

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 51

RAPTURE PASSAGES

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

RAPTURE PASSAGES

The first passage we will examine is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 ¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope [ἐλπίς]. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵For 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up [ἀπάζω] together with them in the clouds to meet [ἀπάντησις] the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore comfort [παρακαλέω] one another with these words.

The Thessalonians had a question concerning the believing dead that provided the occasion for Paul to teach the truth concerning the Rapture, specifically the timing of the Rapture relative to the Resurrection. The common thinking among theologians on this is they were concerned over the status of those believers who had physically died before the Lord returned for His church because they would not be alive at the time of His return and they needed to learn about the Resurrection. This understanding of the problem is not tenable, however, because it presumes they didn't understand the particulars of the Resurrection. Rapture denying theologians claim Paul is addressing the issue of the Resurrection and the Second Coming. That is not possible because the Gospel of God's grace Paul preached included the death of Christ for our sins, His burial, and His subsequent resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in 51 A.D. and he wrote 1 Corinthians in approximately 55 A.D. Paul visited both cities on his second missionary journey within a short period of time and it is inconceivable that he changed the Gospel at all during his lifetime let alone from one place to another within a year. Even before that, he preached the Resurrection on Cyprus during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:30, 34-36). The point is, those who deny the Rapture want to make these verses in 1 Thessalonians instructions about the Resurrection and the Second Coming rather than about a revelation of the Rapture and the timing concerning all those events. [For an example of this thinking, see Gary S. Shogren, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 176-195].

Paul made it clear in the letter he had already instructed them about end-times events, including the wrath to come, prior to chapter 4 (1 Thess. 1:9-10, 2:19, 3:13). If the believers in Thessalonica already knew about the Day of the Lord, the Resurrection, and the Second Coming, then what exactly was the issue? The issue seems to be the timing of events rather than whether or not certain events were going to take place in relation to the Lord's return. The Thessalonians were worried that those among them who had already died were going to miss out on the blessings attendant to the return of the Lord for His Bride, the Church. Perhaps Paul told them of the Lord's words in John 14:1-3. They must have thought that somehow the dead saints would suffer some sort of disadvantage relative to the living saints concerning their resurrection. Paul is going to assure them this is false. They weren't worried about whether or not their dead brethren would be resurrected, they were worried they would miss out on the joy of greeting the Lord at His return for them. They knew dead believers would be resurrected; they didn't know when. Timing seems to be the primary issue of this Scripture and in explaining that, Paul revealed the doctrine of the Rapture.

The Thessalonians were also being persecuted and it seems that some of them were thinking that perhaps they were in the Day of the Lord already. Paul later refers to that situation in 2 Thessalonians 2:2.

"[I]t seems best to understand that the concern, grief, and ignorance (4:13) of the Thessalonians were not about the fact of the resurrection of believers, nor about the full nature of the Parousia and related events (the day of the Lord) but about the timing of these eschatological events. As for their loved ones who died, the Thessalonians certainly knew they would be raised. But those deaths led to several questions: (1) when would the resurrection of the saints happen relative to the events of the tribulation; (2) did those deaths mean their loved ones would miss the great day of the Lord's return for His bride; and (3) did those deaths (perhaps due to persecution) mean that the day of the Lord had begun and the living Thessalonians now had to endure that day of judgment and wrath before they experienced the Lord's deliverance when He would gather His own to Himself?" [Kevin D. Zuber, "Paul and the Rapture: 1 Thessalonians 4-5" in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, pp. 148-149].

Paul refers to the believers who have passed away as being asleep. As Christians, we know that only the body, the container of the real person, dies, but the person lives on in the presence of the Lord. In the case of believers, their soul/spirit goes to be with the Lord while their body lies in burial awaiting resurrection. Zuber writes that sleep is an appropriate metaphor for death because "as far as their bodies were concerned, the deceased looked as if they were only in the repose of sleep and they had the expectation of 'awakening'—that is bodily resurrection." [Kevin D. Zuber, "Paul and the Rapture: 1 Thessalonians 4-5" in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, p. 149]. Most theologians recognize that sleep is used as a metaphor for a believer who is lying in repose awaiting his/her resurrection.

