

The Rapture Question

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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One of the reasons I wanted to preach on this doctrine of the rapture is because there is so much ignorance in the church today about this.

Beginning in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul says, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep...”—referring to the death of believers—“...lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. 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”—or “who have died.” “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. Then we who are alive and remain...”—and here’s our word—“...shall be caught up...”—the Greek word is “harpodzo,” which means “to snatch up” or “to catch up by force”—“...together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

Many of us who were alive on July 20, 1969, when Apollo 11 landed on the moon, remember those iconic words of Neil Armstrong, when he took his first step onto the surface of the moon. He said, “One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” Indeed, it was an amazing event; man had just stepped onto the moon for the first time.

But when I think of the rapture of the church, the moon landing will pale that in glory and majesty and splendor. When you think of “one giant leap for mankind,” it will be when Jesus Christ comes back in the clouds, the dead saints will be resurrected, the living saints will be caught up in the air and we will all be gathered home to heaven. It’s called “the rapture of the church.” It’s the blessed hope of the believer. It’s when Jesus comes for the church. In the Second Coming Jesus comes with the church.

There is a lot of ignorance about the rapture. So in verse 13, Paul writes, “I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren.” Someone jokingly said, “That’s the largest Christian denomination in the world today: the “ignorant brethren.” I thought that was good. One of the reasons why we’re ignorant is simply that we don’t know the Bible; we don’t pay attention to God’s Word. The Word of God is “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” We need to make sure we understand this Biblical teaching on the rapture.

There are several things I want to point out about the rapture. The first is the concept of the rapture. The reason I want to discuss this is because some people don’t believe in the rapture. Some people believe in the Second Coming, but they take rapture verses and Second Coming verses, mix them all together and think it’s just one, grand event. They don’t understand the idea that Christ will come for His church before the seven years of the tribulation. At the end of the tribulation, that is when the church comes back with Christ. There’s a very easy distinction:

in the rapture, He comes for us; in the Second Coming, He comes with us. In the rapture, we're taken from earth to heaven; in the Second Coming, we go from heaven back down to earth. In between, there is a seven-year period, of which the last three-and-a-half years is known as "the great tribulation."

Some say that the rapture is a modern doctrine; it wasn't taught by the Apostles or the early church. I disagree with that. I want to make very clear that the authority for what we believe and how we determine how we behave comes from one source only: the Bible.

"The B-i-b-l-e;

Yes, that's the book for me.

I stand alone on the Word of God,

The B-i-b-l-e."

It's not church tradition that is our authority, it's not psychology, it's not philosophy, it's not my own intellect, it's not my experience; it's the Bible, "the B-i-b-l-e." So what is clearly taught in the Word of God is what is important, and I believe the rapture is clearly taught in the Word of God.

I'm going to touch on three of the clear teachings in the Bible on the rapture, but I will use 1 Thessalonians 13-18 as my text.

The second clear teaching of the rapture is in John 14:27, where Jesus is in the upper room and He says to His troubled disciples—because He announced that He was leaving—"Let not your heart be troubled; neither let it be afraid." How many times are our hearts troubled and we're afraid? In John 14:1, "You believe in God, believe also in Me." He's saying, "Don't be afraid. You believe God; also put your faith and trust in Me."

He continues in verse 2, "In My Father's house..." I love that. He's talking about heaven. He calls it His "Father's house." That means that if you're a child of God, and God is your Father, heaven is your home; this world is not your home. He says, "In My Father's house are many mansions," it says in the King James version. I like that translation. One translation I read said, "In My Father's house are many apartments." I said, "No, thank you." Now I realize the Greek word would be better translated "abiding places" or "rooms," but the idea is that He is building a house for us, a home for us in heaven. He said, "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 to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

I happen to believe that Jesus is not talking about His Second Coming here, but He's talking about the rapture of the church. Jesus is saying that He is going to snatch up, catch up or take up the church to heaven to go to His Father's house. Once we are there with the Lord, we will be forever with the Lord.

Some say that the word “rapture” is not in the Bible. Well, it depends on what Bible you’re reading. The word “caught up” is here in our English Bible in our text, verse 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.” The Greek word for “caught up” is “harpodzo.” It literally means “to snatch up,” “to seize” or “to take by force.” It appears 13 times in the New Testament.

