

Reuniting and Meeting the Lord in the Air

📖 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

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🌐 fgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

In our series on Major Prophetic Passages we are now dealing with prophecies related distinctly to the Church. I mentioned that we would discuss two of these prophecies; apostasy and the rapture, but upon reflection I think we should look at a third as well; the judgment seat of Christ. Then we will go to the Book of Revelation. Today we will review the prophecy of apostasy and the first major rapture passage and then press on to another major rapture passage.

The first major prophecy related to the Church is that of apostasy. Apostasy means some kind of departure from or rebellion against something. We showed two passages that describe the Church as departing from sound doctrine. The first is 1 Tim 4:1 and the second is 2 Tim 4:1. In 1 Tim 4:1 Paul says, "...in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron..." That is a prophecy that as the Church age progresses there will be a falling away from the faith, and a turn to demonic doctrines. In 2 Tim 4:1 Paul says, "...the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths." This is another passage predicting that the Church will move from sound doctrine to myths and there will be a takeover in the church by false teachers. And this is exactly the trend we are seeing in the Church age and have been seeing it for some time. The resistance to this is to preach the word, be ready in season and out of season, to reprove, rebuke and exhort with great patience. And one can only wonder how long this apostasy can grow until the faith is no longer being taught on the earth.

The second major prophecy related to the Church is the rapture. This is a doctrine that many Christians argue about. They can get very emotional about it, particularly the timing aspect; whether it will occur after the Tribulation, during the Tribulation or before the Tribulation. The difference affects things in your life so it is important to look at the major rapture passages and come to a sound conclusion. The word "rapture" is the Latin translation of the Greek word *ἁρπαζω*. This word is used 14 times in the NT. It falls in two types of contexts. First, in some contexts it means to "make off with something," as when stealing someone else's property. For example, in Matt 12:29 "Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he

first binds the strong man?" The word "carry" here is the Greek word for rapture and it is used in the context of someone breaking into another's house and carrying off their property. Second, in some contexts it can mean "to grab or seize suddenly so as to remove or gain control, *snatch/take away*." In Acts 8:39 "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing." The word "snatched away" is the Greek word for rapture and here it is being used of Philip being physically seized suddenly so that he was removed from that area and taken to another. That is a spatial departure and the idea of the rapture that we are interested in learning about. The first passage that mentions this concept of the rapture anywhere in Scripture seems to be John 14:1-3. This grew out of John 13:1 and 3 where Jesus said He was departing out of this world and returning to God and the reaction of the disciples in 13:36 when Jesus told them "where I am going, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later." They became very emotionally troubled. They thought He was going to establish the kingdom on earth. Why would He be leaving earth? In that light Jesus tried to comfort them with a new doctrine relative to His absence. In 14:1 He said, "Do not let your heart be troubled." Well, how are they going to avoid that? By believing in God and believing in Him. In particular, believing His words in 14:2, "In My Father's house are many dwelling places." The picture is of heaven; the Father is viewed as dwelling in heaven. In heaven, there are many dwellings or rooms. The point is heaven is spacious and can accommodate any and all believers. Jesus says, "if it were not so, I would have told you." "I go to prepare a place for you." The preparation of the place is by means of His death, resurrection and ascension. His work will ensure that there is a place for them because apart from this work there is no place for anyone! In 14:2 He says, then "I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." This was something new. As verse 5 says, they did not know where He was going. The idea of coming again, not to establish the kingdom on earth, but to remove them from earth and take them to heaven, presumably without them having to taste death, and presumably, at-any-moment after He prepared the way, was something never revealed before.

This, I think, coupled with the passage of time, led to the problem at Thessalonica. Turn to 1 Thess 4:13-18. This is another major rapture passage. The only other rapture passage possibly revealed by this time is in James 5 and it doesn't tell us much, simply that it was near. So this doctrine was still being revealed piece by piece, and what Jesus said in John 14:1-3 indicated that Christ would return for the believers on earth, and from their vantage point it would be soon, within their lifetimes. And the apostles were teaching this doctrine. But as time passed believers started dying before the rapture happened. This was happening at Thessalonica en masse because they came under persecution. I think this is the problem the Thessalonians were facing. But this is a big issue. Walvoord said, "The first problem faced by all expositors is discerning the reasons for the unusual sorrow of the Thessalonians over the death of their fellow believers."¹ But if you put this in the frame of reference of what Jesus said in John 14, that I'm leaving to prepare a place for you, but I will come again and receive you to myself so that where I am you may be also, there leaves a question open as to what about those believers who die before He comes again? Does it not? It may be obvious to us, 2,000 years later, but they were operating on John 14:1-3

