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BY ALAN PARKS

Caught Up and Reunited

Like many of us, I grew up learning of the next great act of God called the rapture. Before I was saved, it terrified me. The thought of coming home to an empty house and being left behind to face God's wrath was real and frightening. After God forgave and saved me from my sin, what had been my deepest burden became my greatest thrill. I could now look forward to the promised time when I would be free from sin and spend eternity with the Lord!

However, a different interpretation has been gaining popularity and has made us search the Bible to determine whether it's scriptural. Disagreement over the interpretations has divided churches, friends, and even families.

A growing number of believers say that the rapture is a pipe dream, that it is the creation of John Nelson Darby, and that no early church leaders held that position until he did in the 1830s. Is this true? Is the belief that Christians will be "caught up" to meet the Lord in the air—thus sparing the church from the horrors of the tribulation—the invention of a man?

Actually, many Christians wrote and preached of the rapture long before 1830. I cannot list them all here, but search for Joseph Mede's seminal work, *Clavis Apocalyptica*, from 1627. Also, Irenaeus (AD 130–202) wrote in book 5, chapter 29 of *Against Heresies*: "And therefore, when in the end the church shall suddenly be caught up from this, it is said, 'There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning.'" Any interested reader would enjoy the writings of Cyprian (AD 200–258), Thomas Vincent (AD 1634–1678), Morgan Edwards (AD 1722–1795), and many others who believed in a literal interpretation of prophecy.

As with any important matter, our first question must be "What says the Lord?" The only words that matter are what Scripture says! Of the New Testament passages on the rapture, the one that has brought me the most comfort in times of loss and grief is 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Possibly 20 years had passed since Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and the saints had concerns about their loved ones who had "fallen asleep." In this passage, Paul addresses them tenderly and beautifully.

First, Paul sets the stage. What he is about to impart is not his opinion: "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord" (v. 15). This was divine revelation received from the Lord Himself. It is based on the foundational belief of Christ's resurrection (v. 14). Next, Paul speaks of His return: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God" (v. 16). And then he adds: "And the dead in Christ will rise first." The question regarding dead loved ones is quickly answered in victory: there will be a resurrection!

And any believers alive to be "caught up" are considered in the next verse: "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 it will be forever: "And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (v. 17). This is the rapture, the catching or seizing away. Our Savior will descend into the very realm of the Prince of the Power of the Air and bring us safely home. He will either come with us or for us!

Our Savior will descend into the very realm of the Prince of the Power of the Air and bring us safely home.

What our Lord's return will set up is one glorious reunion. We'll see the One who suffered and died to atone for our sins. We'll begin our eternal occupation of worshipping Him. While we'll unite with the saints of all the ages, we'll reunite with friends and loved ones who went before us. All of the "no mores" of Revelation 21 and 22 will indeed be gloriously absent.

While this is obviously a massive subject, one impossible to exhaust in a few words, let us simply marvel over this glorious event. The wonder is that we'll not only be with Him but also like Him. There's no wonder why Paul ended by writing, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (v. 18). What a future is ours! ■

Alan Parks is a commended worker based in Texas.

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COVER PHOTO: Javier Ramirez preaching in the Guadalupe church—Mindy Ramirez

Photo: ©Lightstock.com









Above (from top): Rice fields dot the landscape around Trujillo (©AdobeStock/Galyna Andrushko); In the mountains, the roads become more winding; The Ramirez family joins the believers in Pay Pay; After lunch, Javier shares thoughts from the Bible. **Right:** Lilia finds beauty in this simple adobe bathroom.

Be Our Guest

Join a Family's Trip to Encourage Assemblies in Rural Peru

BY MINDY RAMIREZ

Have you ever thought about coming to Peru? Like many missionaries, my family enjoys showing visitors around our beautiful country and introducing them to the believers and ministries here. We focus much of our ministry on discipleship, Bible teaching, and preaching, which take us around our coastal-desert city of Trujillo and into surrounding areas. Even if visiting had never crossed your mind until now, we would love to take you with us—right now—on a weekend trip to encourage some rural assemblies about three hours north and east of us. Are you ready for an adventure? Let's go!