It is used in Matthew 13:19, where Jesus is talking about the sower and the seed. Some seed fell on the wayside, and the birds circling overhead swooped down and “harpodzoed,” they snatched away or took away the seed.

It is used in John 6:15: “When Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force...” —“harpodzo” —“...to make Him king.” They were going to grab Jesus and forcibly take Him.

It is also used in John 10:28, where Jesus said, “I give them...” —that is, “my sheep” —“... eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them...” —“harpodzo” —“... out of My hand.” So the idea of rapture is that He will snatch us up.

Where do we get the word “rapture”? From the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible. The Greek word “harpodzo” is translated into the Latin as “rapturo,” which means “to rapture” or “to catch up.” It doesn’t mean just to be raptured with joy; it means “to snatch up” or “to catch up” or “to take away.” So it doesn’t matter what we call it, but I like the idea that Jesus is coming back, and He’s going “to snatch” us home to heaven.

Now I know this may sound farfetched and crazy to some, but I believe it, because Jesus promised it. He promised He would come again and receive us to Himself.

In 1 Corinthians 15, we have the third area of the New Testament that clearly teaches on the rapture. Starting in verse 51, Paul says, “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 this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality...Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” So whether we are dead or alive, our bodies will be transformed.

Paul calls the rapture in this passage “a mystery.” A mystery is something you cannot know unless God reveals it. And God has revealed it. It is something that was not revealed in the Old Testament, only in the New Testament. It is a revelation that gives us understanding that Christ will return.

Though the rapture is not in the Old Testament, it is pictured. Let me give you a couple of examples. In Genesis 5:24, the Bible says, “And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.” People say that Enoch walked with God every day. That’s true; they walked and talked and had fellowship with one another. One day Enoch and God took a long walk and God said to Enoch, “Enoch, we’re closer to my house than we are to yours; why don’t you just come

home with Me.” I like that. So Enoch was actually taken up right to heaven to be with God. That’s a picture of how God can catch us up.

In 2 Kings 2:11, when Elijah was going to go to heaven, it says, “Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.” Remember the chariot of fire and the angels who came down and swooped up Elijah. We sing:

“I looked over Jordan and what did I see?

Comin’ for to carry me home.

There was a band of angels,

A comin’ after me.

Comin’ for to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot,

Comin’ for to carry me home.”

Phillip, the evangelist, was raptured sideways in the book of Acts, which I think is kind of cool. So being “caught up” to heaven has happened before, and it could happen again.

Some say that the early church fathers did not teach on the rapture. I say that’s true, but they did teach that Christ’s coming was imminent. The word “imminent” means that nothing else needs to happen before a coming event; it is the next thing to happen. When we talk about the rapture of the church, one of the most important aspects of it is the imminent return of Christ. We’re not looking for the Antichrist, we’re not looking for the “abomination of desolation,” we’re not looking for the moon to turn to blood or the stars to fall from the sky or earthquakes and famines. We’re looking for Jesus Christ, who will come to take us to heaven to be with Him.

Even though the early church fathers didn’t use the word “rapture,” they did teach of the imminent return of Christ. Clement of Rome, from the first century, is quoted as saying, “Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His return be accomplished. As the Scriptures also bear witness saying speedily, ‘He will...come and will not tarry.’ The Lord shall suddenly come to the temple, even the Holy One, whom ye look for.” So the doctrine of the rapture is the imminent return of Christ; nothing else has to happen before the church is raptured and “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air.”

Next I want to point out the problem or conflict of the rapture, verses 13-15. “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. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. 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.”

Notice the problem in verse 13. The problem was that they were ignorant about those who had fallen asleep. First, this word “asleep” is referring only to the physical body. Never does the Bible teach about soul sleep. There are some groups that teach that when you die, your soul goes to sleep, and God will recreate you in the resurrection. No so. The moment you die, your soul is still consciously awake, and your soul either goes to heaven or to hell. If you’re a Christian, you go to heaven; if you’re not, you go to hell. You’re awake and alive, because the soul never sleeps. So what is sleeping? The body.

