

The Rapture Of The Church

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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In John 14:1-6, Jesus is in the upper room with His disciples, and they're sad, because He said He was going away from them. So He said, "Let not your heart be troubled, you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house..."—that's a reference to heaven—"...are many mansions..."—or "abiding places"—"...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's the rapture—"...that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know." Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" So Jesus promised. Take note of that.

I believe this is the first revelation of the rapture of the church. Jesus said that He would go to His Father's house, prepare a place there for you—it's a real, prepared place—and He'll come again and receive you and take you to where He is. But this is not the Second Coming of Christ, when He comes back with the church; this is the rapture of the church when we're "caught up...to meet the Lord in the air," and we're taken to heaven, 1 Thessalonians 4:17. So Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid," John 14:27.

1 Corinthians 15:51-58 is the passage on the resurrection of our bodies at the rapture. We're going to learn that the dead saints' bodies will be resurrected, and the living saints at that time will be translated to heaven. This is another teaching on the rapture.

Paul says, "Behold, I tell you a mystery." This word "mystery" is important. "Mystery" is described in Ephesians 3:5 as that "which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets." So it's something that is a New Testament revelation which was unknown to the Old Testament saints.

Continuing with verse 51, "We shall not all sleep." This is a metaphor for the death of a believer, that their bodies are only sleeping, waiting for the resurrection of their bodies at the rapture. We'll read about it in 1 Thessalonians 4.

"But we shall all be changed..."—that will be at the rapture—"...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible..."—referring to our physical bodies—"...must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now notice the implication of the rapture and bodily resurrection, verse 58: "Therefore, my

beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” So don’t let your heart be troubled, “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.” Why? Because “your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

Now let’s look at our text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. This is the most commonly quoted and referenced Scripture on the doctrine of the rapture of the church. Paul the apostle said, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep...”—this is the metaphor for physical death—“...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,” or those who died trusting in Christ, God will bring with Him. “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.

Verse 16, “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 shall be caught up...”—the Greek word is “harpodzo” or “raptured”—“...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.”

When Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica, they were troubled, upset and ignorant about what happens to their loved ones who have died before Jesus returns in the rapture. So all we read in the Thessalonian passage was written to educate them, to encourage them and to comfort them that those who had died in Christ are not at a disadvantage with those who are living at the time of the rapture and will be “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air.”

In Philippians 3:20-21, Paul says, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body.” That is a reference to the rapture of the church. We’re looking for the Lord to return. Heaven is our real home; we’re citizens there. Christ will come, we’ll be “caught up,” we’ll meet Him in the air and “We shall always be with the Lord.”

Now I want to give you five facts about the rapture of the church, from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. I want to look at the problem of the rapture, the pillars of the rapture, the participants of the rapture, the plan or program of the rapture and the profits of the rapture.

First, let’s look at the problem of the rapture, verse 13. “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.” Here is the background for why Paul wrote these words. They were troubled about their loved ones who had died, thinking they would miss out on the rapture or be at a disadvantage when the Lord returns.

There are four key words in this Scripture I want to mention: “ignorant...asleep...sorrow...hope.” The first key word is “ignorant.” First, He said, “I do not want you to be ignorant,

brethren.” Someone jokingly said, “The largest Christian denomination in America is the “ignorant brethren.” What the Thessalonians were ignorant of is what happens when you die. And one of the most common questions I am asked as a pastor is, “Where do we go when we die?” Christians are ignorant about what happens after death.

All Christians who die “in Christ” are true Christians. “In Christ” is synonymous with being a true Christian, and every Christian is “in Christ.” That’s what makes you a Christian. So the Thessalonians were ignorant about the fact that even though their loved ones had died before the rapture, they would not be at a disadvantage when it happened. Their soul or spirit would be with the Lord at their deaths, and their bodies would be resurrected at the rapture. Then we all would “meet in the air...and always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

2 Corinthians 5:8 says, “To be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord.” So don’t keep asking me that question about what happens at death! It’s in the Bible. And in Philippians 1:21, Paul said, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” And in verse 23, Paul said, “For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.”