Day 1: From rice fields to mountains

As we get ready to leave the house on Friday morning, make sure you use the restroom. There aren't clean rest stops or fast-food chains to quickly stop at here, unlike the US. Oh, and let me warn you: the roads can be pretty bumpy. And sometimes the police stop you just to make sure your headlights are on (yes, even in the middle of the day) or all your paperwork is in order. I've already packed snacks to take with us since, again, there are no drive-throughs or easy stops. We now have everything we need, so let's head to the car!

Now that we're on our way, let me point out the rice fields on both sides of the road. This area is a major producer of Peru's rice—a daily staple, especially along the coast. In fact, many people will say you haven't eaten if you haven't had rice that day!

Are you noticing that the scenery has started to change now that we're heading up toward the mountains? The roads are becoming a little more winding, but we won't climb too high. We will stop at Pay Pay, which is the farthest we normally go. This village, Pay Pay, is home to an assembly with six older women and one older man.

They've invited us for a lunch of stewed goat and rice today. As we chat, they tell us about the history of the church and the people who attend. After, Javier, my husband, leads us in a time of reflection. The saints contribute insightful things to the teaching.



Meanwhile, our kids, Lilia (4) and Mateo (2), run around the church and play in the piles of rocks in the garden. Lilia asks to stop by the bathroom. She especially loves this church's bathroom, which involves a walk through the weedy garden to get to the little adobe room. (Watch out for the ants!) I remember the first time we went to use this bathroom, she told me, "This is so beautiful!" and I









Above (from top): Javier grew up in the Pacasmayo church, gathered here to celebrate an anniversary; The Ramirez family and several friends enjoy God's creation; Javier's friends set up instruments at the church in Jaguay; Mindy organizes the Sunday school in Jaguay, and two teens from Pacasmayo help. **Right:** In the Jaguay Sunday school, Lilia and a friend learn about the days of creation.

thought, *I want the perspective of a child!* I love their wonder at all things new and different.

We find the seven saints so welcoming and are always amazed at their generosity. Every time we visit, they provide some kind of food alongside the service. We pray others will come to know their generosity and, even more, God's! Will you pray for this assembly—the only Christian church in Pay Pay? Please pray that the Holy Spirit will be so present in the believers' lives and in the church that people can't help but want to start attending. Pray that more people will attend and be saved. Pray, too, that God will show us how to best encourage the believers. No one among them can preach. We are thankful, though, that a fellow servant, Segundo, takes the bus to Pay Pay as often as he can.

Day 2: Cockroaches, music, and kids

Are you ready to head to the coastal city of Pacasmayo? We drive back down the mountain and settle into the guest rooms of the church where Javier grew up. My kids love playing in the old sanctuary. If you poke your head in at just the right moment, you may see them singing songs to Jesus on the stage! I still have a hard time with the cockroaches living in the church's old wood floors, but God gives me grace and strength.

When we wake up on Saturday, we take a few minutes to enjoy God's creation at the beach. Before we head to the next church, we pause for lunch. You guess what's on the menu today: rice!

Then, we pack up before heading to Jaguay, which is only about 20 minutes from Pacasmayo. The kids and I will go a little later, in time for the service. You, Javier, and some of his childhood friends go early to set up the music. We are thankful for his friends' help in leading the music at this rural church and some others. Many lack believers who play instruments, so days like this, when instruments contribute to the worship time, are special.

Before the service begins, you look around and notice that this church is made entirely of unpainted adobe bricks but it is clean and well cared for. After we sing, the adults and kids split up. Today, Javier brought a friend from Trujillo to share in the preaching load. The saints enjoy hearing the Word of God from different brothers in Christ. I take the kids to the back room to do Sunday school (or Saturday school). This church asked us to start a Sunday school, and we are now seeing neighborhood kids come. They are still getting used to sitting for class, but they are hearing the Gospel!



When the meeting ends, someone hands you a little purple bag that looks like a fat Otter Pop. It is called *mazamorra*, or purple corn pudding. Peruvians boil dried purple corn to make a drink and a dessert. It's delicious! We love seeing the generosity of these small churches. We also love seeing growth and interest in the Gospel. This church consists mostly of one family, but their friends and neighbors are coming and getting saved. Will you pray that this spiritual interest will continue?