Secondly, “asleep” is only referring to a Christian’s body. The term is never used for unbelievers. Thirdly, “asleep” conveys the idea that it is a temporary state, and your body will be awakened. When you go to sleep, you do it with the expectation that you’ll wake up; you plan to get up in the morning. So we understand that the body will be resurrected. That will become clear in this passage.

The word “cemetery” comes from the Greek word translated “sleep” here in our English Bible. “Cemetery” means “resting place.” It is a place where the bodies are resting, waiting for their resurrection, which for the church, will be the rapture.

Now the problem in verse 13 is that the Thessalonians were ignorant about those who had died before the rapture. They were sorrowing, which is understandable—when someone dies you feel sad. But they were sorrowing with a hopelessness, “as others who have no hope.” The Thessalonians believed the rapture would occur soon, so when their Christian friends and family had died, they freaked out; they thought their dead loved ones would miss the rapture. So Paul is writing these words to the Thessalonians not so much to explain the rapture but to comfort their hearts. Paul wanted to show them that those Christians who died before the rapture would not be at a disadvantage compared to those who will be alive when the Lord returns at the rapture.

That’s the key to understanding this whole passage. Paul was writing to Christians, who were sorrowing hopelessly, thinking that their loved ones who died in Christ would miss the rapture, that there was no hope. So Paul said he didn’t want them to be “ignorant” or “sorrow as others who have no hope.”

Then Paul moves to the pillars of the rapture, verses 14-15. What do we believe? There are three pillars that we believe. First, we believe in the Crucifixion of Christ: “For if we believe that Jesus died...” The foundation of all our hopes is the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. So Paul is saying that “If you believe in the death of Jesus Christ...” The Cross is the centerpiece of God’s redemptive history. God came in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, took on flesh through the womb of the Virgin Mary, lived a sinless life, then voluntarily died a substitutionary death on the Cross. At Jesus’ death, all the sins of the whole world were placed on the sinless Son of God, and He atoned for the sins of the world. But only those who put their faith in Christ and appropriate what He did by faith are forgiven or justified before a holy

God. Jesus died for the world, but only those who believe in Him have everlasting life. Jesus died for our sins, so there is hope.

The second pillar of the rapture is the Resurrection of Christ, verse 14. Not only did Jesus die, but He “rose again.” So the foundation for the rapture is the death of Christ and the Resurrection of Christ. Had Jesus died for our sins but not risen from the dead, we would have no assurance that we could be forgiven. The Resurrection of Jesus was God the Father’s stamp of approval on the work of the Cross; that His death for us was accepted by the Father. So Jesus rose victoriously from the dead. The empty tomb is the hope of humanity.

Because of Jesus’ Resurrection, verse 14 says, “God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.” The souls of those loved ones, who they were sorrowing hopelessly over, were with Jesus and would come back with Jesus at the rapture. So Paul wanted to comfort them with this truth. This passage is pastoral and not theological. It is a pastor trying to comfort these people, who were sorrowing.

The third pillar for the rapture is the revelation of God’s word, verse 15. “This we say to you by the word of the Lord.” You have three foundations: the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the revelation of God’s word. This isn’t just theory or hypothesis or some philosophical thought; this is revelation from God. The truth we believe is from the Word of God, the Scriptures, and it was revealed to Paul by the Lord Himself. It’s “the word of the Lord.”

Now we move to the next point, which is the components of the rapture, verses 16-17. What are the elements or components that make up the rapture of the church? “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.” There are four components of the rapture. The first component is that Christ returns. Now, again, Jesus is coming for us. In Revelation 19, in the Second Coming, He is coming with us. In the rapture, the saints are on earth going to heaven, but in the Second Coming, the saints are in heaven coming back to earth.

In Bible study, you need to do what’s called “observation.” It means to take note of the details and observe the differences. There is a vast difference between the rapture verses and the Second Coming verses. Some people put them together, but they are two, separate events. The rapture is not a coming; it’s a catching away. In the Second Coming, we come back with Christ. But in John 14:3, Jesus said, “I will come again and receive you...”—or “rapture you” or “take you”—“...to Myself” to His “Father’s house.”

The first phase of the rapture is Jesus coming back in the clouds. Remember that He went to heaven in the clouds, and He is coming back in the clouds.

