SESSION FOUR / WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2011

OUR BLESSED HOPE!

The world system is unraveling today at an unparalleled pace. All over this planet, governments are disintegrating; morality is at an all-time low; and, as the Bible says, “men’s hearts are failing them for fear.” Luke 21:26 Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

Let’s just look at a random sampling of this week’s news:

TRIPOLI - Deep cracks open up in Moammar Gadhafi’s regime after more than 40 years in power with diplomats abroad and the justice minister at home resigning, air force pilots defecting and the government hall on fire. As of this writing (Tuesday morning) at least 236 protestors against Gadhafi have been killed in the streets. The national press reported Tuesday that there were many dead bodies in the streets of the capitol there.

CAIRO - The 30-year government of Hosni Mubarak has fallen and the Muslim Brotherhood appears poised for a takeover, posing a whole new threat to Israel and the oil supplies to the world. Yesterday Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed grave concerns of threats to peace in the Middle East.

MOSCOW - Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on Monday described Russia as an imitation of democracy and accused its current leader Vladimir Putin of conceit and contempt for voters. Gorbachev, who will turn 80 next week, called for a probe of the current government, which more and more is taking a harder position against Israel and the West.

NEW ZEALAND - One of New Zealand’s biggest cities lay in ruins Tuesday after a powerful earthquake toppled tall buildings and churches on a busy weekday, killing at least 65 people in the country’s worst natural disaster in decades.

MADISON, WISCONSIN - For the second week in a row, hundreds of people mill the
streets of Wisconsin’s capital, protesting the new governor’s decision to bring spending in line. The mob is demanding its “entitlement rights” whether the government can afford it or now.

ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA - A 25-year veteran of the local police force became the third officer killed in the line of duty there in less than a month. Violence continues to escalate. The murder rate is New York City has taken a sharp rise this year.

Those are just five headlines and stories chosen at random yesterday as I prepared the syllabus for tonight’s study. We could take the rest of the study tonight outlining startling headlines around the world. Truly the civilized world is coming unraveled. Is there any hope?

WHAT IS THE NEXT EVENT IN GOD’S PROPHETIC PROGRAM?

The answer to that can be found within the pages of your Bible:

1 Thes. 4:13-18 [New Living Testament]

And now, brothers and sisters, I want you to know what will happen to the Christians who have died so you will not be full of sorrow like people who have no hope. [14] For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus comes, God will bring back with Jesus all the Christians who have died.

[15] I can tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not rise to meet him ahead of those who are in their graves. [16] For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the call of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, all the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. [17] Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and remain with him forever. [18] So comfort and encourage each other with these words.

John 14:1-6

"Don't be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me. [2] There are many rooms in my Father's home, and I am going to prepare a place for you. If this were not so, I would tell you plainly. [3] When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. [4] And you know where I am going and how to get there."

[5] "No, we don't know, Lord," Thomas said. "We haven't any idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

[6] Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the
Father except through me.

WHAT IS THE RAPTURE?

☐ JESUS TAUGHT THAT HE WOULD RETURN TO TAKE HIS FOLLOWERS TO HIMSELF AND THAT WE WOULD MEET HIM “IN THE AIR”

Matthew 24:42-51

So be prepared, because you don't know what day your Lord is coming.
[43] "Know this: A homeowner who knew exactly when a burglar was coming would stay alert and not permit the house to be broken into. [44] You also must be ready all the time. For the Son of Man will come when least expected.

[45] "Who is a faithful, sensible servant, to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his household and feeding his family? [46] If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. [47] I assure you, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns. [48] But if the servant is evil and thinks, 'My master won't be back for a while,' [49] and begins oppressing the other servants, partying, and getting drunk— [50] well, the master will return unannounced and unexpected. [51] He will tear the servant apart and banish him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Mark 13:37

What I say to you I say to everyone: Watch for his return!"

☐ THE EPISTLES TEACH THAT JESUS WILL RETURN - The New Testament

Epistles refer often to the Second Coming and the theme of imminence (next or soon) runs through all the passages of Scripture dealing with this subject. The whole body of scripture emphasizes that His return will happen suddenly, without warning, and that believers should be in a state of continual readiness.

Note: The Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ are two DIFFERENT events with years between their occurrence.

1. The Rapture is when Heaven’s trumpet sounds and Christ instantly (in the twinkling of an eye) gathers up His followers, living and dead, to meet Him in the clouds of glory.
The word “rapture” is not found in the English Bible, but has been used so widely that one of the definitions of “rapture” in Webster’s New International Dictionary Unabridged is “Christ’s raising up of His true church and its members to a realm above the earth where the whole company will enjoy celestial bliss with its Lord.” The word “raptured” could well be used to translate the expression “caught up” of 1 Thes. 4:17.