It’s a blessing when a believer dies. The Bible says, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints,” Psalm 116:15. That’s because they go home; they graduated, they receive crowns, they’re glorified. It’s the culmination of their salvation. We weep, mourn and are upset and distraught because of the pain of separation and bereavement. But from heaven’s perspective, it’s glorious; they go to be with the Lord. So don’t be ignorant what happens to a believer when they die. It’s not a disadvantage.

The second key word I want to look at is “asleep.” This word is used metaphorically. This is a metaphor for death. Instead of using the word “death,” Paul used the word “asleep,” so it pictures aspects about our physical death. There are three facts about this metaphor for death. Number one, it is only used in the Bible for true Christians when they die and is not used for unbelievers. Number two, it is used to refer only to the physical body and never to the soul or spirit.

The Seventh Day Adventists teach that when you die, you just kind of go “poof”; you cease to exist. You’re no longer anywhere. Then you’re waiting for the resurrection and will be recreated. They call it “soul sleep.” But actually the Bible doesn’t teach that. It teaches, “To be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord.” Our souls don’t sleep, because they don’t have a body that needs rest. I have a body, so I need to sleep.

Warren Wiersbe once said when he was a pastor that he was going to take a vacation. One member of the church asked, “Why would you take a vacation as a pastor? The devil never takes a vacation.”

He said, “Madam, the devil doesn’t have a body. I do, so I need rest.” Well said.

So the soul doesn't sleep; the soul is alive and vital in the presence of the Lord after Christians die. How marvelous that is!

We know the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had physically died. Jesus said that "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.' Then His disciples said, 'Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.'" John 11:11-12. They were ignorant too. Then Jesus said, "Lazarus is dead," verse 14.

So the body is "asleep," and it is only a temporary state, because of the hope of the resurrection of the body. All of the bodies of believers—and even unbelievers—will be resurrected. Christians will be resurrected to life at the rapture; unbelievers will be resurrected to judgment and damnation at the Second Coming. So every human being's body will be resurrected.

Now notice the third key word "sorrow," verse 13. It's natural to sorrow when a loved one dies. We sorrow because we love those who have died, we're going to miss them and we're separated from them. It's the pain of separation, but it's only temporary. We'll be reunited with them.

So we will have sorrow. Paul doesn't say we aren't to sorrow; he says we aren't to "sorrow as others who have no hope." Sorrow is a natural, grieving process, but it isn't a hopeless sorrow. When a believer dies in Christ, we're sad, but we have "hope," our fourth key word, beyond the grave. And there is only one place where that hope is found: in Jesus Christ.

Second, we look at the pillars of the rapture, verses 14-15. What is the foundation or pillars for our hope of life beyond the grave? "For if we believe that Jesus died..."—there it is, the Cross or the Crucifixion—"...and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep..."—or "died believing"—"...in Jesus."

There are three pillars for the hope of the rapture of believers. First, is the death of Christ. "If we believe that Jesus died." In the literal rendering of this verse, the word "if" should be translated "since." So it would say, "Since we believe that Jesus died." It's called the "first-class condition"; it assumes the fact. It's not saying that if we believe, or if we don't believe, or we don't know if we really believe or not; it's saying that Christians do believe in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the Cross.

Notice that I didn't say, "We believe in the death of Jesus Christ." I could have said that, and it would be true. But what do we believe about the death of Jesus Christ? There is a real movement in the church today to deny the substitutionary death of Christ on the Cross. That's not Christianity. That's not Biblical. Jesus didn't just die on the Cross to demonstrate God's love, to show us how much God loves us. Jesus actually died in our place. He actually took our sins. "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed," Isaiah 53:5.