Then there is “a shout,” which in the Greek is “a command.” In Revelation 4:1, what John “heard was...‘Come up here.’” I believe that is where the church was caught up to, heaven, before Revelation 6, when the tribulation starts on earth.

Remember, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He said, “Lazarus, come forth!” He had

to specify “Lazarus,” or the whole graveyard would have emptied. “Just Lazarus; we’ll get the rest of you later.” Then Lazarus came out of the grave. There will be a shout when the resurrection and the transformation of our bodies happens. How glorious is that! Then there is “the voice of an archangel.” Then there is “the trumpet of God” calling the saints to heaven. I love that.

The second component of the rapture is that the dead in Christ are resurrected. So Christ returns, then the bodies of the Christians who have died before the rapture, which are “sleeping” will be resurrected. “The dead in Christ will rise first.” Most of the questions I get about the rapture are about this statement, this verse.

Here’s the confusion: “Pastor John, didn’t you tell us that the Bible teaches that “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord”? Yes, that’s true; it’s in 2 Corinthians 5:8. The moment a Christian dies, their soul or spirit goes immediately to heaven to be with the Lord. Then at the rapture the bodies of “the dead in Christ will rise first”; only their bodies will be resurrected. Remember that they are “sleeping”; their bodies are what is sleeping. Their soul is with the Lord. They are awaiting the resurrection of their body to be reunited with their soul or spirit. Then their body will be transformed into a new body, a resurrected body.

In Romans 8:23, it says that we are “eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.” The glorious truth of Christianity is that your body will be transformed. Go home and look in the mirror and praise God for that. I had a good friend send me a picture of myself he took a year ago with an aging process done on my face. It’s John Miller at 90 years old. The good part was I still had my hair. I guess the app figured that if I still had my hair at this age, I’ll still have it at 90. But it was snow white. I looked wasted! So you look in the mirror and weep, but then you open the Bible and rejoice. “I’m getting a new body! A new model. That’s awesome!” No more aches and pains. And us old folks will actually be able to tie our shoes in heaven! It will be awesome! What a glorious hope that is for the believer, that our bodies will be resurrected. So if you die before the rapture, your body will be resurrected and redeemed.

Jesus was the “firstfruits” of those who die or are sleeping. The first resurrection is of Christ, then the church is resurrected. What a glorious precept that is.

The third component of the rapture is the living in Christ will be raptured, verse 17. This is what most people know of the rapture. “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.”

Notice Paul uses the word “we” in this verse; Paul is including himself in this event. He believed in the imminent return of Christ for the church, so he thought it possible that he might experience the rapture while he was still alive on earth. “Caught up” in this verse is where we get our word “rapture” from. It’s “harpodzo” in the Greek—“caught up” or “taken away” or “snatched up.” What a glorious moment that will be!

In 1 Corinthians 15:52, it will happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” From that word “moment” we get our word “atom.” “Twinkling of an eye” is not the blinking of an eye; it’s the light quickly reflecting off the pupil of the eye. It’s instantaneous. So if we’re alive when the rapture happens, we’ll be “caught up” immediately “to meet the Lord in the air.”

There are a lot of questions about who will be raptured, and the answer is quite simple: those who are “in Christ.” Several times in this passage you find the phrase “in Christ” or “in the Lord.” That’s one of the key phrases in the New Testament. The moment you are saved, you are placed “in Christ.” If you are not a Christian, you are not “in Christ.” If you are “in Christ,” you are a child of God; you are declared to be a saint. If you’re not a Christian, you’re not a child of God and you’re not “in Christ”; you ain’t a saint. So the answer to the question, “Who is going to be raptured?” is the saints, the children of God, the church, the people of God.

“Well, do I have to be super spiritual? Read a bunch? Pray a bunch? Be on fire for Jesus? Is the rapture a reward for spirituality? It’s only the ‘deeper life club’ that’s going to get ‘caught up’?”

That’s not what the Bible teaches. If you’re saved, you’re going to get raptured. If you’re not saved, you’re going to be left behind. It’s as simple as that. The believers will be “caught up,” and the unbelievers will be left behind to face that terrible time of the tribulation and judgment.