It's now 6:30 p.m., and the sun is going down (yes, I know it's early, but close to the equator, the sun sets at almost the same time year round). We head back to Pacasmayo. Javier will help with the youth group at the local church. This

church has been around for 67 years and is more established and bigger than the others we visit. Javier considers it an honor and privilege to serve in the church where he was saved and matured as a believer so many years ago. The youth group is growing, and the teens are inviting their friends to hear the Gospel and grow in the Lord. We will all be tired at the end of the day, but what a privilege it is to see people learning about Jesus and to be involved.

Day 3: The faithfulness of believers

On Sunday, we travel about an hour back up toward the mountain to another small town, Cafetal, and another small church. This town is where Segundo, our faithful fellow worker, lives. You don't see him when we arrive, as he is leading the church up the road in another rural town called Tolón. But, here, you see about 15 older saints and a couple of dogs enjoying the shade of the church. We break bread together. Suddenly, as the cup moves from person to person, you hear one of the older saints who can't remember or hear much anymore say, "That wasn't enough juice!" We love that he still comes to church even though he may no longer understand what is happening.

When you peek out the door, you see Segundo across the dirt street washing his face and arms with a bucket. The one room in which he and his wife live doesn't have a bathroom or running water. And he just rode his bike back from Tolón. And you know what? You will never hear him complain—not once. He serves the Lord with all his heart and with little to no recompense here on this earth. Segundo and his wife, Miriam, are great examples to us of people who have given everything to serve the Lord.

After church, we stop and have a picnic overlooking the river. If it rains a lot, the water passes over the bridge, making Cafetal and Tolón inaccessible. I am glad that doesn't happen too often! Currently, the view is beautiful, and the water looks so refreshing.

Then, we cross the main road and go to the small town of Huabal. Right now, there is no church, but a family donated an adobe building to start one. Why hasn't anyone opened a church? There is nobody to lead it. By now, you've noticed that many of the small, rural churches depend on others, including believers from the bigger city of Ciudad de Dios and Segundo. Will you pray with us for wisdom and guidance? Please pray that God will make it clear who can help start a church here. In many of these small towns, either there is no church or the assembly is the only Bible-believing church. These churches are needed!

Until next time

Our weekend ends, and we return to Trujillo tired but thankful. I wish we could take you to Tolón, Ventanillas, Chepén, Guadalupe, and other towns we haven't visited yet. You would meet more wonderful saints who love the Lord and discover more prayer requests. We appreciate your prayers for all these small assemblies. Please pray that they will be lights in their towns and that many will come to a saving knowledge of our Lord.

We hope you enjoyed the visit. Come back soon! ■



Mindy and Javier Ramirez are commended from Des Moines Gospel Chapel in Des Moines, Washington.









Above (from top): Javier considers supporting these leaders and young people a privilege; Relying on his trusty bike and the bus, Segundo visits rural churches; After a meeting, several believers, including Segundo (far right) and Miriam (third from left), chat outside with the Ramirez family; Church anniversaries are a good reason to gather the rural churches—here, the building in Ventanillas bursts with guests!







Watching God Work

Michigan Believers Spend a Prayer-Infused Two Weeks in Colombia

BY JASON GRAHAM & HEATHER LOMBARDO

In *Method in Prayer*, W. Graham Scroggie wrote, "A prayerful life is always a powerful life; and a prayerless life is always a powerless life." This quote is a perfect backdrop for our short-term mission trip to serve alongside Bill and Angela Loudon (*Missionary Prayer Handbook* Day 20) and Family Church in La Calera, Colombia.

As an assembly, Dunning Park Bible Chapel in the Detroit area had been praying about doing outreach and evangelism and about training our members in such work. At the same time, Bill Loudon reached out to Detroit Missionary Council, which helps inform the local assemblies of missions news, opportunities, and activities. He voiced Family Church's desire to host a small mission team that could visit for two weeks and help lead a vacation Bible school and support other ministries in La Calera. After additional time in prayer, a small group from Dunning Park felt the Lord opening the door to go and stepped out in faith, along with a small group from Lakeside Bible Chapel (also in the Detroit area).

Our team of nine ranged in age from teenagers to mid-60s. The team, including the Loudons, met virtually several times to pray and get to know one another. Then, we met with the Loudons (who were on furlough) once in person shortly before the trip for some cultural-awareness training. Before we knew it, we were on a plane to Bogotá.

We had no idea what to expect. We barely knew each other and knew even less about the situation into which we were about to step. It was scary, but we all sensed that the Lord wanted us to go. We adopted a go-with-the-flow mindset and tried to set aside any expectations or agenda and just be open to helping in whatever way necessary, whether sweeping floors, sharing our testimony, or playing games with children.

