

THE RAPTURE

TEXT: I THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

INTRODUCTION:

1. When Paul established the church at Thessalonica, he taught them about the rapture and the events to follow (cf. II Thess. 2:5).
2. But in the meantime, questions had arisen regarding those believers who had died. Where were their bodies? Would they be raptured with those alive when Christ returned? To answer these questions, Paul gave them a detailed explanation of the rapture (4:13-18).
3. This is the most detailed teaching about the rapture in the Bible.
4. "Asleep" (4:13, 14, 15) is a euphemism for "dead." It refers to the body "sleeping" – not the soul. "Soul sleep" is unscriptural.
5. The idea is that when a person goes to sleep, he will soon awake. When a Christian dies, he will soon be resurrected (4:13, 14).
6. The rapture is imminent. Many scoffers have ridiculed this doctrine. The apostle Peter deals with these scoffers in II Peter 3. Peter says in II Peter 3:8, "But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."
7. The ancient Greeks and Romans and other pagans had no hope (I Thess. 4:13). Ephesians 2:12 says they "were without Christ...having no hope, and without God in the world."
8. However we Christians have hope. Titus 2:13 says, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."
9. Therefore, we are to "sorrow not" (I Thess. 4:13). We miss our loved ones, and we mourn over their deaths. "Jesus wept" over the death of Lazarus (John 11:33-35). But we are not to be overcome with sorrow.
10. The basis for our hope is the empty tomb. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him" (I Thess. 4:14).
11. Those alive at the rapture "shall not prevent (precede) them which are asleep" (4:15).
12. The word "rapture" is not found in the Bible. It comes from the Latin word for "caught up" (I Thess. 4:17).

I. THE IMMINENCY OF THE RAPTURE

1. The concept of the imminent coming of Christ necessitates a pretribulational rapture. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "imminent" as "hanging over one's head, ready to befall or overtake one; close at hand in its incidence."
2. *Webster's Dictionary* says "imminent" means "likely to occur at any moment; impending."
3. Therefore, since the rapture is imminent, it could take place at any moment and therefore must be pretribulational.
4. If the church must go through seven years of tribulation before the rapture (or even part of the tribulation), then the rapture could not be imminent and the concept of imminency would be destroyed.
5. There are many Scriptures which teach the imminency of the rapture (I Cor. 1:7; 4:5; 15:51, 52; 16:22; Phil. 3:20; 4:5; I Thess. 1:10; Titus 2:13; James 5:7-9; I John 2:28; Rev. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).
6. I know of no greater motivation for godly living than the imminency of the return of Christ (cf. I John 3:2,3).

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE TRIBULATION

1. I have noticed that many Christians have an inadequate understanding of the tribulation. And if Christians do not understand the tribulation, how can they warn their unsaved friends and loved ones? (cf. Rev. 6:14-17; 9:6).
2. Unfortunately, many Christians do not study Bible prophecy, and they are missing out on God's blessing (cf. Rev. 1:3).
3. Here is another problem we face. Many Bible teachers allegorize or "spiritualize" Bible prophecy. Therefore, the horrors of the tribulation are minimized and explained away. Try imagine reading any other document that way! You would be hopelessly confused. The Bible must be studied literally, otherwise there will be confusion and error.

4. Another problem is that many Christians do not understand the purpose of the tribulation. Some think it is a time when God will purge His church. But this is not taught in the Bible.
5. The Bible refers to the tribulation as “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7). It is not the time of the church’s trouble. The church is not referred to in Rev. 4—22.
6. We must be careful to distinguish between the church and Israel.
7. The Bible does use figurative language. There are parables, metaphors, types, etc. There is plenty of symbolism in the Bible, but the symbols are usually easy to recognize and easy to interpret (cf. Rev. 17:1, 15).
8. A good principle to follow is: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense."

III. THE PROPER OUTLINE OF BIBLE PROPHECY

1. After the rapture, those of us who are saved will be ushered into the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. I believe we will then stand before the judgment seat of Christ.
2. W. Graham Scroggie said he would rather go through the entire seven-year tribulation than be a carnal Christian standing at the judgment seat. Those are words to ponder!
3. The judgment seat will be for the church (not lost sinners) up in heaven. Meanwhile, here on earth the seven-year tribulation period will begin (cf. I Thess. 5:1-9; Rev. 6).
4. At the end of the tribulation period, Christ will return to judge the wicked and set up His kingdom in Jerusalem (Rev. 19:11-16).
5. Then Christ will reign for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-6; Isa. 2:1-4; 11:6-9).
6. This will be followed by what is usually referred to as “the eternal state” (cf. I Cor. 15:24-28).
7. There are several popular views concerning the timing of the rapture. I believe the most literal view is the best, i.e., the pretribulation rapture.
8. Some hold to a midtribulation rapture, and then there are those who hold to the posttribulation rapture.
9. Also, there are some who hold to the "partial rapture" theory.
10. I have many reasons for holding to the pre-trib view. In Revelation 2 and 3, the focus is on the local church. It is significant that the church is not mentioned at all in Revelation 6 through 19 (cf. Rev. 3:10).

11. The tribulation period is a future seven-year time period (Daniel's 70th week), when God will pour out His wrath upon this wicked world because it has rejected the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 6:12-17).
12. But God "hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thess. 5:9; cf. 1:10).

CONCLUSION:

1. During WWII, President Roosevelt ordered General Douglas MacArthur to leave the Philippines and go to Australia.
2. President Roosevelt realized that the prospects for the American forces were not good, and that he could not afford to have General MacArthur taken captive by the Japanese.
3. Most Americans and Filipinos are familiar with General MacArthur's promise to the people of the Philippines -- "I shall return."
4. And he did return.
5. Our Lord made a similar promise in John 14:1-3, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. 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 unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."