I believe that the rapture is the imminent coming of Christ. We’re not looking for the moon to turn to blood. We’re not looking for the sun to lose its light. We’re not looking for the stars to fall from heaven. We’re not looking for the Antichrist. We just studied that in the Olivet Discourse. These are signs that will happen before the Second Coming, not the rapture. We’re looking for the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

I always thought it would be the ultimate experience to get raptured Sunday morning while I’m preaching on the rapture. Wouldn’t that be cool? Boom—I disappear. But hopefully you’re not here to see that; I want you to go with me. Hopefully you don’t get raptured and I get left behind! That would really be bad—the church disappears and the preacher’s still here preaching! That will probably happen in some congregations. It’s sad.

So if you’re a Christian, you’re going to get raptured.

When will the rapture happen? I believe in a pre-tribulation rapture. I believe the church is raptured in Revelation 4, the church is in heaven in Revelation 4 and 5 and in Revelation 6, the tribulation begins.

Revelation 1:19 is a key to the book of Revelation. It says, “Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are and the things which will take place after this.” I believe “the things which you have seen” is in Revelation 1. “The things which are” is in Revelation 2-3, which is the church age. In “the things which will take place after this,” the word “after” or “hereafter” is the Greek word “meta tauta.” It’s the same Greek word that Revelation 4:1 opens with: “Come up here...after this,” meta tauta.

So I believe the church, in Revelation, is “caught up” in chapter 4. That is long before the tribulation starts in chapter 6, and we are never seen again on the earth until Revelation 19, when we come back on white horses with Jesus Christ. The Bible says “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ,” 1 Thessalonians 5:9.

The fourth component of the rapture is that together we’ll forever be with the Lord. Verse 17, “... together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” That warms my heart. There are two aspects of being reunited. Number one is that all of our loved ones who have died in Christ we will see again. You will see them face to face. You will hug them. You will talk to them. You will know them. They will know you. It will be the most grand and glorious reunion you’ve ever had.

When I read those words “together with them,” I thought about my mom and dad, who have been in heaven for many years. I can’t wait to see them and hug them. I can’t wait to tell them about all that God has done in and through my life. I will see them again. This is why Paul is writing these words in verse 18: “Comfort one another with these words.” There is going to be a reunion.

So there is the return of the Lord, the resurrection of the dead, the rapture of the living and the reuniting with those who have gone before. How glorious is that! If you have a loved one who has died in Christ, you will see them again.

Notice also, verse 17, that we will “meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” With our loved ones, reunited, and with the Lord forever. Isn’t that great?!

My last point is the comfort of the rapture, verse 18. So we have the concept, the conflict, the components and the comfort of the rapture. Here is the conclusion, and here is how you put it into practice: “Therefore comfort one another with these words.” The Thessalonians were sorrowing with no comfort.

I’ve done enough funerals to see how people respond to those who die in Christ and to those who die not in Christ. It is tragic to watch family members weep and cry for people who perish, because they’ve died outside of Christ. There’s no hope that they’ll ever see them again. There’s no hope that they’ll ever be reunited with them. So when Paul says “together with them” and “meet the Lord,” he says to “comfort one another with these words.”

The Holy Spirit is that Comforter, the “paraklétos,” who comes to comfort us. Remember I said that the aspect of the Lord’s coming brings us comfort? Here it is in this passage: “Comfort one another with these words.”

The rapture also cleanses us. If you knew that Jesus Christ was coming tonight, what would you do this afternoon? How would it change your plans? “I’m still watching the football game!” I’ll pray for you. Church attendance drops when the NFL games start. That’s pretty sad. Jesus is coming back! Get serious! Does that mean you can’t watch the football game and still go to heaven? No; it’s fine for you to watch the game. But what’s your motive? What are you doing

with your time, your talent and your treasure?

The third thing the rapture does for us is that it compels us. When Paul closed his teaching on the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:58, he said, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord...”—why?—“...knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” Everything we do outside of the Lord is vain and temporal. What we do for the Lord is not in vain, because we’ll spend eternity with Him and we’ll hear those words, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”

We don’t know if the Lord will come tonight, or tomorrow, or next week or ten years from now. But when He comes, that’s all that will matter: Are we ready for His coming? Have we lived and labored for the Lord?