2 Corinthians 5:6–8 ⁶Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight— ⁸we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

Philippians 1:23 ²³But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better;

Luke 23:43 ⁴³And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

A number of Scriptures use the metaphor of sleep to represent death.

Matthew clearly revealed the Bible speaking of dead believers being asleep when the context is clearly death and burial.

Matthew 27:52 ⁵²“The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised”

The Lord referred to the dead Lazarus as asleep before He resuscitated him.

John 11:11-14 ¹¹This He said, and after that He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.” ¹²The disciples then said to Him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” ¹³Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. ¹⁴So Jesus then said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.”

When Stephen was stoned to death, the Bible says he fell asleep which is clearly referring to his death.

Acts 7:60 ⁶⁰“Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.”

This may have been a common way people referred to death in the ancient world. 2 Maccabees 12:45 refers to death as sleep and the ancient Greek Homer referred to a man who died defending his fellow citizens as “sleeping a sleep as it were of bronze.” [Gary S. Shogren, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 180]. Whether or not other people in other cultures around the world used this metaphor is not known, but in the ancient Middle East they certainly did.

This is important to understand because Seventh Day Adventists use the concept of being asleep as the basis for their doctrine of soul sleep. “This doctrine teaches that when believers die they go into a state of unconscious existence, and the next thing

that they are conscious of will be when Christ returns and raises them to eternal life.” [Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 819]. They also believe in annihilation which is the doctrine that unsaved people are done away with and they do not suffer eternal torment in the lake of fire. The very fact of being forced into non-existence is the eternal punishment the Bible says the lost will suffer. Needless to say, both of these doctrines are entirely unbiblical.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul is setting up the contrast between believers who have the hope of the Resurrection and unbelievers who have no hope. Most pagans simply believe they die and cease to exist or they believe they can achieve some sort of spiritual bliss by means of self-effort which they will discover when it is too late that is no hope as well. Believers have the hope of bodily resurrection and presence with the Lord for eternity (Titus 2:13). It is important to understand what hope means for the believer. Hope, ἐλπίς, is “not a theoretical knowledge about a promised future salvation—it is a function of the Christian’s living faith. Thus hope is consistently depicted, e.g., as a confident, sure expectation of divine saving actions.... NT hope is a patient, disciplined, confident waiting for and expectation of the Lord as our Savior.... [T]hose who hope are comforted and confident.” [New Testament Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis, s.v. “ἐλπίς,” pp. 2:183-188]. In English, hope is seen as simply a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen, but that is really no more than a wish for a desired outcome. We may hope for rain in a drought, but it may or may not rain. We may hope for a promotion or a raise in pay at work, but that may or may not happen. But Christian hope, as Paul used it and as the Bible uses it, is to know for certain that the promises of the future will come to pass. Premillennial dispensationalists are unanimous in applying Titus 2:13 to the Rapture.

“[W]e can conclude that in the context of Titus 2 Paul was saying the following in verse 13: Grace is teaching Christians to live sober, righteous, godly lives in this present age in conjunction with their expectant waiting for the appearing of the divine glory in Christ when He comes to rapture the church. The assurance of that appearing is a source of great joy to Christians because that appearing will bring incredibly happy changes for them, such as the loss of their sin nature and the reception of an immortal body.” [Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, p. 135]. The concept of hope in connection with the Resurrection/Rapture of the church is a consistent thought in Paul’s theology. He wrote Titus about fifteen years after he wrote 1 Thessalonians, but they are consistent one to the other which we would expect given the facts of inspiration and inerrancy. The Bible does not contradict itself. Throughout the course of his ministry and his life, Paul didn’t change his theology.