We must understand that we believe not only in the Cross but what we believe about the Cross. So we believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died in our place, that His death was a

reconciliation, that it was a propitiation, that it was a redemption for our sins and that He died to save us from our sins. This is the foundation of our hope: the Cross of Christ.

The second pillar for the hope of the rapture is in verse 14: “and rose again.” Since we believe—and we do—that Jesus died on the Cross for our sins, Jesus was buried, and three days later, He “rose again,” then what do Christians believe about the Resurrection? We believe that Jesus rose physically, bodily and victoriously from the dead. He didn’t just mystically or spiritually rise and His body was left in the grave. No. He physically rose from the dead. He died in a mortal, sinless, human body; He was raised in an immortal, incorruptible, eternal body. So Jesus is the exalted, glorified God-man in heaven, seated “at the right hand of God.”

So this is the foundation of our hope. Without that, we’re lost. If Christ had not risen from the dead, “we are of all men the most pitiable,” 1 Corinthians 5:19. We’d just be “playing church.” It’s not real if Jesus didn’t die for our sins, conquer sin, death and the grave and rise from the dead. We might as well all go home.

And what goes along with that is a foundation of revelation from Christ or God. Verse 15 says, “For this we say to you.” So Christ died and “rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this...”—what he just said in verse 14—“...we say to you by the word of the Lord.” This is what’s called “revelation.” You have only two options of what happens to you after you die: human speculation and divine revelation. I’m going to stick with divine revelation. There is a lot of human speculation about where we go when we die. Where will you be one second after you die? Divine revelation gives us the answer.

If there is anyone who knows what is beyond the bars of death, it’s God, it’s Christ. Jesus died and came back from the grave and said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live,” John 11:25.

So we have a revelation from God. We have the death of Christ, we have the Resurrection of Christ and we have the revelation of Christ in His Word. John 14:3 says, “I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

The third pillar of hope for the rapture of the believer is the participants of the rapture. Who will participate in the rapture? Who will be “caught up” in the rapture? Basically you might say, “The church, the church that has already died in Christ, and the church that is alive in Christ at the time of the rapture.” In verse 15, Paul says, “...that we who are alive and remain.” That’s the first group of participants. This is what we pray for and hope for: that we’ll be “alive and remain until the coming of the Lord.” But those “who are alive and remain...will by no means precede those who are asleep.” That’s the second group. So there are two groups of the saints in Christ who will be raptured: those “who are alive” and those who are “asleep.” The souls or spirits of those who already died in Christ went to heaven, but their bodies were placed in the earth, waiting for the resurrection of their bodies at the rapture.

Now notice that Paul says “we who are alive and remain.” Paul thought that he could possibly

be raptured while he was still alive. That means he believed in the imminent rapture of the church. That is the doctrine that nothing, no event, has to happen before the rapture occurs.

When you watch the news about the war in Israel now, the rapture could happen at any moment. The rapture is not based on wars, famines or earthquakes happening. Those events are “the beginning of sorrows,” Matthew 24:6-8, that will precede the Second Coming of Christ. Those are the signs of the Second Coming.

But the rapture is the imminent hope of the believer that could happen at any time. Every time I’m preaching on the rapture, I’m praying, “God, rapture me while I’m preaching on the rapture.” Wouldn’t that be sweet? “Man, that’s powerful preaching! He got raptured when he was preaching on the rapture!” But don’t be left behind. Don’t be left unaware that Christ could be coming at any moment. It’s marvelous to realize that we have that hope alive in Christ.

Then the second group to be raptured is those who are “asleep.” Verse 15 says, “...those who are asleep.” If a Christian dies before the rapture, his soul or spirit goes to be with Christ, but his body is waiting for the resurrection at the rapture..

So the rapture concerns the church. And if we’re talking about either the living saints or those who have died in Christ, we are talking about people who lived between the day of Pentecost, the day the church was born in Acts 2, and when the rapture occurs. This is a period of dispensation when God is forming a body, His bride, a building of God, His church. Jesus said, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,” Matthew 16:18. The church was born at Pentecost and will go out of the world at the rapture.