2. The Second Coming of Christ is the time in which Jesus actually “touches down” so to speak on this earth to institute His Millennial reign for 1,000 years. Acts 1:9-11

It was not long after he said this that he was taken up into the sky while they were watching, and he disappeared into a cloud. [10] As they were straining their eyes to see him, two white-robed men suddenly stood there among them. [11] They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!"

WHAT WILL ACTUALLY HAPPEN DURING THAT GLORIOUS “INSTANT” OF THE RAPTURE? AND WHAT ABOUT THOSE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST WHO HAVE ALREADY DIED?

1 Cor. 15:51-54

But let me tell you a wonderful secret God has revealed to us. Not all of us will die, but we will all be transformed. [52] It will happen in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, the Christians who have died will be raised with transformed bodies. And then we who are living will be transformed so that we will never die. [53] For our perishable earthly bodies must be transformed into heavenly bodies that will never die. [54] When this happens—when our perishable earthly bodies have been transformed into heavenly bodies that will never die—then at last the Scriptures will come true:

"Death is swallowed up in victory.

Paul had already comforted the Thessalonians (those living in Thessalonica, Greece) in his writing to them (1 Thes. 4:13-18) that those who had already died would most certainly NOT be left out in this triumphant and supernatural homegoing. The people there were concerned about their friends in Christ who had already passed away and were buried somewhere. Would those dear friends be able to share the glory of that rapture day or had they already missed out because of their passing?
Paul informed the Thessalonians that they must not sorrow as those who have no hope. He taught them this divine truth: The person who has lived and died “in Christ” is still in Christ even in death and will rise with Him. Because Christ died and rose again, so the one who is one with Christ will rise again.

WILL THE CHURCH GO THROUGH THE TRIBULATION?

The Tribulation will be that 7-year period of time when the wrath of God is poured out upon the Earth. Although God’s people may endure severe trials before the Lord comes (as many saints around the world are experiencing even now), the Church will be raptured before the period called the Great Tribulation.

In studying the Word of God, we learn an principle: Scriptures are consistent because God is consistent. WHENEVER, THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE, GOD POURED OUT HIS WRATH UPON MANKIND - SUCH AS THE FLOOD, SODOM AND GOMORRAH, ETC., HE ALWAYS GOT HIS PEOPLE TO SAFETY FIRST. The Tribulation will be a time of God’s wrath - not man’s inhumanity to man, vis-a-vis the Holocaust or current persecution against believers in Muslim countries.

Christians are told repeatedly in the New Testament to be watchful for the Lord’s appearing. NEVER are they taught to watch for the Great Tribulation or the appearance of Antichrist. Believers are told to wait for “his Son from heaven,” not the Great Tribulation (I Thes. 1:10). The signs of the Lord’s coming will be fulfilled before His public appearing, but they do not have to be fulfilled before the Rapture. Any teaching that certain events must transpire before the Rapture is out of harmony with the doctrine of “imminence”. Imminent simply means “the next thing to happen.”

While Christians are looking forward to the coming of the Lord, it is well to remind themselves of Paul’s words to Titus: Titus 2:11-14. For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. [12] And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with self-control, right conduct, and devotion to God, [13] while we look forward to that wonderful event when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed. [14] He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing what is right.

Dr. Dwight D. Pentecost makes a fascinating observation in his little book Prophecy For Today:

“No place (in the Word) does it ever say that Christ is coming to take us to heaven.
Each time it speaks of Christ’s coming it is to take us to HIMSELF. The glory of heaven is the person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We are not looking for an event, nor are we looking for a program. We are looking for A PERSON!”

Zondervan Publishing / page 31

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The Apostle John is the only one of Jesus’ original disciples who died a natural death. Judas took his own life while the others were martyred in various places around the world for their faith. John was the youngest of our Lord’s disciples. It is believed he was not much more than 15 or 16 when he left his fishing business in Bethsaida, Israel, and followed Jesus.

John was the only disciple who had the courage to actually be near the cross when Jesus died. He stood beneath our suffering Lord, upholding Jesus’ mother Mary. From the cross, Jesus said to John and Mary, Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. [12] And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with self-control, right conduct, and devotion to God, [13] while we look forward to that wonderful event when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed. [14] He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing what is right.

John 19:26-27

When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, "Woman, he is your son." [27] And he said to this disciple, "She is your mother." And from then on this disciple took her into his home.