Titus 2:13 ¹³looking for the blessed hope [ἐλπίς] and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,

Paul is not saying that Christians should not grieve the loss of loved ones. He is saying we should not grieve in the same way pagans do who believe death is the end and they

will never see their loved ones again. Christians who lose loved ones in Christ know they will see them again; therefore, grieving as though there is no hope of reunion is pointless and emotionally damaging.

Christ was the firstfruits of the Resurrection and those who are in Him live forevermore. By definition, believers have faith that Christ was raised from the dead; therefore, they have the confident assurance that they too will be raised from the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:12–19 ¹²Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. ¹⁵Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁷and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

When Paul says, “if we believe,” (1 Thess. 4:14) he is presenting a first-class condition that means “since we believe” or “because we believe” that Christ was resurrected, then the things that follow are the logical consequences of His resurrection. As believers, these things should be settled truth in our minds: Christ was raised, deceased believers will be raised, and living believers will be translated.

Paul refers to the fact that the Lord will bring those back with Him who have fallen asleep. These are the believers who are absent from the body and present with the Lord. In other words, believers, in whatever manner they exist in the presence of the Lord before their Resurrection will return with the Lord to be reunited with their physical, but glorified at the time of the return, bodies. What form deceased believers exist in at this time is not known; the Bible doesn't address it. As we noted earlier, the Word simply says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord and we know this is before the Resurrection. By telling them their loved ones will return with the Lord, Paul is addressing the issue of timing and not specifically the issue of resurrection because resurrection wasn't the issue. They already knew that.

Paul goes on to tell the Thessalonians the saints who are alive will not be raptured before the saints who are dead in Christ are resurrected (1 Thess. 4:15). Paul received this information “by the word of the Lord;” therefore, this is the product of divine revelation. Paul received this revelation from the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 15:51, Paul referred to the Rapture as a mystery which is something previously unknown but now revealed. The only way Paul could have known this was by means of direct revelation which he says he received from the Lord.

In a tangential way, Paul also confirmed the doctrine of imminence. By using the pronoun “we,” he was clearly revealing the fact he thought believers, including himself, could be taken by the Lord at any moment. He wasn’t saying it was going to happen; he was acknowledging it could happen. That was as true then as it is true today.

Concerning the timing of these things, the living saints will not precede the Resurrection of those saints who have suffered physical death.

The Lord will descend from heaven (1 Thess. 4:16) and no mention is made of anyone accompanying Him other than the deceased saints. There will not be an angel acting as His messenger. He will not be leading an army of saints or angels. Instead, He will come for those who belong to Him. He will be coming from heaven which was nothing new in terms of revelation to the Thessalonian believers; Paul had already commended them for coming to faith and waiting for the Son “from heaven” who was going to rescue them from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

There will be a shout, the voice of the archangel will call out, and the trumpet of God will sound. Paul assured them the “dead in Christ will rise first.” All of this probably happens so quickly that we wouldn’t be able to discern any specific order, but an order there will be. Remember, the Thessalonian believers knew of the Resurrection, timing is the issue and Paul provides the answer here.

Shout, *κέλευσμα*, means the voicing of a command. “In the Class. Gr. writers, used for the shout of soldiers charging their enemies, rowers encouraging each other in their work, [or] charioteers inciting their horses.” Spiros Zodhiates, s. v. “*κέλευσμα*,” *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, p. 856]. Most dispensational exegetes seem to compare it to a command issued by a military officer. Couch says it is “a military term meaning to command, and is used for the purpose of gathering together.” [Mal Couch, *The Hope of Christ’s Return: Premillennial Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 125]. We don’t know what is shouted. Could it be something like “Come forth,” which the Lord used to bring Lazarus out from the tomb (John 11:43)? Many people believe the Lord had to qualify that command with the name of Lazarus, otherwise everyone would have been raised. Or could it be “Come up here” which was the command given to John in Revelation 4:1? At any rate, the Lord Jesus said that people in the tomb would one day hear His voice and come forth. Believers and unbelievers will be raised at different times, but both groups will respond to a command from the Lord.

