

Where the Believers Go After the Catching Up to the Clouds

By Robert I. Adams

The apostle Paul wrote about what will happen at the coming of the Lord in his letter to the church at Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Paul states:

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

In this article, we will be looking at where the gathering together of all the believers in the air will take place, and where they will go after the gathering.

As to where the believers will be gathered, let's first go to the book of Acts, to the account where Jesus is taken up into heaven after His resurrection. Those who witnessed this event were His disciples. It is described in the following way:

“He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.’ Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.” (Acts 1:9–12)

This passage informs us that Jesus ascended from a hill nearby Jerusalem called the Mount of Olives. Since the two angels said to the disciples that Jesus will come back “in the same way” as He departed to heaven, we can expect Him to return to the exact place from where He departed. Zechariah, one of the prophets of Israel, foretold that when Jesus returns, He will descend on the Mount of Olives:

“Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. On that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem.” (Zech. 14:3, 4)

According to the apostle Paul, when Jesus descends from heaven He will gather the believers to Himself in the clouds. Therefore, we have every reason to believe that the gathering of the believers to Jesus will occur in the air space above Jerusalem. Here, there will be enough room for the many millions who will meet Jesus when He returns.

So where will all those gathered to Jesus in the clouds go after the great gathering? To find out, let's compare what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4 to Christ's own teaching in Matthew 24, where He describes His second coming immediately after the great tribulation (cf. vv.29-31). Christ's account in Matthew 24 ends with “His elect” being gathered by the angels when He appears in the clouds (v.31). As in Paul's description of the return of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4, the end of the account hangs literally in the air. Only after several parables about His return, does Jesus tell us what will then take place. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus

informs us that after His descent, all the nations will be gathered before Him to be judged. This happens on the earth. And since we are told that when the gathering of the believers takes place they will then "be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17), we can safely assume they will accompany Jesus in His descent to the earth after having met Him in the clouds.

This conclusion aligns with the meaning of *parousia*, the Greek term that is used for the "coming" of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 4:15. The word *parousia* was a term used for a visit of the Caesar or a high-ranking official to a city. The rulers of the city went out to meet him and escort him back to the city on the final part of his journey. This seems to imply what will happen when Jesus returns; the believers from the whole world will "meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17) and then escort Him down to the Mount of Olives at Jerusalem.

Let's take a look at the Greek term *apántesis* ('meet') as used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Paul wrote here that the believers will "be caught up . . . in the clouds to meet [*apántesis*] the Lord in the air." The word *apántesis* is also used in Acts 28:15, where we read that believers from Rome went out to "meet" Paul. This verse provides us with an example of how this word was used at the time the New Testament was written. In the same way as Paul continued to Rome with the believers who came out from Rome to meet him, so will Jesus, when He comes, continue His descent to the earth with the believers who will be caught up from the earth to meet Him in the air.

Another passage in the Bible where the word *apántesis* appears is in Matthew 25, where Jesus told the parable of the coming of the bridegroom to illustrate His coming after the great tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:29-31). As was customary, a group of virgins (bridesmaids) "went out to meet [*apántesis*] the bridegroom" (v.1). They were to greet the bridegroom and escort him on the last leg of his journey to the house of the bride from where the virgins left to meet the bridegroom. This illustrates the sequence of events at the return of Jesus. In the same way as the bridegroom continues on his way to the house of the bride along with the virgins who came from her house to "meet [*apántesis*] him" (v.6), so will Jesus, when He comes, continue His descent to the earth with the believers who are caught up from the earth to meet Him in the air.

The above passages are the only places in the Bible where the word *apántesis* is used. There is, however, a variant of this word that also sheds light on events at the second coming of Jesus. That word is *hupántesis*. Its only occurrence is in John 12, where we read of Jesus coming to Jerusalem on a donkey. In verses 12 and 13 it says, "A great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to meet [*hupántesis*] Him." This is indicative of what will transpire at the coming of Jesus in the future. In the same way as Jesus continued on to Jerusalem together with the great crowd who went out from Jerusalem to meet Him, so will Jesus, when He comes back, continue His descent to Jerusalem with the believers who are caught up from the earth to meet Him in the air.

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