it is important to note that it is the actual *time* of the action that is undefined. Moreover, while the time of the action is unspecified, the context usually makes it clear that it is something that has already happened. And it is not as though John had no choice in the matter, for there are other verb forms that he could have used, forms that would specify exactly when the action occurred.¹⁰

All of which means that this verse may teach that His Wrath will begin as early as the beginning of the tribulation, or as late as the opening of the sixth seal, or any time in between. I personally do not take the words of people who are crying out to the mountains to fall upon them as being greatly accurate for the purposes of finely fixing a time for the commencement of His Wrath. After all, these are the ones who will have steadfastly hardened their hearts against all of the horrors of the first five seals. It is easier for me to see this as the moment when they finally realize that God's Wrath has been staring them in the face all that time.¹¹

In any event, it is clear that for our present purposes it is an especially helpful verse because it plainly teaches that His Wrath begins at some certain point *before the end* of the tribulation. And since the church has been promised an escape from His Wrath, then the rapture must occur prior to that time, whenever it occurs. At the latest, it must be before the last seal judgement and all of the trumpet and vial judgements. Now there are a lot of tribulation events packed into those remaining fifteen judgements; too much for it all to happen in a few weeks, or even months (much less the lone last day!) Why, the scriptures that teach the appearance of the two witnesses (Chapter 11) come well after the sixth trumpet judgement; moreover, it states unmistakably that those two men will testify

⁹ Note also that God's Wrath as used in this context refers to His judgements during the Tribulation, as opposed to the everlasting punishment suffered by unredeemed sinners in hell. It is clearly seen in the cries of those who call for the mountains to fall upon them. Not only are they still alive in mortal bodies, but there yet remain a significant number of judgements to follow.

¹⁰ *The Hebrew Greek Key Study Bible*, Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., Compiler and Editor, Baker Book House, copyright 1984, Spiros Zodhiates and AMG International, Inc., p. 1569

¹¹ It is not a portion of scripture that one can comfortably define as merely instructional. Rather, its flavor is that of irony, with a touch of pathos; that these people who have been so sin-blinded for so long are now awaking to the truth far too late!

for forty-two months (1,260 days). Thus, it is clear that the cries of these wicked people who beg the mountains to fall on them will be uttered well before the middle of the tribulation (again, assuming a seven-year tribulation).¹²

4. ***Evacuation Types*** We cannot build doctrine on types, but it is very difficult to have a doctrine that contradicts clearly established biblical types. The *evacuation types* obviously include Noah before the flood (Gen 6-7), Lot before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18-19), and the “Good Figs” which were sent to Babylon for their own safety (Jer. 24). Certainly these were all the judgements of God. In the first two He used the forces of nature as His instrumentality. In the third it was the atrocities of man. Also note that in these OT examples no distinction is made between the Wrath of God and the wrath of man, which is seen as an instrument in the hands of God. Plainly a pre-tribulation rapture of the church agrees with these OT types, while the very concept of “the wrath of the Antichrist” as something distinct from the Wrath of God – as something other than an instrument of God’s Wrath -- rests on shaky grounds. So shaky, in fact, that I personally find that I must err on the side of caution, and assign the whole of the tribulation period to the Wrath of God.

5. ***Marriage Types*** The ancient eastern marriage customs are very instructive. The more important elements are seen in the following scenario:¹³ *Following the marriage ceremony the groom keeps his bride hidden away for one whole week (Gen 29:27-28); seven days reserved just for the two of them. After this time of retreat – their honeymoon – they return for the Marriage Supper, to which both the families and the “friends” are invited (Jn 3:29). During the procession from their getaway cottage the “invited guests” – the “friends of the groom” – join the swelling ranks as they make their way to the place where the Marriage Feast is to be held (Matt 22:1-14)...* Now it is important to note that this is not the only procession in this wedding week. (See the following section: “***The Processions***”.) In the more elaborate weddings there were as many as three. The first occurred when the groom, accompanied by some of His friends, came to his bride’s house and escorted her to the wedding ceremony. It was at that time that she went out of her house to meet him. The second procession went from the wedding ceremony to the getaway cottage¹⁴. And the third occurred a week later and made its way from the cottage to the marriage feast, which was hosted by the Father of the Groom. Of course, people would come and go during that week, as other commitments required, and provision for late arrivals would have been included in the Father’s plans. Nonetheless, the week would have been an occasion for ceaseless celebration at the Father’s house. Certainly excitement among the guests would build throughout the week, in anticipation of the return of the wedding couple. That third procession would have been the grandest of them all, consisting of all the first guests and all the late arrivals.

