

RESURRECTION AND RAPTURE

Dr. Domingo J. Diel, Jr.

By the nature of the subject being discussed in this symposium, divided in three related topics, repetitions at some points cannot be avoided. In fact, the next two topics — mine and Dr. Gumban's "Judgment and Tribulation" — are related to, if not essentially components of, the topic "The Second Coming of Jesus Christ" presented by Dr. N.M. Fabula. One cannot fully discuss the doctrine of the Second Coming without discussing at the same time the themes of resurrection and judgment. The two other words which also appear in today's topics - rapture and tribulation - because of the connotations they carry, seem to get more attention and importance among us these days than the main subjects of the Second Coming, Resurrection and Judgment.

In fact, the word *rapture* does not even appear in the Bible - at least not in the ones I have consulted with the use of a good Concordance. I can understand, if our people would become frightened at the mention of the *Great Tribulation*, since the way it is described in the New Testament is really frightening! But the word *rapture* should actually evoke in us a feeling of expectant joy, bliss or ecstasy, for that is what it means.

But why this symposium about all these? Personally, I can think of at least two reasons: a) To reject the attempts of some Korean preachers, who are in the country advertising themselves as having the knowledge of the divine mystery (secret), which only God Himself knows. To claim to have read the signs of times correctly, then speculate and claim to know about the exact date of the rapture, that is on October 28, 1992 before midnight, is to usurp the divine prerogative, hence, blasphemous! There were in the past also similar so-called modern prophets who dated exactly the Coming Again of the Lord Jesus Christ. They came from the ranks of the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Apostolic Church, and during the fifties, from some Pentecostal groups. They were all proved wrong—the Lord Jesus Christ did not come as they predicted He would come. Modern Church history has now the records of these modern false prophets. These so-called Korean prophets could be the next ones.

I wish I could discuss with you lengthily, why such phenomenon comes in waves and at certain periods of history. But perhaps, it will suffice, if I say that at times when the world is in great turmoil, misery and catastrophe, then such

predictions come. My second reason then is: b) To remind us Christians to be awake and remain faithful in the faith and in the Word of God. Indeed, the world is in great turmoil: terrible famine in several African countries, the total breakdown of socialism in Eastern Europe, the economic recession in the American continent and Western Europe, together with untold natural catastrophies in many parts of the world including the Philippines. All these are conducive to predictions about the cataclysmic end of the world and the Coming Again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me now turn to the task proper assigned to me: to discuss the topic "Resurrection and Rapture." Christianity stands or falls on the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. He is not only the central figure of it, He is the foundation as well as the cornerstone. The Christian Faith, on the other hand, also stands or falls on the crucified-risen Lord Jesus Christ. If He did not rise from the dead, our faith in Him would be in vain. But because He is risen, we shall also be risen, or as the Gospel chorus says: Because He lives, we shall also live and can face tomorrow.

This foundation of faith in the risen Lord is anchored in the stories of the Four Gospels - all Four Gospels report about the resurrection of Jesus Christ - and in the Epistles of St. Paul.

A. The doctrinal concept of the resurrection of the dead in the last days is, in turn, founded on this faith in the risen Lord. This has been illustrated in the story of Lazarus, which happened in the life-time of Jesus Christ himself (John 11). Moreover, St. Paul in a number of his Epistles attested to this faith of the early Christians in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord, and the resurrection of the dead. Four references from his Letters would suffice to illustrate the latter:

- a) II Cor. 5:4 - "... we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."
- b) I Cor. 6:14 - "And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power."
- c) Rom. 8:10-11 - "But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you."
- d) Phil. 3:20-21 - "But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to

himself." And finally, I Cor. 15:51-55:

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?

From all these passages two observations can be drawn. First, the resurrection of the dead awaits at the coming again of the Risen-Crucified Lord, who comes in glory as King and Judge, and second: in the resurrection of the dead, human mortality characterized by decay and destruction is changed to immortality. On this, hangs the Christian faith and on this, makes the Christian life meaningful and worth living.

B. Now to a more sensational, highly dramatized topic of *rapture*. The word itself does not appear in the Bible, but it evokes both curiosity and fear among many of us. I cannot yet fully figure out why it creates much attention and anxiety to many Christians.

The word means, "the act of transporting a person from one sphere of existence to another," (Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus, 1987 Edition, London). With this definition, we have at least two New Testament references, which seem to correspond to it. One in Matthew 24:40-42 and the other in I Thess. 4:16-18. Before one gets into them more closely, we should be reminded of one Old Testament incident which could also be classified as *rapture*, that of Elijah's experience. Without tasting death, he was carried up to heaven by a whirlwind (another version: by a chariot of fire) as recorded in II Kings 2.

In the two references mentioned, one in I Thess. 4:16-18 is fairly well complete. Matt. 24:40-42 does not say about the whereabouts of those who suddenly disappear from the earth. It does not even say where those who disappeared go. This could be, perhaps, the reason for fear among many.

Since the so-called *rapture* is a part (a small part) of the doctrine of the Last Things - all to be understood against or in the context of the Coming Again of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, we should not deal with it out of proportion of the rest of the doctrine, which certainly also includes judgment, resurrection, life forever with the Lord and death forever without Him.

What then, do I make out of the so-called *rapture* in the whole context of the Coming Again of the Lord and the End of the world? Let me offer two observations: First, this event means both separation and reunion. This will be

the final moment of separation: the saved from the unsaved, the justified sinners from the unjustified sinners. At the same time, this is also the moment of final reunion of the Christian believers with their Lord (1 Thess. 4:16-18). The second observation is: this moment of separation will be something that is quick. There would be no waving of handkerchief, so to say; neither would there be time to shed tears! That is the reason evidently for the Apostle's exhortation: watch, be ready and pray.

About the sensational dating of the Lord's Coming Again or the rapture on October 28 at 11 o'clock p.m., I maintain, it is wrong and is misleading Christians—a human attempt to be like God. As in the Garden of Eden, man and woman in their human curiosity (more seriously: disobedience), cannot accept their limits as human beings. To know or attempt to know as God knows, is to claim to be God, and this to me is not only sacrilegious, it gets into the realm of blasphemy.

Faith and hope confirm that we belong to Christ and that we are in Him. This should strengthen us these days. When the great reformer Martin Luther was asked, what would he do if Jesus Christ would come tomorrow, replied: "I will plant an apple tree today." Real and living Christian faith in the Living Lord gives Christians confidence to welcome with joy the Coming Again of the King of kings and the Lord of lords, be it in the morning, noon, afternoon or night, any day now or in the future. Let us continue to do our usual task, but being watchful and remaining faithful in His Word and in the Christian faith until He comes again!