alone. And John 14 didn't address the issue of believers' dying before He came for them. So, they had a problem. What about those who have now died before He came back? Obviously, they would be resurrected. But how? When? They needed more information. That is what Paul says in verse 13, **we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren**. The rapture doctrine was not entirely revealed yet. It was coming in pieces, just like all other prophetic revelation. And in verse 15 Paul received new pieces of revelation because he says, **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord**. Paul had to get a special word from the Lord to answer this problem. And therefore, to answer the problem Walvoord stated, I think the problem the Thessalonians were facing was what about believers who died before the Lord came for His own? And I think this is the answer Paul received to comfort the Thessalonians. Verse 18 says, **Comfort one another with these words**. So, all that is happening here is a filling out of the doctrine of the rapture.

And so, in verse 13 they were grieving **as do the rest who have no hope**, meaning they were grieving as unbelievers. The answer to that is to give them some new information. Paul says in 4:13, **But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren**. Apparently, they were uninformed. **About** what? **About those who are asleep**. That is, believers who died before Christ came **for them**. You will see throughout the early church that they expected Christ to come back for them soon. They were not thinking that it would be 2,000 years. They were thinking it would be within their lifetime. So, when believers started dying before that this opened up a question. What about them? This was a very practical issue and you'll see the rapture is a very practical doctrine. Paul didn't want them to **grieve as the rest who have no hope**. But the only thing that could solve that problem was knowledge. By the way, there is nothing wrong with grieving over lost loved ones, but grieving as if you have no hope, that is no way for the Christian to grieve, considering what was revealed to Paul.

Verse 14 explains why, **For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again**, and it's a 1st class condition, so we do believe that Jesus died and rose again. We could translate it "since." Since **we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus**. Alright, a number of them had **fallen asleep in Jesus**, they died saved, and so **God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus**. That's comforting. But question, if God is going to bring them with Him where are they now? They are with Him. Alright, this is something new. In the OT all they knew was that when a person died they went to sheol, which is just a Hebrew word for "who knows where." They didn't really understand where people went when they died. They knew the body went to the ground, they knew about the resurrection of the body, they knew that resurrection would occur in connection with the future kingdom, but they did not know where people went when they died until that time. So here it was revealed to Paul that these believers were already with Him, that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and that they would be brought with Him when He came again.

Verse 15 gives further explanation, **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord**. So just as we noted before, this information about the rapture was not known before. All they had was John 14. But John 14 didn't address

believers that died. It only addressed those alive when He came for them. In fact, they thought He was coming for them so soon that dying before He came for them wasn't even an issue. But now believers were dying like flies and they needed a word from the Lord and so that word was given to Paul. And here it is, **that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord** for His own, **will not precede those who have fallen asleep**. Precede them in what? The end of verse 16 says, in resurrection; **the dead in Christ will rise first**. So they may have thought that if their loved ones had died they would have to wait until some later time to be resurrected, maybe the Second Coming. we don't really know exactly what they thought, but it was causing them to grieve without hope and so Paul says they will be resurrected before those who remain until the coming of the Lord.

Now I want to point out a very important observation in verse 15. Notice the pronouns, **that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep**. There are two groups here. Who are they? **We** and **those**. Who are **we**? **We** are the group that will still be alive when the Lord comes. Who are **those**? **Those** are the group who die before He comes. What's important about that? Well, when Paul says **we** who must he be including in that statement? Himself. You don't usually say **we** and exclude yourself from the equation. So Paul is including himself as one who might still be alive when the Lord comes. Now why would Paul think that was a possibility? Because that's what John 14 taught. The Lord is leaving, you can't come now, but I will come later and get you. That could happen at any moment. That's imminency. Imminency means that something can happen at-any-moment, and in the case of the rapture it means that there is no prophesied event which must occur before the rapture. Something prophetic may happen before but nothing has to happen before. Because if something has to happen before then the rapture can't happen. The other thing has to happen first, then the rapture can happen. But that's not the picture. The picture is it can happen any time. It is overhanging. Now Paul is not saying that he knew the Lord *would* come while he was still alive, but he is saying that he *could* still be alive. **We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord**. And I think he thought it would come in his lifetime. I think he had that expectancy. It sounds like He is coming back for them soon in John 14. But it doesn't mean He has to. That's imminency and it is a critical aspect of the doctrine of the rapture. Another thing to point out here is that here's a generation of believers who are alive when He comes for them. They don't have to die. They are just translated into resurrection bodies, as verse 16 explains. So, they are here in mortal bodies and suddenly those bodies are changed from mortal to immortal, without tasting death. The concept of a translation is another critical aspect of the doctrine of the rapture. There is nothing like this at the Second Coming. This is something distinct from the Second Coming. Those alive at the Second Coming are not translated into resurrection bodies, they just go into the kingdom in their mortal bodies. So the rapture is something distinct from the Second Coming in the sense of imminency, and in the sense of translation. And I think Paul held out that He was coming soon, within his lifetime. I don't think he ever imagined that it would be over 2,000 years. And I think every generation is supposed to think He is coming in their lifetime. That is part of the structure embedded in the rapture doctrine. God doesn't want us to know when He is coming for us. He wants us to live every moment as if the next moment He is coming for us. And it has something to do

