

The Rapture of the Church

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction:

- As we have noted before there is a constant reference to future things in this letter, each chapter closing with anticipation of Christ's return
- Here we see the premier passage on the teaching of the Rapture. Apparently, the Thessalonians had some questions about this, and even today many people are not sure what the Bible teaches on this subject. Sadly, kooks such as Harold Camping give Christians who believe in end time prophecy a bad name!
- The Bible is a progressive revelation. So, the OT was not exactly a clear reference point. Often the OT predicted Christ's first and second coming in one picture- i.e. Isaiah 7:14. No wonder the disciples were confused that Jesus had to die, instead of overthrowing the Roman government and establishing His own.
- Jesus revealed something new in John 14:1-3. Before He establishes His Kingdom He would come back for His own! What a comfort for us, and those who have gone on before us!
- Jesus introduced this teaching, and Paul fully discloses it with many similar comparisons!

I. **THEM WHICH ARE ASLEEP- v. 13-14**

- a. The certainty of our Christian hope- v. 13
 - i. The stamp of certainty, the foundation- the cross- v. 14
 - ii. Sorrow not, even as others which have no hope: For the Christian leaving this body is like laying down for a nap and waking in glory. It is moving, not dying
 1. Illustr- someone leaving for a long trip
 2. See you later, not goodbye
 3. Sadly, this cannot apply to those who have died without Christ
 - iii. We believe that Jesus died and rose again: This was the confident belief of the Apostle Paul and the early Christians. We will certainly live, because Jesus lives!
 - iv. We have more than a wishful hope of resurrection. In the resurrection of Jesus we have an amazing example of it and a promise of our own.

- v. The hardest thing to believe in the Bible is also the most important thing to be believed - The death and resurrection of Christ!
- b. Asleep in Jesus- v. 13-14
 - i. Sleep is a euphemism for death- Cemeteries are dormitories for the dead in Christ
 - ii. They were not asking, will the Lord return? But rather what about those loved ones who have died?
 - iii. They will be resurrected first- v. 15
 - iv. V. 15- Paul wanted to assure the Thessalonians that those who have died already will not be at a disadvantage or miss out. God will allow them to share in the glory of the coming of the Lord!
 - v. What about soul-sleep?
 1. There will come a day, when in God's eternal plan, the dead in Christ will receive their resurrection bodies. Yet until that day, we can be sure that they are not in some kind of soul sleep or suspended animation. Paul made it clear that to be absent from the body means to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)
 2. The present dead in Christ are with the Lord as a spirit and soul, awaiting their final resurrection body

II. **WE WHICH ARE ALIVE- V. 15-17**

- a. We which are alive means that Paul himself shared in this expectancy. Paul is setting an **example of expectancy** for the church in each generation. His belief was in the imminent return of Christ, and ours should be too!
- b. We must count our days to make sure each day counts! (Ps. 90:12)- So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom
- c. This passage is the basis for the New Testament doctrine of the rapture. The word rapture is not in the ancient Greek text, but comes from the Latin Vulgate, which translates the phrase caught up with "rapturus," from which we get our English word "rapture."
- d. The verb translated caught up here means to seize, or to carry off by force
 - i. The Bible teaches this, so we must believe it!
 - ii. There is no hint of allegory or symbolism here. It must be taken literally!

- e. Compare with I Cor. 15:50-53 which describes the rapture for living saints
- f. So many people fear death, and have no hope (Ted Williams)- v. 54-55
- g. The church in glory- In the ancient Greek, the phrase “to meet” was used as a technical term to describe the official welcoming of honored guests.
- h. The earth in judgment- The 7 year Tribulation. What about those whom we know that are lost? We must warn them!
- i. The debate about this catching away centers on where it fits in with the Great Tribulation.
- j. Different views on the rapture
 - i. The pre-tribulation rapture position believes believers are caught up before this final seven-year period.
 - ii. The mid-tribulation rapture position believes believers are caught up in the midst of this final seven-year period.
 - iii. The post-tribulation rapture position believes believers are caught up at the end of this final seven-year period.
- k. I Thess. taken naturally refers to a pre-trib rapture. Even other references to the return of Jesus within 1-2 Thessalonians support this understanding:
 - i. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 shows believers waiting for the return of Jesus. The clear implication is that they had hope of His imminent return, not the expectation of an imminent great tribulation.
 - ii. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 assures us that those believers who died would not be at a disadvantage during the events of the rapture and the resurrection. But if Paul believed Christians would go through the great tribulation, he would count the dead in Christ as more fortunate than those living Christians who might very well have to endure the great tribulation. It would have been logical for Paul to comfort the Thessalonians with the idea that the dead in Jesus were better off because they won't have to experience the Great Tribulation.
 - iii. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 comforts Christians enduring hardship, promising them a coming rest, while their persecutors will face certain judgment. But if Paul knew that the church was destined to pass through the Great Tribulation, it would have been more appropriate for him to warn these Christians about worse trials and suffering ahead, rather than hold the promise of a coming rest.

III. THE LORD HIMSELF- v.16-

- a. Significant expressions- several explanations have been offered as to the significance of these commanding sounds.
 - i. Shout- a general commanding his troops! (illustr- Lazarus)
 - ii. The voice of the archangel- most likely referring to Michael perhaps summoning the angels as a sort of military escort!
 - iii. Trumpet of God-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. Trumpets also sounded an assembly of God's people. Here, the trumpet of God gathers together God's church.
 1. There are three other associations of trumpets and end-times events which has confused Bible students. One is the last trump of 1 Corinthians 15:52, which is clearly connected with this same trumpet of 1 Thessalonians 4. The others are the seven trumpets which culminate at Revelation 11:15, and the trumpet gathering the elect of Israel at the end of the Tribulation in Matthew 24:31.
 - iv. The question of pre-trib is often raised with reference to Matthew 24:31 which seems to speak of a similar resurrection taking place after the tribulation. Is Matthew 24 talking about the same thing as I Thess. 4?
 - v. As to the trumpet of 1 Thessalonians 4 and the one mentioned in Matthew 24:31, we can also observe:
 1. The subjects are different: Matthew refers to believers during the great tribulation; Thessalonians refers to the church.
 2. The circumstances are different: Matthew refers to a gathering of the elect scattered over the earth, with no mention of resurrection; Thessalonians refers to the raising of the believing dead.
 3. The results are different: Matthew refers to living believers gathered from all over the **earth**; Thessalonians refers to the uniting of the raised dead with the living believers to meet the Lord in the **air**.
- b. The rapture's purpose- v. 17
 - i. And so shall we ever be with the Lord: The manner in which Jesus will gather us to Himself is impressive. But the main point is that whatever the state of the

Christians (dead or alive) at the Lord's coming, they will always be with the Lord.

This is the great reward of heaven – to be with Jesus

- ii. There is a sound to hear, a sight to see, a miracle to feel, a meeting to enjoy, and a comfort to experience
- iii. Illustr- Fanny Crosby

Conclusion:

- Are you ready for the Lord to come? No man knows the day or the hour, but we can live each day as if He will return now!
- Are you saved? If not, judgment is coming!
- 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.**"