

"The Promise in John 14:1-3"

by

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Chapter 12

from

The Church and the Tribulation: A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationism

Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

In this passage Jesus promises to return and receive His disciples to Himself.¹ Jesus tells them, it is usually understood, that He will go back to heaven for the preparation of heavenly "mansions" (AV) to which He will take the disciples at His return. From this the argument develops that Jesus must come to take believers to heaven before the tribulation, because at His posttribulational return He will reign upon the earth rather than return to heaven. But notable weaknesses appear in the argument:

Jesus does not promise that upon His return He will take believers to mansions in the Father's House. Instead, He promises, "*Where I am, there you may be also.*" The pretribulational interpretation would require us to believe that the Church will occupy heavenly mansions for a short period of seven years, only to vacate them for a thousand years in order to reign with Christ "upon the earth" (Rev. 5:10; 20:4-6). A thousand years' delay before habitation of the mansions poses no greater problem for posttribulationists than a thousand years' vacating them does for pretribulationists. In order to maintain pretribulationism we might avoid the difficulty by regarding the New Jerusalem (where the mansions are assumed to be) as a millennial as well as an eternal city. Then the Church

1 Payne adopts the view that Jesus here promises to come and receive to heaven believers *at their deaths* because Jesus has just spoken of His own death and of the disciples' following Him in death (13:36,37) and because the statement "I will come" in 14:18 carries a spiritual sense (p. 74). But in the exchange between Jesus and Peter concerning Peter's boisterous faith (13:36,37) Jesus implies that Peter will *not* follow Him in death, at least not on this occasion. Nothing is said concerning the death of believers generally. In 14:18, "I will come" refers to Jesus' coming in the person of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, for the believers' earthly lifetime, not to a spiritual coming of Christ at a Christian's death. The additional clauses in 14:13, "and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also," rule out a reference to the Spirit's descent as in verse eighteen.

would not have to leave her mansions during the millennium because they, too, will descend from heaven after the tribulation. But if this view be adopted, no difficulty arises for posttribulationism either! For if the mansions in the New Jerusalem will descend at the beginning of the millennium, the Church will not need to return to heaven before the tribulation in order to dwell in them.²

Although in John 14:1-3 we may solve any difficulty for posttribulationism by taking the widely accepted millennial application of the New Jerusalem, another view of the passage better accords with the larger context:

Christ is promising to take His disciples to the Father's house when He comes again. . . . The passage . . . clearly teaches that the disciples will go from earth to heaven. . . .³

That, however, is exactly what the passage does not state. Indeed, the absence of such a statement makes one of the most remarkable features of the passage and holds the clue to a deeper and truer understanding.

In order to console the disciples concerning His going away, Jesus tells them that His leaving will work to their advantage. He is going to prepare for them *spiritual abodes within His own person*. Dwelling in these abiding places they will belong to God's household. This He will accomplish by going to the cross and then ascending to the Father. But He will return to receive the disciples into His immediate presence forever. Thus, the rapture will not have the purpose of taking them to heaven. It rather follows from their being in Christ, in whom each believer already has an abode.

The crucial point is that Jesus does not speak about a work of construction in the New Jerusalem. He rather speaks along a line which runs through the entire Upper Room Discourse, that of the position "in Christ" of believers. The word "place" (τόπος) easily lends itself to the thought. The verb "prepare" (ἐτοιμάζω) often refers to a spiritual work.⁴ And the figure of a house (οἰκία), in its various nominal and verbal forms, appears

2 Those who believe that the Church will hover in mid-air for seven years at the point where they meet Christ prior to the tribulation cannot use John 14:1-3 argumentatively, for like posttribulationists they do not believe that Jesus and the Church will return to heaven upon His advent. Doubtless, the theory of a lengthy stay in the sky offers some advantage. It slightly alleviates the problem of two second comings instead of one and provides a reason why no passage concerning the rapture incorporates a return to heaven. However, neither do we read any place of a seven years' waiting in the sky. And those who hold such a view have to let go supposed indications in Revelation that the Church has moved entirely to heaven by the time the tribulation **begins**.