6. ***The Processions*** - A wedding that unfolded as outline above could be thought of as a “Grand Wedding”, or if appropriate, a “Royal Wedding”. It consumed an entire week

¹² Note, too, that the angel of Rev. 7:14 identifies the souls under the altar as those martyred tribulation saints who come out of “great tribulation”. This occurs between the sixth and seventh seal; again, he calls what they have already suffered the “Great Tribulation”. Also, it says that they “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”; another way of saying that they made themselves ready, just as “buying oil for their lamp” did likewise... various ways of saying the same thing.

¹³ It is helpful to keep in mind that there was not just one monolithic wedding custom – one homogenous Jewish norm. They were as creative as we are today!

¹⁴ A cultural remnant of this second procession may have been preserved in the American frontier custom known as “chivaree” (colloquial; spelling uncertain). Following the wedding ceremony a loud and boisterous group would follow the wedding couple to their honeymoon cottage, and sometimes they stayed outside their window for hours! It lent itself to much abuse. The expression may have descended from “chivy” or “chevy” (to make a loud noise).

(Gen 29:27) and as such must have been reserved for those with the financial means to endow it. Certainly there would have been all sorts of modifications downward from this highest of standards. The length of the wedding event would be the first and easiest item to adjust: just two or three days; just one full day; just a few hours. And most other elements could be similarly amended. Therefore, the “three processions” may not have been a commonly experienced element. But certainly when our Lord returns for His Bride, the wedding will have all the elements of the grandest royal wedding ever. Thus, we can safely assume that it will contain all three processions. And therein lies a rich field for inquiry. Many subjects could be examined, but I want to look at only one: the “Friends of the Bridegroom”. Who will they be? Well, we know for sure who they will not be: The Church! So who among the other redeemed peoples of history could fill the ranks of these honored guests? Well, the OT saints are the first and most logical candidates. But is there any biblical support for it? I think the testimony of John the Baptist is conclusive. In John 3:29 he makes it clear that he is exactly that “friend of the bridegroom” who “stands and hears” and is filled with joy when he hears his friend’s voice. And we have already seen that Jesus taught that John was the greatest of the OT prophets. Thus, he stands symbolically for all OT saints. Certainly they will be the perfect candidates for at least one of the processions, and in my opinion, for all three.

But they cannot fill all the ranks for the reason already observed: at least some of the “guests” must still be in their *mortal* bodies, not *resurrected* ones such as the OT saints and the martyred Tribulation saints will have at this time. Why not? Because they are the ones whom Jesus encouraged to keep their loins girded and their lights shining. They are, I believe, the foolish virgins who were unprepared at the moment of His arrival at the Bride’s house (the Rapture), but who have now made themselves ready by “buying oil” (see Sections #1 and #2). Oil that now lights their lamps! So now we have two groups who will be qualified to be a part of the procession, and who will be allowed to enter the royal hall and partake of the marriage feast. Who else may be an invited guest?

Well, we know that Jesus’ first advent ministered to the heavenly hosts, though in ways that are not explained. Paul’s “great mystery of godliness” (1 Tim 3:16) stipulates that the angels were somehow included in His mighty work, though not for redemptive purposes. So it seems certain that the third group will be the celestial beings. After all, it was they who announced His birth! So, now we have the four groups that will comprise the ranks of the “invited guests”: 1) **Resurrected OT Saints**; 2) **Resurrected Tribulation Saints**, those who were martyred during the tribulation period; 3) **Mortal Tribulation Saints**, those who survived the tribulation; 4) **Angelic Hosts**. Now it seems obvious that only the OT saints and the angelic hosts could accompany Jesus in the first and second Processions. However, for that great climactic final procession, the two classes of Tribulation saints will be included!