John 5:28–29 ²⁸“Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, ²⁹and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.

The NASB says “with the voice of *the* archangel,” but the article is not in the text; they added it. It is more accurately translated “a voice of an archangel.” Michael is the only

archangel identified by name in the Scriptures (Dan. 10:13, 21, 12:1 where he is called the prince; Jude 9 which is the only verse that identifies him as an archangel, and Revelation 12:7 where his status or title is not mentioned), but the Bible does not say whether this is a specific angel, whether it is another archangel unknown to us, or whether it is just a sound like that of an archangel. What it is and who it is, we don't know. Walvoord does believe it will be Michael. [John F. Walvoord and Mark Hitchcock, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 76] but that seems to be more of an assumption than a fact developed out of exegesis.

The third sound will be the trumpet of God and again the article is not in the text. It could read "a trumpet of God." Trumpets are obviously used a great deal in the Bible concerning the presence of God and judgment. This trumpet is probably the same trumpet sounded in 1 Corinthians 15:52 in connection with the Rapture truth presented there. This is not the same trumpet that will be sounded at the end of the Tribulation when the Lord sends His angels to gather together the Jews saved during the time of Jacob's distress who will be entering the Kingdom (Mt. 24:31) and it has no connection with the seven trumpets of Revelation. In the Old Testament, trumpets were used to assemble the people of God in the presence of God (Ex. 19:16-19) and to signal the deliverance of God's people (Zech. 9:14-16).

Exodus 19:16–19 ¹⁶So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.

Zechariah 9:14–16 ¹⁴Then the LORD will appear over them, And His arrow will go forth like lightning; And the Lord GOD will blow the trumpet, And will march in the storm winds of the south. ¹⁵The LORD of hosts will defend them. And they will devour and trample on the sling stones; And they will drink and be boisterous as with wine; And they will be filled like a sacrificial basin, Drenched like the corners of the altar. ¹⁶And the LORD their God will save them in that day As the flock of His people; For they are as the stones of a crown, Sparkling in His land.

What we also don't know is whether or not the unsaved world will hear these things. Scripture does record instances of a heavenly voice on earth that was not comprehended by those who heard it. At the least, we can probably say the sudden disappearance of millions of people and some audible, heavenly sounds will capture the attention of the world. They won't comprehend it and they might even rejoice that believers have suddenly departed, but they will know that something significant has

happened. For some unbelievers, especially those who were exposed to the truth before the Rapture, it might be a wake-up call.

Acts 9:7⁷The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

Acts 22:9⁹“And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.

John 12:28–30²⁸“Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.”²⁹So the crowd of people who stood by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, “An angel has spoken to Him.”³⁰Jesus answered and said, “This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes.

Paul said the dead in Christ would be raised; he did not say that about living believers. He said living believers would be caught up (1 Thess. 4:17). I know some theologians who try to make the Resurrection and the Rapture equivalent events, but they are not. The Resurrection involves the animation of dead bodies, changing them into glorified bodies and reuniting the soul and spirit with that new body. The Rapture involves changing a living body, that never experienced physical death, into a glorified body, soul, and spirit. The Resurrection of dead saints happens first, then the translation of living saints happens. The end result is equivalent, that is, every person in the body of Christ receives a glorified body befitting those who are the body of Christ and adopted into the family of God. “For those who are resurrected and for those who are raptured, a real body is given. It is impervious to death and will last eternally, and yet it is an actual body. Some of the older commentators envision the new body to be ‘spiritualized’ or immaterial (Ellicott). But this is not so. Because Christ is a life-giving spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), the new body will be spiritual (v. 46), energized and supported by Christ’s resurrected power. ‘Spiritual’ does not mean that this body is an apparition or ghostlike; it will, however, be imperishable and immortal (v. 53).” [Mal Couch, *the hope of Christ’s Return: Premillennial Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 128].