with generating two things; first, purity of life and second, urgency in proclaiming the gospel. That's probably why the pre-trib rapture is not popular. People don't want to live a pure life and people don't want to proclaim the gospel.

Verse 15 does something else, it gives us the order of resurrection when He comes. Who will go first? Those who are alive and remain or those who have fallen asleep? Those who have fallen asleep will be raised first, then those who are alive and remain will be raised. But the second of those things was already known from John 14. What they did not know was number one; that believers who die before He comes are already with Him. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

In verse 16 we are given further explanation. **For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.** Now where is **the Lord** going to come down **from? Heaven.** Isn't that what John 13 and 14 said? I am departing out of this world, I am going to God, I am going to the Father's house. Those are all the same place. They are all **heaven** and that is where the Lord will descend from. So this is in perfect agreement with John 14. But here's the thing. Where is He going to descend to? Look at v 17. **In the air.** The Lord is going to come **in the air.** He's not going to come to the earth. He's going to come in the air above the earth. Is this the Second Coming? No, because at the Second Coming He comes to the earth. In fact, Vincent in his *Word Studies in the New Testament* said, "Used nowhere else of Christ's second coming."² So again, this is something distinct from the Second Coming. Now three things are listed as signaling the **descent** of the Lord **from heaven; with a shout, with the voice of archangel and with the trumpet of God.** The grammar does not support a sequence of actions but simultaneity of actions. The **shout** is a command. The **voice of archangel** could be the voice of Michael, the only archangel mentioned in the NT, or it could be another. The **trumpet of God** is a signal from God. The **trumpet** is the most controversial of all three. Why? Because people see a trumpet in Matt 24:31 and a trumpet in Rev 11:15 and they want to make all or some of these trumpets the same trumpet. I see the temptation to do that. It's natural to want to connect things. But what makes us disconnect things? Context. If the context is different then it should cause us to disconnect things. Hold your place here and look at Matt 24:31. It's not hard to see these arguments. This is an argument for post-trib rapture. 24:30 is the Second Coming which is after the tribulation, "And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other." What is happening? Textually, the title Son of Man is from Dan 7:13-14 and is a picture of the King receiving the kingdom from the Father in heaven and descending to establish that kingdom on earth. Which is what is stated explicitly in 25:31. But that's different from 1 Thess 4:16-17 because here He is coming in the air to meet believers and go back to heaven, not establish a kingdom on earth. And here in 24:31 He sends forth His angels to do this, to gather the elect. Whereas in 1 Thess 4:16-17 angels don't do any gathering, an archangel says something, that's all, but no gathering. Then in 24:31 we see "a great trumpet" but this is a quote from Isa 27:13, which in context is the regathering of the nation Israel to be taken into the kingdom. There is no

resurrection at all. And in 1 Thess 4:16-17 there is a trumpet, but the result is resurrection of the dead in Christ and the translation of those alive on earth. So the results of the two trumpets differ. They are not the same trumpet. The differences are too great for these to be the same trumpet. And if they are the same trumpet and it all refers to the Second Coming, and all the believers are resurrected and all unbelievers are killed, then you have another problem, who is going to re-populate humanity in the kingdom? There's nobody left in mortal bodies to re-populate the world. That's a problem for post-tribulationism that they have some very weak responses to. The main point is that this trumpet in Matt 24:31 is clearly the fulfillment of Isa 27:13, it relates to the regathering of Israel, it occurs at the Second Coming, there is no resurrection and the kingdom begins on earth. Whereas the trumpet in 1 Thess 4:16-17 is that it relates to the reunion of the Church, it occurs at the Rapture, there is a resurrection and the meeting is in the air.