7. ***The Kingdom People*** In this model the answer to a persistent question just seems to materialize. It’s just *there*! The question: who will fill the ranks of the charter generation of the millennium kingdom (Rev 20:4)? The answer: these same *mortal tribulation saints*! Remember, the kingdom will be nearly perfect in every way. Satan will be bound in hell for the duration, except for a short period at the very end of the 1,000 years (Rev 20:2-9). The earth itself will be a paradise from North Pole to South Pole (Isa 65:25). Yet sin will be present and will have to be dealt with by the King of Kings, who will wield a rod of iron to crush it before it has a chance to mature (Ps 2:9). It is this presence of sin that eliminates the now resurrected OT saints and the resurrected

Tribulation saints. These two groups will be in glorified *terrestrial* bodies that are beyond the possibility of sin. And of course, the Church will not even be a resident of the earthly kingdom. Rather, we will reside in the New Jerusalem, possibly in stationary orbit directly above the earthly Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). Also, the church saints will be in glorified *celestial* bodies, which will likewise be beyond the touch of sin. So who will be the *mortal* human beings comprising the founding citizenry of the earthly kingdom? Who will be the ones that sin can still tempt? The ones that do not have immortal bodies? Who can and will die? But whose incredibly healthy bodies will live extraordinarily long lives – for some it will be from beginning of the 1,000-year reign to the end (Isa 65:20)? They can only be the mortal tribulation saints, having a mortal terrestrial body,¹⁵ who survived the tribulation and were allowed to enter as the charter generation of the kingdom (Ps 24; Matt 25:31-46). Thus, a pre-tribulation rapture of the church is in my mind the best model for providing this founding, charter generation of the kingdom.

8. ***Harvest Types*** Very briefly, the OT harvest consisted of **The Firstfruits** (Ex 23), followed by **The Great Harvest**, and finally **The Gleanings (Lev 19:9)**. The resurrection of Christ is declared to be the fulfillment of The First Fruits type (1 Cor 15:20, 23). How very well a Pre-Tribulation Rapture of the church would fulfill The Great Harvest, while the salvation of the Tribulation saints would fulfill The Gleanings.

9. ***“Thief in the Night”*** (I Thes. 5:2) Since unmistakable signs identify the Tribulation as a time unlike any other ever to transpire in human history, there is simply no way that the Lord’s return at the end of that time could be as a “thief in the night”. The elect, should they still be here throughout the Tribulation, would have only to count down the days: exactly 42 months following the establishment of the abomination of desolation in the middle of Daniel’s 70th week, to name just one (Dan 9:24-27).¹⁶ But a pre-tribulation rapture is of necessity sign-less, imminent, and absolutely unpredictable.

10. ***No secret rapture*** I agree with a sister who feels strongly that there will be nothing secret about the rapture. It wasn’t so with Christ and those that arose with him (Matt 27:52-53), and there is no compelling scriptural mandate that it must be so with the rapture of the church. But that alone does not rule out the possibility of the rapture occurring prior to the commencement of the tribulation. Indeed, one of the events from which the five foolish virgins could begin their countdown (see #10 above) would be that very resurrection of the church age saints, for there will be many eye-witness accounts from which they will be able to compile sufficient information for that project.¹⁷

11. ***Day*** Some confusion seems to have resulted from the use of the word “day”. One thing to keep in mind is that it is used extensively in scripture in both its common sense as well as its figurative sense. “Day” commonly means 24 hours. But Peter told the

¹⁵ 1 Cor 15: 35-44; this is a definitive passage where the differences between “mortal” and “glorified” as well as “terrestrial” and “celestial” are made clear.

¹⁶ Of course, there are a few variables that would have to be included in their calculations, e.g., the “added days” of Daniel 12: 12-13. Likewise, the unspecified date as to when the tribulation began: some scholars will then, as now, insist upon a seven-year time period, others on three and a half, still others with shorter ones. I can imagine the Tribulation saints studying their checklist, with the earliest possible date at the top of the list, and then checking them off as they come and go, and the Lord did not return. Clearly, they **will be ready and waiting** – just as He instructed them (see sections #1 and #2) – so that His eventual coming will certainly not be as a thief in the night.

¹⁷ And remember: those who rose with Christ “went into [Jerusalem] and appeared unto many”. Will this be repeated in the rapture of the church and thus become a powerful source of encouragement and enduring perseverance for these “foolish virgins”? Perhaps a resurrected friend or loved one will be permitted by God to go to them and remind them of Jesus’ promise (see Section #1).

multitude in Jerusalem (Acts 2:20) that the phenomena of recent days¹⁸ were the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken by the OT prophet Joel (Joel 2:30-31). In that prophecy he (Joel) said that the “**Day** of the Lord” would be accompanied by the darkening of the sun, the blood moon, etc. And he (Peter) said it unconditionally: this *is* the fulfillment of that “Day of the Lord” prophecy! Well, that particular “day” has been going on for nearly 2,000 years! So we must not restrict the rapture of the church to the last “day” (24 hours) of the tribulation period. There are just too many examples from our Lord’s and the apostles’ teachings in which the figurative usage is clear.