All of this happens so fast, everyone is caught up together in the clouds which many believe to be the same type of clouds with which the Lord ascended into heaven in Acts 1:9 after His Resurrection. It may, however, simply be a reference to clouds as they exist in our atmospheric heavens which is where this initial meeting with the Lord takes place. This seems to be more likely because the clouds when connected to the Lord are in connection with His return as the King (Dan. 7:13-14; Acts 1:11). This is a reunion for all believers who lost believing loved ones during the course of Church history. The Lord has come down from heaven where He has been sitting at the right hand of the Father awaiting the time set for Him to fetch His Church.

The end result of all this is permanent: “we shall always be with the Lord.” This will be the first time since Adam when the planet will be devoid of any living believers. Faith will have completely departed. This will also be the first time when every person in the body of Christ is together, unified, and present with the Lord.

The people who are Resurrected and Raptured are only those believers who came to faith in the dispensation of grace and are therefore part of the body of Christ. In the past, there has been some disagreement about this among dispensational theologians. Scofield misled people into believing the Rapture was for all believers across all dispensations. In his original study Bible, his note for 1 Thessalonians 4:16 reads: “Not church saints only, but all bodies of the saved, of whatever dispensation, are included in the first resurrection, as here described, but it is peculiarly the ‘blessed hope’ of the Church.” Chafer disagreed with this and when Scofield’s Bible notes were revised, the revision committee dropped this note. Paul clearly said in 1 Thessalonians 4:14 that those who are resurrected are those in Christ. In verse 17, those who are raised and translated are with the Lord; unbelievers are not with the Lord. Old Testament saints will be raised after the Tribulation so they may enjoy their Kingdom inheritance. The conclusion must be that Paul is only talking about those who are in the body of Christ.

Paul intended these words to be comforting (1 Thess. 4:18). These believers were assured by the Word of the Lord their deceased loved ones would be raised at the return of the Lord and they would, in turn, be translated and united with all the other believers who are in Christ and therefore be with Christ for eternity. Comfort, *παρακαλέω*, means to cause someone to be encouraged or consoled, either by verbal or non-verbal means. There is nothing but comfort in the words Paul wrote to these believers in Thessalonica and, by application, to us. These words encompass the dispensation of grace and they should comfort and encourage us just as much as they comforted and encouraged them. People who deny the Rapture are denying themselves comfort. “Comfort or ‘be calling alongside, be counseling, consoling’ here, as in almost all of the Rapture passages, provides a practical, moral, and spiritual purpose for the teaching. Some commentators criticize the doctrine of the Rapture as encouraging escapism or a belief in ‘pie in the sky by and by.’ But such is not the case. Here, the apostle sees the Rapture as spiritual comfort for those who especially struggle through the heavy trials of life. Ellicott says the Rapture is balm for sorrow.” [Mal Couch, *the hope of Christ’s Return: Premillennial Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 128].

Caught up, *ἀρπάζω*, means to grab or seize suddenly so as to remove or gain control; to snatch or take away [BSAG]. The interesting nuance of this word concerning a violent snatching away seems to suggest that most Christians are so rooted and invested in this world that they need to be forcibly jerked out of here in order to go into eternity. There is a number of Greek words that could have been used to refer to this catching up or taking away; the use of *ἀρπάζω* seems to be a deliberate choice of words. I noticed something in these verses that might serve to confirm that analysis. Note that the dead in Christ are raised or resurrected, but those alive and in Christ must be caught up or

violently snatched away to be with the Lord. Those who are deceased are already with the Lord and all they need is to be joined to their new, glorified body. They already know how wonderful it is to be with the Lord; snatching them away to be with Him is unnecessary.

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