The church is not a particular denomination, or an affiliation or a building. It’s a group of genuine, born-again believers who were saved and are part of the body of Christ. The church is described by Paul in Ephesians 5:27 as “glorious...not having spot or wrinkle...holy and without blemish.” So the believers are in Christ and perfectly righteous. You may see all the problems in the church, but Jesus sees it as holy and righteous and His bride. And Jesus would not let His bride go through the tribulation. We’ll see that in 1 Thessalonians 5. The church will be “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air” before this time of trouble on earth.

The fourth pillar of hope for the rapture of believers is the plan of the rapture, verses 16-17. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven....” Remember that Jesus said, “I will come again” from heaven. Paul continues, “...with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ...”—there they are—“...will rise first. 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.”

There are four facets or points I want to make about this plan of the rapture. First, there is the return of Christ, verse 16. It says, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven.” He won’t send an ambassador. He won’t send anyone else. After Jesus’ Ascension, an angel told His disciples, “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like

manner as you saw Him go into heaven,” Acts 1:11.

Also, there will be a shout, verse 16. It says, “with a shout.” This word “shout” is a shout of command. It’s a military term. When Jesus rose Lazarus from the dead, He said, “Lazarus, come forth!” I like that. I’ve always felt that Jesus had to specify “Lazarus,” or the whole cemetery would have emptied. “Whoa, whoa! Just you, Lazarus. I’ll get the rest of you later.”

When I drive by a cemetery and see those graves, I think about this verse. There’s a great “gettin’-up mornin’” coming, when all those who died in Christ will come out of the grave. How marvelous that will be!

So there will be those Jesus shouts to, and there will be “the voice of an archangel.” And there will be “the trumpet of God.” Don’t confuse this with the seventh trumpet in the book of Revelation. This is the trumpet in Revelation 4, which said to John, “Come up here.” In Revelation 2-3, the church was on earth; in Revelation 4-5, the church is seen in heaven; in Revelation 6-19, there is tribulation on earth, but there is no mention of the church on earth, because it is in heaven.

Then notice after His return, the second facet is resurrection. This is where the Thessalonians were having trouble understanding. Verse 16 says, “And the dead in Christ will rise first.” This is a problem people have. It’s a common question I get. “How do the dead rise first at the rapture, if you just said that when they die, they go to heaven?” Only their bodies are resurrected first at the rapture. Their soul and spirit is already in heaven with Christ, and He brings them back with Him at the rapture, 1 Thessalonians 4:14. You don’t get your glorified body until the rapture, which will be reunited with your soul and spirit.

A lot of people are confused about that. They think the moment we die and go to heaven we get our glorified body. After we die, we’re with the Lord in His presence and we’re conscious. It’s what theologians call “the intermediate state.” And over and over again, the Bible makes it clear that we are waiting for the resurrection of our body. Our actual, physical bodies will be resurrected.

You might say, “Well, I don’t want this body resurrected; it’s all messed up!” Don’t worry. “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality,” 1 Corinthians 15:53. You’ll have a new and improved you. And you won’t even have to go to the gym to get it. It’s just given to you by the grace of God. And Romans 8:23 says that we are “eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.” So the bodies of “the dead in Christ will rise first.”

A lot of people ask me about cremation. Cremation does not affect your salvation or your resurrection. If a believer in Christ is cremated when they die, God doesn’t say, “Oh! You really messed things up!” In Jeremiah 32:27, God says, “Is there anything too hard for Me?” And what about people who die at sea, and they’re dumped off a ship and a shark eats them? God doesn’t say, “Oh, bummer!” Or how about when you’re buried and someone plants an apple

tree in the cemetery? The roots go down into the casket and suck you up into the tree and into an apple. Then somebody eats the apple. Do you think God's freaking out over these situations? No. Also, when our bodies come out of the grave, it's resurrection, not reconstruction. So God can resurrect a body, no matter what its condition.