12. “**Falling away first**” (II Thes. 2:3) Paul taught the Thessalonians that the Day of Christ would not come until there first be a “falling away”. The Greek word is composed of two parts, which mean, respectively: “to stand” and “away from”. It means in a general sense “to depart”, or in the noun form, “departure”. The verb form is used in 13 other scripture passages, and in the majority of them it means “leave-taking” in its physical sense. That is, it means that material objects (human, animal, etc.) move away from other material objects. But it is also used in a spiritual sense in a minority of the passages. However, in every such instance the sentence itself makes that clear. Usually a prepositional phrase follows the verb, e.g., “departure *from the faith*”. And while it is true that many scholars have taught that its use in this verse refers to that very defection from the faith by the church, they do so despite the fact that the sentence, indeed the whole context, makes no reference to spiritual issues. Quite the opposite: the antecedent of this verb is clearly stated to be “His coming” and our “gathering unto Him” (2 Thess 2:1), i.e., *the rapture!* And this is even more emphatically so when we remember that Paul had already written the Thessalonians a previous letter in which he gave a detailed prophecy about this blessed hope: the removal of our most precious material object (our bodies!) from this planet. Thus, this second letter would already have a commonly understood antecedent. Why, Paul would have had to go out of his way to stress the fact that he was using this verb (“to depart”) in a spiritual sense, and he plainly did not do so.

Furthermore, if as these scholars teach, it means a departure from the faith, then it has proven to be practically useless, since the apostles themselves (Paul included) warned the churches of their own day that *they had already so defected*. That the so-called “departure from the faith” was already upon them! Furthermore, church history has documented that every era of that history has seen numerous examples of that very same “defection”.

But if the “departure” means a *leave-taking* then it more sensibly applies to the removal [the evacuation] of the church from this world than to any other interpretation that can be placed upon it. But is there a reason for preferring “leave-taking” to “defection”? Yes. This is the very Greek word that was used to advertise the arrival and “departure” times for the caravans that moved throughout the ancient east. Now caravans do not “defect” from the depot; they “take leave” of it. Certainly the first thing that would have occurred to the ordinary citizen of that day, upon seeing that word in Paul’s letter, would be “leave-taking”, not “defection”. And if that be the case, then Paul apparently intended for us to understand that the rapture [removal] of the church would occur before the revealing of the man of sin – the antichrist whose worldwide reign will occupy the era known as the Tribulation.

¹⁸ Namely, exactly fifty days earlier, there in Jerusalem; it would still have been a common topic of conversation throughout the region.

13. **“And now ye know what withholdeth”** (II Thes 2:3-8) Paul goes on to emphasize the fact that, because of this “departure” doctrine, the Thessalonians now know what is withholding [preventing] the man of sin [the antichrist] from gaining the ascendancy in world politics. It is the plainest grammatical construction that can be placed on these verses. The antecedent of “what” is that which has fallen away [“departed”... “taken leave of”]. Which raises a simple proof-question: What would make it easier for the man of sin to rise to world domination? 1) A church that is still an earth-bound, established institution, though weakened by its departure [*defection*] from the faith, or 2) A church that has departed from [*taken leave of*] the planet itself? In my mind, it has to be the latter, because the former is an accomplished fact, and it still has not produced the Anti-Christ. By that I mean that the church has been greatly weakened in various eras of church history – a self-inflicted weakness, to be sure, resulting from its having defected from the truth. And yet, for all its infirmity it was still able to keep that man of sin at bay, for indeed, at this present moment in history he is still not seated on a worldwide throne. But be very sure of this: the removal of the church from this world will create a political power vacuum, the like of which has never been seen. It will be a simple matter for a man empowered by the Prince of Darkness to fill that vacuum with astounding and unprecedented swiftness.
14. **“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it...”** (Matt 16:18) Time for a break... Here is what may be pure mental gymnastics, but it is stimulating nonetheless to consider a rather remarkable possibility. I include it just for that reason, and do not assign any persuasive merit to it. Indeed, I sit here and think of very reasonable objections to the concept as a whole. But what if... What if the whole tone and tenor of the great tribulation is one in which the forces of evil do indeed “prevail” against the forces of good? (I know, it requires a purely subjective answer.) There are times when we study the Revelation that it seems that there, between the lines, is a dread-filled, hopeless people, forsaken by all but God. It seems that Jesus’ description of it as a time of terrible tribulation, the like of which the world has never seen, nor ever will see, is in ultra-high definition. Something has happened to make it possible for the totality of Satan’s schemes to finally be forced into reality. Yes, of course, they are proving to be fatally flawed, and in most instances they are self-destructing, as evil seeks to devour other evil, as is ever its wont. But the forces of good are appallingly weak, in human terms. They have no political clout, no military power, no economic force whatever. They are at the mercy of the powers of darkness.¹⁹