A fresh coat of paint

From the first meeting, we had a strong sense of community with the people of Family Church; our shared love for the Lord brought us together in common purpose. They were well prepared for our arrival and had planned a creative World Cup–themed VBS and several other means of outreach to the community. Angela Loudon, clearly gifted by the Lord in organization and administration, kept us all on track. Most importantly, God was already at work in us and through us—not just the Michigan team but the La Calera team too.

This became evident the morning after our arrival. A neighboring Protestant church in La Calera has an outreach in a poor neighborhood near the Bogotá city limit that has historically resisted the Gospel. This church asked if our team could help clean, repaint, and refresh a run-down basketball court as a service to the community. We worked hard on the project, and it was a pleasure to leave the court looking much improved, as a positive witness to Christian service. One of the partnering church members, who lives in the community, painted part of John 14:6 on the roof of the adjoining restroom.



God still had more planned. Off to the side of the court, and looking equally run-down, was a cross carved out of a rock. While we worked, some community members watched to see what was going on. One man was particularly interested. As it turned out, he was the one who had carved the cross many



years before as a memorial for his brother, who had been killed on that spot. Thinking that approval had been given to paint the cross too (it hadn't; in fact, the community leaders had forbidden it), one of the Family Church members, Daniel, began to paint it white to make it stand out.

While some of the locals gasped, the man who had carved it granted his permission, which started a conversation about the meaning of the cross. The man saw it as a memorial symbol, but Daniel explained that the cross represents Jesus's payment for our sins, death, and resurrection and points to the future resurrection of those who put their faith in Jesus. The man said he would now look at that cross differently.

Changed behavior and grateful hearts

After helping with an evangelistic Bible study for moms, a weekly kids' Bible club, an outreach and prayer time at a drug rehab center in Bogotá, and fellowship times with the church youth group and young adult group, we were into the second week and the beginning of VBS. Many of the children came from poor homes that struggle with food insecurity. So it was a joy to see them get a good, healthy meal each day at VBS, enjoy the games and crafts, and listen attentively to a gospel message.



Over the course of the week, we noticed the demeanor of several children change for the better. The Lord knows what went on in those young hearts and minds. This effect in the children's lives opened the door for us to do one or two home visits every evening, connecting with the moms or parents of these children. Our standard approach was asking the mom to share with us a little of the family's story first. Then, one team member would share his or her testimony, and we would pray with the family, gift them bags of groceries, and invite them to join a Bible study or visit the church. Many had been influenced by Jehovah's Witnesses but were not at peace with the teachings.

One mom of four broke down in tears when we handed her the groceries. She had no more food in the house, and her husband would not be paid for three more days. She said, "I prayed that the Lord would provide food but didn't know if He would hear." Many of these women attend the moms' evangelistic Bible study, are open to learning more about the Lord, and are willing to continue sending their children to the youth meetings at Family Church.

It was wonderful to see God work in many ways during the trip—in some of them, we had hoped and prayed He would move, but others were beyond our imagination. It's one thing to know something intellectually; it's a completely different thing to experience it, to know what it means to walk with God, and to see Him in real and tangible ways move in and through us. That is one of the things that stands out most about our mission trip to Colombia: as we prayed and stepped out in faith on the promises of God, we began to see His presence. It's something we will never forget and leaves us wanting to see Him more. ■

Jason Graham and Heather Lombardo fellowship at Dunning Park Bible Chapel in Redford, Michigan.

Top (L–R): The VBS helpers gather with the children; The team and Family Church study God's Word on a Tuesday night; The bilingual singing during Family Church's Sunday meeting became one of the trip's highlights; One team member, Melissa (third from right), enjoys quality time with her Family Church hosts; The Michigan team participates in a game night for Family Church's young adults; Kids receive a healthy meal at VBS; José, a Family Church missionary, welcomes children on the first day of VBS; One participant displays his Bible characters sticker album; The mission team and several Family Church members visit the family of a VBS attendee; The Michigan team, pictured here in the Bogotá airport, thanks the Lord for the two weeks in Colombia. **Page 10:** The repainted basketball court glorifies God. **Page 11:** A mother and daughter decorate tote bags during the moms' Bible study.