

The Rapture

1 Thessalonians: 4:13-18

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9/1/2024



This morning, we are going to take a look at one of the most amazing passages in all of Scripture, the last few verses of 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4.

- To catch you up on the first part of Chapter 4 that Ben addressed last week, it encouraged the Thessalonians to continue growing in three areas they already were doing well in:
 1. their sanctification to be more like Christ,
 2. loving one another, and
 3. leading a quiet life minding their own business and working with their own hands.

The passage we are looking at this morning is even more encouragement and addresses a question some of the Thessalonians were concerned about as reported by Timothy and Silas.

- It is also one of the most important passages in Scripture on the rapture of the church.

What is amazing is that even though Paul had only spent 2-3 weeks with them, he taught them about the rapture. We know this from 2 Thessalonians 2:5 where he addressed a follow-up question about the rapture and said, “do you remember that when I was still with you I taught you these things?”

So, the teaching on the rapture of the church is important enough that even new Christians need to know about it. And this teaching of the rapture of the church is a great blessing to believers...

- It is when we will receive our permanent, eternal, glorified, resurrected bodies.
- That is why the rapture is also called “The Blessed Hope” in Titus 2:13.

I should point out that you might hear me use the terms resurrection and rapture interchangeably. That is because they are the same event.

- All Church Age believers in Jesus Christ living and dead will be resurrected together at the same time when the rapture of the church occurs.

Israel didn’t recognize Jesus as the Messiah because they were looking for a conquering king. They did not realize that the Messiah would come twice, first as a Suffering Servant and later as the Conquering King.

Many Christians today are making a similar mistake thinking that the return of Jesus is a singular event. They don’t realize that the return of Jesus is actually in two phases:

- first for the church as The Bridegroom coming for His bride,
 - and later as the Conquering King to rule on earth.
- There will be at least 7 years between the two phases of the Lord’s return when God pours out His wrath on the nations to prepare them for Jesus ruling on earth.

The first phase of the Lord’s return is the rapture of the church. It will be a spectacular supernatural event when Christians will disappear from the planet.

- I know this sounds fantastic, like science fiction, but it is what Scripture reveals.
- The church had a supernatural beginning at Pentecost and will have an even more spectacular supernatural conclusion at the rapture.

And that is what we are going to look at this morning. I’m going to read the whole passage, then we’ll dig into it.

- By the way, I read this very passage at my Dad’s Funeral in 2003. Since my Dad was a believer, this passage was a great comfort to me and it still is. I hope it will be a blessing for you as well...

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³ But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.

In the short time Paul was with the Thessalonians, he told them about return of Jesus, and they believed it. This was part of the reason they were complimented so highly by Paul.

- However, after Paul left, some of them wondered about those Christians who died *before* Jesus came back. They were troubled by the idea that these Christians might miss out on that great future event.

Four times in his letters, Paul asked Christians to *not* be ignorant about something:

- God's plan for Israel (Romans 11:25).
- About spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1).
- About suffering and trials in the Christian life (2 Corinthians 1:8).
- About the rapture and the second coming of Jesus as we're looking at this morning (1 Thess 4:13).

Remarkably, these are areas where ignorance is still common in the Christian world.

v13 – The term “*sleep*” used here is a euphemism for death. It was a common way to express death in the ancient world, but among pagans, it was almost always seen as an *eternal* sleep that people don't wake up from.

Christians called death *sleep*, but they emphasized the idea of *rest*. Early Christians began to call their burial places “cemeteries,” which means, “dormitories” or “sleeping places.”

- Yet the Bible never describes the death of the unbeliever as *sleep*, for there is no rest, peace, or comfort for them in death.

Though Paul referred to death as sleep which was a common idiom of his day, that does not prove the erroneous teaching of *soul sleep*. The concept of soul sleep is that Christians who die before the rapture are in a state of suspended animation, waiting for the resurrection to be consciousness again.

- But departing from this world in death to ‘*be with Christ*’ is described by Paul as being ‘*far better*’ than our present state in our mortal bodies (per Philippians 1:23). He also said:
2 Corinthians 5:8 – *We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.*

Christians shouldn't grieve over fellow Christians who have died because death is simply a transition to a better life with Christ. For the Christian, being separated from our mortal body that has died is like laying down for a nap and waking in glory.

- It is *moving*, not *dying*.