And it will be resurrected. That's why, when we get to heaven, we'll actually know each other. That's another common question I get: "Will we know each other when we get to heaven?" You think we're going to be dumber there than here? "Hi. I'm your husband." No. The Bible says, "I shall know just as I also am known," 1 Corinthians 13:12. We'll see each other, know each other and we'll hug each other.

And remember when Jesus was in His post-Resurrection body, His disciples knew Him, they touched Him and they ate with Him. They knew He had flesh and bones. It will be the same kind of resurrection body that we will have. He was the prototype, the forerunner of our body that we'll have for all eternity, because of the Resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

The third facet for believers is the rapture itself. Verse 17 says, "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up..."—it's the Greek word "harpodzo," or in the Latin Vulgate translation, "rapturous," from which we get "rapture"—"...together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. So the word "rapture" is in the Bible, if you have a Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible. And "harpodzo" means "to be caught up by force." And in 1 Corinthians 15:52, it says that it will happen "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye."

And the fourth point of the rapture is that there will be a reunion. Verse 17 says, "together with them." Oh, praise the Lord! Our loved ones who have died in Christ will once again be back together with us. How precious.

Do you have someone you loved who died in Christ? You will see them again. And the reason why is because Jesus died and Jesus rose. He didn't do that because you live a good life or because you're a good person. We're all sinners saved by grace. I tell people this at funerals: if you want to see your loved one again, you must be a Christian, and they must have been a Christian. Jesus is "the resurrection and the life." There is no hope apart from that. Then we'll meet with our loved ones "in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

The fifth pillar of hope for the rapture of believers is the profit, verse 18. This is precious. What good is all this talk about the rapture? What practical implications does it have? Here's the conclusion. "Therefore comfort one another with these words." What words? The words we just read from verses 13-17. Take those words we just expounded on, grab hold of them and then give comfort to others with them.

Let me point out three profits of the rapture. First, it comforts us. We just read it in verse 18, because we have hope beyond the grave, and we'll see our loved ones again. Second, it

cleanses us, 1 John 3:3. “Everyone who has this hope...”—that is, of the rapture—“...in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” Third, it compels us. 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” So the rapture comforts us, cleanses us—we want to be pure, living holy lives—and compels us to get out and tell others about Jesus Christ.

So if you're a believer, you have a hope. Even though the world may be crumbling around you—there are wars going on—and unbelievers are freaking out, because they don't know what's going to happen in the Middle East, believers know that God sits on the throne. We know that we have hope beyond the grave. We know we're on the winning team. So we look for Christ to come.

But if you have not repented of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ, if you haven't been born again, you won't go up in the rapture. You'll be left to go through seven years of tribulation on the earth, which will be the greatest time of trouble the world will ever have seen. What we see going on in the world today, which is more demonically energized than I have ever seen, is nothing to be compared to what will happen after the rapture. The Antichrist will come, and there will be seven years of tribulation on the earth, just before the Second Coming of Christ.

So if you haven't been saved, if you haven't been born again, you need to get right with God today. If you don't know that when you die you'll go to heaven, if you're not sure that you're a Christian, if you're not sure that you've been born again of the Spirit, if you haven't trusted Him as your Savior, if you haven't repented of your sins, “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation,” 2 Corinthians 6:2. If you don't know your sins are forgiven, you don't know if you're ready for the rapture and God's Spirit is speaking to you and convicting you, then it's time to get right with God. The Bible says, “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,” Hebrews 9:27.

Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me,” Revelation 3:20. Be ready for the rapture. Be ready to trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior, be ready to die and meet the Lord and then go to heaven. Don't procrastinate. Don't put it off. Don't say “No” to Jesus. Trust Him as your Savior.