But still what if... what if such shades and hues of interpretation end up being an accurate description of what will actually transpire in the Tribulation? Then one thing is certain: **the church is nowhere to be found on earth!** Because our Lord’s guarantee to His bride is that the gates of hell will never prevail against her!

For me personally, it is high intrigue of the first order! But again, absolutely no effort is made to use it persuasively for this thesis. (Have fun thinking about it!)

¹⁹ (I can’t resist: the obvious objection is that that is exactly how the church began!)

15. ***But the very idea is “new”*** One of the reasons given by a brother for his rejection of a pre-tribulation rapture is that the whole idea came about within the last 100 - 200 years. But that is very much in line with the method God used to prepare the people for His son’s ***first coming***. It is like the old saw: “When God moves in history, He first casts a shadow”. Down through the many eras of the OT age we see only a moderate level of emphasis given to the coming of the messiah. But, beginning about two centuries before the babe was born in Bethlehem messianic fever began to grow. Why? Principally because of Daniel’s ***seventy weeks*** prophecy (Dan 9:24-27). Someone – doctor of the law, rabbi, priest, even a student! – just did the math and realized that the time of the messiah’s arrival must be drawing near. That, in turn, sparked intense study of all the other OT messianic prophecies. By the time Jesus arrived there had already been a fair number of false-christs to come on the scene, each claiming to be the messiah and trying to gather a band of followers unto himself. In the Olivet Discourse our Lord warned that that heresy would continue (Matt 24:5). But for all the abuse heaped upon it by these deluded men, the “fever” continued to grow. Debates raged about the messiah: what would He be like? Would He know where to find the dispersed of Israel (Jn 7:35)? Would He somehow fulfill both types of messianic prophecies: the “Glorious King” as well as the “Suffering Servant”? Or would there be two messiahs? (Matt 11:3) How very remarkable that for all that feverish activity, He still came “as a thief in the night”, heralded indeed by an innumerable company of angels (alas, they were ***heaven’s*** representatives) and a rag tag of lowly shepherds, earth’s only delegation (Lk 2:1-20).²⁰

So why must his ***Second Coming*** be any different? Down through the various stages of church history the second coming of Jesus received only a moderate level of attention, the various revealed details being conveniently cobbled together under the heading of a “general resurrection”. But beginning about the middle of the nineteenth century the “second fever” began. Which begs the question: why should we not look at it as a sign unto itself? The very fact that we are looking for Him may be one of the most powerful indicators of how close we are. Is God casting the Second Shadow?

16. ***But the church cannot expect to avoid suffering.*** I have heard this often, but I cannot see how it makes a pre-tribulation rapture impossible. Down through the various epochs of church history men and women have either suffered, or led idyllic, peaceful lives depending upon the times and geography of their days on earth. Nothing about a pre-tribulation rapture suggests any escape from ***persecution***. We are guaranteed only to be kept from the ***Wrath of God***.²¹ But until that time, we will still continue to suffer ***persecution*** – or not – depending upon the politics of the times and locales in which we find ourselves. It simply has no impact one way or the other on the likelihood or the feasibility of the rapture preceding the tribulation.
17. ***One taken, one left behind*** (Matt 24:40-41) To my mind, this is one of the plainest statements concerning the suddenness of the rapture. It does not necessarily imply a “secret rapture”, only a sudden one... “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor 15:52). But a brother objects strenuously that I fail to consider that Paul said that that mystery was reserved for him and his fellow apostles and prophets to unveil, to them was the revelation given. Well, “revelation” can be accomplished by two different means: ***I***) By drawing back the curtain and allowing something to be seen for the very

²⁰ Assuming, as so many do, that the wise men came later.