As Christians, we may mourn the death of other Christians; but not as others who have no hope. Our sorrow is like the sadness of seeing someone off on a long trip, knowing you will see them again.

- When an unbeliever dies, we do mourn for them.
- But when a believer dies, our mourning is more for ourselves, because they are with the Lord and we are not there yet.

v14 – *God will bring with Him those who sleep*: We have more than a wishful hope of resurrection. In the resurrection of Jesus, we have an amazing example of what resurrection is all about and a promise of our own resurrection.

The Bible reveals a lot about the blessings of our eternal, resurrected bodies. Jesus showed us what we can look forward to when He rose from the dead.

- Eternal life will not be some ethereal, spiritual existence;
- we will have physical bodies much like our current ones, but better (Luke 24:39).
- We will enjoy food just like we do today (Luke 24:41-43).
- We will not be subject to pain, sorrow, or death (Revelation 21:4).
- We will have an ability to travel through the spiritual realm to get around this vast physical universe (John 20:19 in light of John 14:3).

And eternal life in our resurrected bodies will hardly be boring... we will be spending eternity getting to better know our Creator-God and He is far from boring. Also, He promised we'd reign with Him (2 Timothy 2:12)...

- We will have plenty of opportunities to express our God-given creativity in exercising the responsibilities He'll give us.

v15 – Paul emphasized that what he was about to tell them was from the Lord, though we do not know whether he received it by direct revelation or if it was a previously unrecorded saying of Jesus.

- Either way, this came from Jesus and did not originate with Paul.
- In no place does the apostle speak more confidently of his *inspiration* than here;
- So, we should prepare ourselves to receive some momentous and amazing truth...

Paul wanted the Thessalonians (and us by extension) to know that Christians who have died before Jesus returns will by no means be at a disadvantage.

- God will allow *those who are asleep* to share in the glory of *the coming of the Lord*.

The fact that Paul said, *we who are alive* means that Paul himself shared in this expectation. It wasn't because Paul had an any promise of the return of Jesus in his lifetime, it was because he knew the rapture of the church could happen at any time.

This is called the doctrine of imminency.

- Paul's anticipation was due to the imminent return of Christ for the entirety of the Church Age.
- There is nothing that has to happen before the rapture of the church... it could happen at any time.

The point is that we should live ready to be in the presence of Jesus at any moment. Conducting ourselves knowing that the rapture could happen with our next breath is powerful incentive for holy living...

1 John 3:2-3 – *Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*

v16 – *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout: When Jesus comes, He will come personally. The Lord Himself will descend and come with a shout.*

- The ancient Greek word for *shout* here is the same word used for the commands that a ship captain makes to his rowers with the ring of authority and a note of urgency.

This means that apparently, there will be some audible signal that prompts this remarkable event. It may be that all three descriptions (the shout, voice, and trumpet) refer to the same sound; or there may be three distinct sounds.

The rapture will not be silent or secret, though the vast majority of people may not understand what the sound is all about.

I have sometimes wondered if unbelievers will hear the shout of the Lord at the rapture. They may indeed... When Paul heard the heavenly voice on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:7; 22:9), his companions heard the sound of a voice, but they could not make out the words. They heard a sound but did not understand its meaning.

- It may well be that the shout/voice/trumpet sound that accompanies the rapture will have the same effect. The entire world may hear this heavenly sound but have no idea what it means.

The fact that the voice is described as that of an archangel does not mean that the *Lord Himself* is an *archangel*. The only one described as an *archangel* in the Bible is Michael (Jude 9).

- Paul does not mean that an archangel will actually say something, but simply that the voice that will be uttered will be very great, an archangel type of voice.

This passage also tells us that believers are gathered *with the trumpet of God*. In the Old Testament, trumpets sounded the alarm for war and threw the enemy into a panic (Numbers 10:9 and Revelation 8 and Revelation 9). Trumpets also sounded an assembly of God's people, as in Leviticus 23:24 and Numbers 10:2.

- Here, *the trumpet of God* gathers together God's people.

Another important passage on the rapture of the church is: 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 – *Behold, 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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*

The last trump here is clearly connected with the same trumpet of 1 Thessalonians 4. Paul calls this a mystery because the rapture was not revealed in the Old Testament. The rapture is for the church, not for the Old Testament faithful.