3 Walvoord, *BibSac*, 112:2; and RQ, 76, 77; see also Linton, 33, 34.

4 Matt. 3:3; 25:34; Mark 1:3; Luke 1:17, 76; 2:31; 3:4; 12:47; 1 Cor. 2:9; 2 Tim. 2:21.

frequently in the NT as a metaphor for the place of believers in the Father's domestic domain.⁵

The use of *μονή* and its associated verb confirms the above understanding. Unfortunately, the familiar term "mansion" does not project the correct connotation in contemporary English. The Greek word carries no thought of a stately house of imposing size and luxurious style. It means simply an *abode* or an *abiding place* (the meaning of "mansion" in early English). And the rest of the Upper Room Discourse indicates that *μονή* and its verbal cognate *μένω* have to do with a spiritual abode in Christ rather than a material structure in heaven. *Μονή* appears only once elsewhere in the NT, and that, significantly, only a few verses after John 14:2. Referring to the Father and Himself, Jesus says, "We will come to him, and make Our abode [*μονή*] with him" (John 14:23). The two appearances of *μονή* denote a reciprocal relationship: as believers will have abiding places in Christ, so the Father and the Son will have an abiding place in believers. The plurality of the term "abodes" in verse three emphasizes the individuality of each believer's place in Christ.

In confirmation, "abiding" in a spiritual sense forms a leading motif throughout the Upper Room Discourse: "the Father abiding in Me" (14:10); "He [the Comforter] abides with you, and will be in you" (14:17); "abide in Me, and I in you . . . abides in the vine, . . . abide in Me" (15:4); "if anyone does not abide in Me, . . ." (15:6); "if you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, . . ." (15:7); "abide in My love" (15:9); "you will abide in My love; even as I . . . abide in His love" (15:10). Jesus could hardly have made it clearer that the abode of a disciple in the Father's house will not be a mansion in the sky, but a spiritual position in Christ. The larger context of Johannine literature bears out the same thought. See John 6:56; 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 9, 17, 24; 4:12, 13, 15, 16.

We can now easily understand why Jesus said, "I . . . will receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also," instead of, "I . . . will receive you to myself; that I may take you to the heavenly mansions." Believers already dwell in Christ, their abiding place. Hence, all that is needed at their meeting with Him is to be kept in His immediate presence for evermore. We are not to deny a literal heaven, of course, but only to regard the context of John 14:1-3 as indicative of a spiritual relationship to the Father through union with Christ.

The interpretation gains further substantiation from the depth of meaning it gives to verse six. In Christ their abode, believers have the "way" into the Father's presence. In Christ, they have the "truth," revealing the Father's innermost character. And in Christ, they have the "life," infusing into them the Father's very nature. These are the present

⁵ Acts 9:31; Rom. 8:9, 11; 14:19; 15:2; 1 Cor. 3:9, 16; 8:1; 10:23; 14:3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26; 2 Cor. 10:8; 12:19; 13:10; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19, 21; 4:12, 16, 29; 1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:2-6; 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:5, 7.

consequences of a position in Christ, just as reception into His immediate presence will be the future consequence.⁶

Chapter 12, "The Promise in John 14:1-3," from *The Church and the Tribulation: A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973).

6 We read that "the hope of the return of Christ to take the saints to heaven is presented in John 14 as an imminent hope. There is no teaching of any intervening event" (Walvoord, *RQ*, 78). However, the Upper Room Discourse does disclose that at least one outstanding event, the coming of the Holy Spirit, must precede the return of Christ to receive His disciples. Furthermore, Jesus also predicts an intervening period of persecution and tribulation (John 15:18-21; 16:1-4, 33). (And elsewhere Jesus gives the great commission to be carried out in an intervening period.) Thus, Jesus does *not* put forward His promise to return as an imminent hope.