²¹ Interestingly, this is accomplished in every interpretive model; indeed it is about the only thing they all agree on.

first time, or 2)By explaining that which has been seen for even a very long time but never understood. The Book of Revelation is filled with instances of the second type. Many OT types, parables, imagery, and paraphrases are found in that book! On the other hand, relatively few of the first type are found in the very book that bears the name “Revelation”. It was certainly not given to the apostles and prophets to pull back the curtain and reveal for the first time the concept of the church. But it was given to them to explain that which had been hinted at for so long. OT types of marriages abound, as do OT evacuation types. And our Lord did far more than hint (Matt 16:18). He very plainly taught the brideship of His church. Why, very much of the upper room discourse is devoted to a quite long marriage proposal (Jn 13-17)!²² But it was not until the apostolic ministries that it was explained as one whole concept. So I say very definitely that Jesus did teach church truth, if only in seminal form (and I personally think it was much more developed than that). And if that be true, then His teaching about the “one taken and the one left behind” is for all intents and purposes a proof text. Certainly it is comforting beyond words! Why? Because if it *can* refer to the rapture, then it most certainly *does* refer to it. And yes, to the exclusion of His Second Coming to establish His Kingdom, for it is bathed in all the sign-lessness, the imminence, and the unpredictability that so clearly mark the Rapture of the Church!



Please remember this very important guideline: we must never, **NEVER** break fellowship over end-time interpretations. (Unless, of course, they deny the *fundamentals* of our faith – e.g. rejecting the Day of Judgment) Such a schism breaks the heart of Jesus, who, after all, is going to come when He decides, how He decides whether we “get it right” or not.

And speaking of getting it right, please remember this if you don’t remember anything else: Those who “get it right” (i.e., whose model most closely resembles the way it actually happens when He comes) will not necessarily be more ready than those whose models miss it by a mile! In fact, it is possible that they may not be ready at all, because our Lord never commanded us to get it right! His command has ever been: **BE READY!** So if this has all been just a mental game for them – or worse, an intellectual fetish – then it is very possible that they have never been seriously concerned about their own spiritual condition. So much so that, perhaps, they will have neglected a serious consideration of the gospel itself. Maybe they, who will have spent so much time tinkering with models, will not even be a child of God, having never received Christ into their lives.

On the other hand, there will be many who are ready, and their numbers will include those who have postulated many different models (and missed it badly), as well as those who never gave “end-time events” a second thought, being content with the simple assurance that Christ is coming for them (Jn 14:1-3)... Content to let Him worry about the details. But I say again: **they will be ready!** Why? Because they will have devoted their lives to the disciplines and ministries that Jesus left for them to do. They “looked for His coming” (Matt 24:42); they “kept watch” (Matt 24:43) over their souls and the souls of those whom God had entrusted to them; they “loved His appearing”, not the details surrounding it! (2 Tim 4:8); they “occupied until [He] came” (Lk 19:13; they “redeemed the times” (Eph 5:16); they “went about their Father’s business” (Lk 2:49) of loving the people that He brought into their lives, and by preaching and living the gospel in both words and deeds! Surely that is what Jesus meant when He said, “**When the Son of Man cometh will He find faith on the earth?**” (Lk 18:8) He *is* coming, and He will be

²² See appendix

looking for those who are being obedient to His command to love one another (Jn 13:34)! He won't care one bit about church-busyness, or end-time debates. And He will *not* have a special reward for all those who postulated the model that most nearly resembled the way it all actually played out. He wants to find disciples who are trying their best to flesh out the eternal, abundant life that He has planted in them by being broken bread and poured out wine, and as such humbly serving others in His name (Eph 2:10; 5:21; 1 Cor 11:24-25).

Have a blessed day,

Pastor Tom

Appendix

Elements of a Hebrew Marriage

by T. L. Marshall

The marriage customs of the Israelites ²³ provides many insights into the relationship that we (the church) have with Christ. In addition to being our Savior and Lord, (and so much more!) He is our Betrothed Bridegroom! Ours is the most intimate relationship between God and humanity that exists. Indeed, it is the most intimate relationship between Creator and created beings of all kinds! Why? Because we are family! This intimacy is seen throughout Jesus' earthly ministry. Consider the elements of the following brief outline, along with the New Testament fulfillment (*in italics*), whereby Christ and His Church were betrothed. All references are to the upper room discourse as recorded in John 13-17, unless otherwise noted.