- Christians living at the time of the rapture will not experience death. We will be translated directly from our mortal bodies to our resurrected bodies in an instant (*the twinkling of an eye*).

What do you think the rapture will be like for unbelievers who happen to be in the presence of Christians?

One minute the Christian will be there, the next instant they'll be gone. This event will shake up those who are left behind.

- Cultural Christians who are aware of the doctrine of the rapture will immediately know what happened and realize they were not taken because they never entered into a personal relationship with Jesus. The rapture will cause many to repent and be born again.

What do you think, will churches still meet following the rapture? I expect there will be blow-out crowds of all the newly minted Christians. Missing out on the rapture does not mean missing out on eternal life though most who come to Christ following the rapture will likely become martyrs according to Revelation.

- So, it is much better to follow Christ now than to do so after the Church Age ends at the rapture.

For those not wanting to believe that the rapture could possibly be the supernatural intervention of God, there will be a strong delusion per 2 Thessalonians 2:11.

- This strong delusion will be a plausible explanation for the rapture probably involving extraterrestrial technology.
- The set-up for this explanation is well established with UFO sightings being a thing along with the popular culture's fascination with extraterrestrials
- By the way, the Bible does reveal that there are indeed extraterrestrials but refers to them as angels & demons
- Jesus said that in the timeframe of His return, there'll be deception so great even the elect will be in danger of believing it per Matthew 24:24.

There are other places in Scripture where trumpets are associated with end-times events...

- There are the seven trumpet judgments described in the book of Revelation.
- And there is the trumpet gathering the elect at the Lord's return to earth in Matthew 24:31.

However, this trumpet of 1 Thessalonians 4 has no relation to the trumpet judgments of Revelation.

- The subjects are different: in Thessalonians it is for the church; in Revelation it is for a wicked world.
- The results are also different: here it is the glorious catching up of the church to be with the Lord; there it is further judgment upon a godless world.

And the trumpet of 1 Thessalonians 4 also cannot be the one mentioned in Matthew 24:31 which is clearly heralding the Lord's return to earth to rule, the second phase of His return.

- At the rapture, Christians living and dead are gathered and only believers will see Jesus. At His second coming, everyone on earth will see Him.
- The timing is also different... the rapture ends the Church Age; the Second Coming ends the Tribulation.

If the trumpet sound at the rapture is the last trumpet per 1 Corinthians 15:52, it begs the question: what was the first trumpet?

I believe it was probably associated with the beginning of the Age of the Law. When Moses received the 10 Commandments at Mount Sinai there was a very loud, supernatural sounding of a trumpet at that event per Exodus 19:16.

- So, the trumpets of God appear to be associated with heralding the transition to a new era of God dealing with people called a "dispensation" by prophecy scholars.

Our 1 Thessalonians passage gives the order of the resurrection of the church: *the dead in Christ will rise first*: The prior dead in Christ will not miss out on the rapture of the church. In fact, they will experience it *first*.

- We who are living will not be resurrected without the dead in Christ being resurrected as well

The fact that the dead in Christ will rise first does not mean that they were resurrected when they die because it is the coming of Jesus for the church that initiates the mass resurrection of His faithful, both living and dead.

The fact that the dead in Christ haven't yet been resurrected does not mean they are currently hanging out with Jesus as disembodied spirits. Recall that when Christians die, we are *absent from the body and present with the Lord* per 2 Cor 5:8.

All people are a tri-unity of body, soul and spirit (per 1 Thessalonians 5:23) and we will always be body, soul and spirit. Thus, the dead in Christ must have a temporary spirit-body in order to be in the spiritual realm with Jesus.

- We know there has to be an intermediate body for both the faithful and unfaithful dead from the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16.

v17 – The verb translated *caught up* here means to seize, or to carry off by force.

- This passage is the basis for the term *rapture*, the catching away of believers to be with Jesus. The Greek word translated *caught up* is *harpazo*. The word *rapture* comes from the Latin Vulgate, which translated *harpazo* as *rapturus*. And this from where we get our English word *rapture*.

In Greek, the phrase "*to meet*" was used to describe the official welcoming of honored guests.

The rapture of the church will be a fantastic supernatural event. Paul speaks of Christians flying upward, *caught up... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*. We wouldn't believe this unless the Bible told us it was so, not any more than we would believe that God became a baby, that He did miracles, that He died on a cross, rose from the dead and that He lives in us.