The other passage people sometimes connect to 1 Thess 4:16-17 is Rev 11:15 so turn there. This is the seventh trumpet in the trumpet judgments. Because they see a trumpet here and a trumpet in 1 Thess 4 they connect the two trumpets into one and the same trumpet. "Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever." This is at the mid-point of the Tribulation and so they say that the trumpet in 1 Thess 4:16-17 is the same trumpet and so also occurs at the mid-point. It's the mid-trib rapture view. The problems here are legion. Here an angel sounds the trump whereas in 1 Thess 4:16-17 it's the trump of God, not an angel. Here the kingdom on earth is established at the consummation of this trumpet whereas in 1 Thess 4:16-17 there is no kingdom, but a return to heaven. Here there is no mention of the Church being caught up, only the two witnesses in the prior section, and they don't represent the Church, they are two literal men. There really is no descent of Christ at the mid-point, that won't come till after the tribulation, so that's a point of difference as well. The differences go on and on. So really all three passages are talking about three different trumpets; one at the rapture signaling the resurrection of the Church, one at the mid-point signaling the coming of the kingdom to earth and at the second coming signaling the regathering of Israel. The one thing they all have in common is that the trumpet is used to signal these major prophetic events. That makes sense because trumpets are used on all sorts of occasions to signal important things. But a trumpet is just a trumpet. They are used to signal things. That's why you find them so commonly in Scripture. It doesn't mean they all signal the same thing.

As we go back to 1 Thess 4:16 we see that this signal will occur, **the Lord Himself will descend from heaven...and the dead in Christ will rise first.** So those who pass away before the Rapture don't miss out on the Rapture, they will be raised **first**. So they are not raised yet, they will not be raised until the day of the Rapture. Their bodies still rest in the earth. But their spirits are already with Him in heaven. That was a new revelation. And on the day of the Rapture they will be raised first. Then, verse 17, **we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them.** Notice again that Paul says **we who are alive**, just like verse 15! What does he mean by using that 1st person plural pronoun? He means to include himself as one who *might* be alive when the Lord descends. Paul really did not know when the Lord would come. He assumed it could be within his

lifetime. But with other believers dying before it is reasonable to assume that Paul believed he could also die before it. There really is no way to know because the rapture is imminent, it can happen at-any-moment. Now when it does happen, the text says those who are alive and **remain will be caught up**. That is the Greek word *harpazo*, which the Latin Vulgate translated as "rapture." It's a passive voice meaning those alive will be caught up apart from their own power, by the power of someone else. They will just be snatched off the earth, whether they want to or not. And so, you can say the rapture is not in the Bible but this is the rapture in the Bible, it is the catching up or snatching away of the generation of believers that are alive on earth when He descends from heaven in the air. It is a physical departure in the same way that Philip was physically removed from one place and put in another. And then we will be **together with them**, that is, with those whom Christ has just raised and who descend with Him. This is why this is called the reuniting. We are going to be reunited with all fellow believers, all who believed verse 14, **that Jesus died and rose again**. Now there is no direct mention of a translation into a resurrection body for those who are alive and remain, but it is implied by the language of **hope** in verse 13 and the language of we will not precede those who have fallen asleep in verse 15. And further, we will have to add another rapture passage from 1 Cor 15 next week which will clearly teach the translation of those who are alive and remain. In any case, **we will be caught up together with them in the clouds**. I think the clouds will hide this gathering from the world so that in that sense it will be a private event, though on earth it will be quite apparent that people are missing. The purpose of the catching up is said to be **to meet the Lord in the air**. Again, the Lord does not come to earth at this time. He comes **in the air** above the earth, and in the **clouds**, and then as John 14 said we will return with Him to heaven so that where He is we may be also. And so, the end of verse 17 says, **we shall always be with the Lord**. There will never again be a separation between us and the Lord. This means that when He does come in His kingdom we will come with Him. And that is the picture in Rev 19. We are coming back with Him. So we have already been with Him before the Second Coming so we can come back with Him at the Second Coming. But once we are with Him **we shall always be with Him**. The **we** here refers to all believers in the Church age. All of us **shall always be with Him** forevermore.

Because of this the application of verse 18 is clear. **Therefore comfort one another with these words**. And this is a comfort. Now they know what has happened to their loved ones the moment they died. They did not know that believers would die before the Lord came. They did not know where they were or when they would be raised. The Lord revealed to Paul a new truth; that the moment they died they went to be with the Lord and will be raised to descend with Him on the day of the rapture when those who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air in a private event within the clouds. This is a great truth of comfort. As are all contexts about the Rapture, it is very different than the contexts surrounding the Second Coming, which is a time of war, global catastrophes, famine and destruction. I hope you see that. So let us be confident in this; the rapture occurs at a time that is not like the Tribulation. This means it does not take place within the Tribulation or immediately after it such as mid-trib and post-trib positions teach. It seems rather to be

a pre-trib event. Plus, putting it before will allow time for us to go to the judgment seat where Christ will evaluate our works done in the body. Then Christ will begin to break the seals to initiate the Tribulation.

¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, 96.

² Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), 41.