Arrangements – There were three methods whereby a marriage came about:

1. The bride was **chosen by the Groom's Father**. *Jesus thanked His Father for those whom He (his father) had chosen and given to Him. (Jn 17:3, etc.)*
2. **By payment** of an agreed upon sum of money (or equivalent). *Jesus paid the price for His bride's redemption at Calvary. (1 Cor 6:20)*
3. **By force**, i.e., by winning her heart and then "stealing" her. *Jesus won our hearts by His sinless life and selfless love. And He will come for us as "a thief in the night". (Jn 12:32; 1 Jn 4:19; 1 Thess 5:2; Jdg 19-21)*

Courtship – The groom spent as much time with his betrothed as possible and proper. If he were the firstborn he would tell her about his father's estate and the home (on that estate) that would be hers. He would tell her all about the family traditions and history, and instruct her concerning her responsibilities and privileges. He would teach and show her his plans for continuing the family business. He would win her heart with his courtesy, strength of character, humility, and practicality. *The entire public ministry of Christ was given to constantly exposing the disciples to all of these elements, and many others, besides.*

Proposal – On the evening of the groom's formal proposal he would arrange for a feast, during which he would make his desires unmistakably clear as follows:

- 1) **He would serve** at least a portion of the meal to her, so that she could have a special remembrance of him from time to time during their upcoming separation.. *Jesus broke bread and poured the cup of wine and gave it to each disciple, commanding them to "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:23-28).*
- 2) **He would humble himself before her**. *Jesus took a towel and bowl of water and washed His disciples' feet (Jn 13:2-20).*
- 3) **He would make his promises to her**. This would be the formalization of the many things he had said to her during their courtship. *Jesus' promises during that evening included:*
 - a) *His Father's estate was enormous, having many mansions (Jn 14: 1-4);*

²³ *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, William Smith, LL.D., Public Domain, was used it as a primary source for this brief, along with other similar general reference works.

- b) *He was going there to prepare a place for us (14: 2,3);*
- c) *We will be true members of the family, one with him and his father (14: 7-12);*
- d) *We have only to ask anything according to his will and he will hear and will provide (14: 13-15);*
- e) *From the very beginning of the time separation He will send many messages of encouragement and instruction, along with precious gifts by the Holy Spirit, who will stay with us during the entire time (14: 16-26);*
- f) *He blessed us with a special benediction of peace (14: 27-31);*
- g) *He promised that, beginning immediately, we have a special, intimate relationship with him, and that all things pertaining to our new life and service would flow from that intimacy (15:1-14);*
- h) *He reminded us that he chose and ordained us to be his friend (15: 15-17);*²⁴
- i) *We are to live a life of integrity before the world, one that will bring honor to the family name. The Spirit will always be there to help us live such a life (15:18 – 16:15);*
- j) *He promised us the gifts of joy, enlightenment, and success during his absence (vv. 16: 16-33);*

- 4) **He would then pray for her**, asking God to seal his words to her heart. *Jesus prayed his beautiful highly priestly prayer in the disciples' hearing (Jn 17).*
- 5) After the feast He would immediately **see to all legal requirements** to make the betrothal binding upon both himself and his bride. *Jesus immediately went to Gethsemane, the beginning of His passion, the fulfillment of which resulted in all legal requirements being completed to His Father's complete satisfaction of. He paid the terrible price for His bride!*

Bride's Responsibility – The bride's responsibilities were few, and simple:

- a) She took his words at face value, placing all her faith and hopes for her future happiness in his character and trustworthiness. But she did not do so blindly, for she had had the entire time of courtship to make dependable judgements concerning those very conditions.
- b) She busied herself with his instructions;
- c) She read his messages daily, and sent her own in reply;
- d) She submitted to the lordship of his visiting friend, who ever and only spoke to her about her betrothed, and never about himself;
- e) She took every opportunity to tell friends and strangers alike about her betrothed;
- f) She looked for his coming as the end of the year approached for she knew not the exact day when He would come. She kept her hope chest clean, orderly and filled with his love gifts;
- g) She carefully cultivated an attitude of expectancy, ever examining her motives, intentions, and hopes. **She would be ready for his return!**

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

²⁴ The church gets to marry its best friend!