- Paul's language here is straightforward and free from figurative speech so there is no missing his intent.
- The Apostle's declarations here are made in the practical tone of strict matter of fact with literal details... there is no room here for allegory.

I should point out that the timing of the rapture is a matter of debate among Christians. Not all Christians believe that the rapture will occur prior to God pouring out His wrath during the Tribulation.

- Different perspectives on the timing of the rapture is a disputable matter which is not something we should break fellowship over.

But, as someone who came to Christ as a result of Bible prophecy, I have studied the cases for the different timing perspectives and I'm absolutely convinced that the *pre-tribulation* rapture position is correct. It is the perspective that takes the most literal interpretation of God's Word.

- And it is the most comforting of all the various rapture timing views as we'll see in the next verse:

v18 – Tells us what should we do with this information about the rapture of the church: *Therefore comfort one another*: Paul did not tell them to *take* comfort, but to *give* comfort. And in the way God works, we always *receive* comfort as we *give* it.

The truth of the return of Jesus for His people is to be a comfort... This only makes sense if the catching away of Christians actually delivers them from an impending danger like the Tribulation.

There is a false teaching that not all Christians will be resurrected in the rapture... this has been called the "partial rapture." There are some who believe that only faithful Christians will be taken in the rapture, with unfaithful Christians left on earth to suffer through the Tribulation. The problem is that the Bible does not support this.

- The passages which describe the rapture apply universally to all true born-again Christians, mature and immature, faithful and disobedient.

There is no biblical evidence for a partial rapture. Every believer will be taken to heaven in the rapture.

Some say that the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 supports the partial rapture idea. The five virgins whose lamps did not have any oil are not symbolic of believers being left behind; rather, it is describing unbelievers being left behind.

- The key is where Jesus says to those left behind, *"Truly I say to you, I do not know you."*
- Those whom Jesus knows are believers in Him, whether vigilant or not (by the way, all 10 virgins were sleeping when the Bridegroom appeared).

The essential element in the parable is the oil for the lamps, oil being symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Those who have the Holy Spirit living in their hearts will be taken in the rapture because they are truly Christians.

- Those who profess faith in Christ, but who do not possess His Spirit, will be left behind.

Just claiming you are a Christian doesn't make it so. Paul encouraged us to,

"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor 13:5).

A great test for how we are doing in our relationship with Jesus is given in the little epistle of 1 John which is summarized...

1 John 5:23 – *These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life*

I have found there to be 12 distinct characteristics of having a healthy relationship with the Lord in 1 John. It is to our benefit to regularly review these characteristics and take corrective action as necessary.

There is also a false teaching about a "secret rapture." This term is used as a pejorative by those who don't recognize that the rapture of the church is separate from the second coming of Christ.

- Those who believe the rapture and the second coming are the same event often use the term "secret rapture" to discredit it.
- Those who believe this also deny there will be a millennial reign of Jesus on earth over mortal people thinking instead that His return immediately ushers in the Eternal State.

There is also a question about babies and young children being taken in the rapture. The Bible does not specifically say what will happen to unborn babies, infants, and children when the rapture occurs. But, given the age of accountability concept, we know children too young to respond to the gospel will be taken in the rapture.

This perspective was expressed by King David when his first-born son that he had with Bathsheba died. He certainly expected to see his son again in heaven per 2 Samuel 12:21–23.

The Bible doesn't specify a particular age for accountability; it would certainly vary from person to person. We had a testimony time at a workplace Bible study I was part of and I was surprised that so many of my Christian coworkers were born again when they were 8 years old.

- My wife Teresa was smarter than your average girl since she responded to Christ when she was 7.
- For me, my effective age of accountability was when I was 35... it is better late than never.

We don't know if all children below the age of accountability will be taken in the rapture or not. But I can tell you beyond a shadow of doubt that under-age children will be taken even if only one parent is a Christian per 1 Corinthians 7:14.

God is loving, holy, merciful, just, and gracious...
Whatever God does is always right and good, and He loves children...

Matthew 19:14 – *Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven."*

Well, I hope our discussion on the rapture this morning has been a blessing to you.

What observations or questions do you have on the rapture?

My take away: The rapture of the church is our Blessed Hope, something we should share with others to comfort them.