Jesus so loved and trusted young John (by now no more than 20 years of age) that He placed the care of His own mother into John’s hands. When the persecution against Christians reached a crescendo, John moved to the west coast of Turkey to the huge (then) metropolis of Ephesus where he became the pastor of a church started earlier by the Apostle Paul. John pastored that congregation (Mary, Jesus’ mother, was with him until her death and her grave can be found in Ephesus) until he was 90. While he would pastor Ephesus til in his late 90's, his ministry was interrupted by a devil in Rome by the name of:

EMPEROR DOMITIAN

When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army in 70 A.D., the general at first in charge of the demolition was Vespasian. But before the was against the Jews ended,
Vespasian was recalled to Rome where he was proclaimed Emperor. There were twelve such men in Roman history:

1. Julius Caesar (who technically was not an emperor but a dictator)
2. Augustus who ruled at the time of Jesus’ birth

THE CLAUDIAN EMPERORS
3. Tiberias (Under whose administration Jesus was crucified)
4. Caligula (Also known as Little Boots who was assassinated after four years)
5. Claudius (Emperor during most of Paul’s ministry)
6. Nero (Who condemned Paul to death)

EMPERORS DURING THE CIVIL WARS
7. Galba
8. Otho
9. Vitellius

THE FLAVIAN EMPERORS
10. Vespasian
11. Titus
12. Domitian (who sentenced John to imprisonment on Patmos)

Domitian was the son of Vespasian and the brother of Titus. Vespasian did not like Domitian very much (nor did anyone else) and highly favored Domitian’s brother Titus. When Vespasian became emperor, he made it very clear to all that it would be Titus who would succeed him, not Vespasian (which made the young brother seethe in repressed anger). Domitian was never granted any position of authority nor allowed to win any military victory. His father simply did not deem him fit to hold power.

When Vespasian died, Titus succeeded him and ruled until A.D. 83. (All through these years, John is pastoring the great Christian church in Ephesus, one of the largest cities in all the Roman Empire.) Titus died, some think by poisoning at the hands of Domitian (but that’s not fact for sure). But while Titus lay dying, Domitian hurried to the praetorian camp and had himself proclaimed emperor by the soldiers. The following day, September 14, A.D. 81, with Titus now dead, Domitian was confirmed emperor by the Roman Senate.

By all accounts, Domitian appeared to have been a thoroughly nasty person, rarely polite, insolent, arrogant and cruel. He was a tall man, with large eyes, though weak sight. And, showing all the signs of someone drunk with power, he preferred to be addressed as ‘dominus et deus’ (master and god). Within four years, Domitian had declared himself “perpetual senator” which granted him nearly unlimited power. It was at this point that he began to really crack down on Christians, at first taxing them to the breaking point, and then pursuing them to their deaths.
Domitian believed if he could eradicate the great leaders of this Christian faith, he could bring the whole movement to a halt. And so he had the Apostle Pastor John of Ephesus arrested and sentenced to spend the last of his life on the prison island of Patmos. Patmos is located off the western coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea.

John spent only a few years (now in his 90's) on the island for Domitian himself was assassinated. In the summer of 96 A.D., the assassination plot was hatched against him and a man named Stephanus killed the ruler in hand-to-hand combat. Stephanus himself was also killed in the melee. Date of the killing was September 18, AD 96. The new emperor was a man named Marcus Nerva, a respected lawyer. It was a good choice. Nerva declared that such civil or political prisoners such as the Apostle John should be freed and returned to their homes.

So it was that John returned to Ephesus at about age 95. He then wrote of the encounter he had with Jesus Himself on the Isle of Patmos. That writing is called the Book of Revelation. (John also wrote I, II and III John and the magnificent Gospel of John before he died a natural death.)

JOHN’S ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST ON THE ISLE OF PATMOS

Rev. 1:9-18

I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. [10] I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, [11] Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. [12] And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; [13] And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. [14] His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; [15] And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of
many waters. [16] And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. [17] And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: [18] I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

The book of Revelation has a 3-fold purpose:

1) Chapters 2 and 3 show Christ’s concerns over the seven churches that were located then in Turkey. But they also indicate His concern over the seven eras of His church since that time, culminating with the church in Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22), a lukewarm group of believers. That is truly a summation of much of His church in America today - a form of godliness but denying all the power of the Holy Spirit.

2) Revelation was given to the churches to strengthen our faith, even if and when we go through times of persecution (a distinct possibility in our lifetime).

3) Revelation was given us to show clearly God’s plan for humanity “After Tomorrow,” right through the Tribulation, the Millennium and the ending of time.
For our purposes in this study, we will begin with chapter 4.

Rev. 4:1-11

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. [2] And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. [3] And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. [4] And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. [5] And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. [6] And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. [7] And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. [8] And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. [9] And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, [10] The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, [11] Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Every follower of Jesus Christ will one day be at this very place - the throne of God.

Let us note quickly some highlights of this chapter:

1. The appearance of God - like a sardine stone, that is, light emanated FROM Him.

2. The rainbow - the sign of God’s infinite mercy. In chapter 20, when the lost stand before the Great White Throne Judgment seat, you will note there is no sign of the rainbow. At that point, His mercy will have ended for the lost.

3. The four and twenty elders - the redeemed of the ages

4. The supernatural throne of God
5. The four mighty seraphim

6. The worship of the saints

Next week we will begin study on the outpoured wrath of God on Planet Earth as the Tribulation period of 7 years begins. Thankfully, those in Christ will have already been gathered safely home.