

The Rapture

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Pastor John Miller

I want to read the text beginning in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. I want you to follow with me. Paul says, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. 15 For this we say unto you"—and I love this—"by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not"—precede—"them which are asleep. 16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be"—here's our word 'rapture'—"caught up"—*harpáz* *ÒÀ* taken up—"together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." Paul says, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

We saw in 2 Peter 3:3, ". . . that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, 4 And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." I believe we're living in those last days when people are mocking and ridiculing the idea that Jesus Christ is returning. They say, "It hasn't happened yet, it's not going to happen again," and we saw in the text there that Peter reminded them that God did invade the earth and brought judgment which was called the Flood of Noah and did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. God did it before, and God will do it again. God will preserve the righteous, and He will judge the wicked.

You know, Jesus promised to come again. One of the most beautiful promises He ever made in John 14, which, by the way, sneak preview, that's a rapture verse. He said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house"—which is heaven—"are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go"—to heaven—"and prepare a place for you,"—what did He say?—"I will come again." Do you believe that? Jesus said, "I will come again,"—and listen to what He said—"and receive you"—"I will receive you, that's the rapture—"unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Jesus said He would come again, and as the Church, the Bride of Christ, we should be living, I believe, in constant expectation that Christ could come at any moment and catch us up to meet Him in the air and we will forever be with the Lord.

This is the doctrine of what is called the rapture of the Church. One of the reasons why I'm preaching on this tonight is because it seems there's a lot of people that are saying, "The rapture is not in the Bible," that "The rapture is not even taught." I heard one guy being interviewed the other day. He said, "The word 'rapture' is not in the Bible." I thought, If you had a Latin Vulgate Bible, it would be. The word "caught up" is in the Bible. You know, the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, but we believe in the doctrine of the Trinity. The word "providence" is not in the Bible, but we believe in the providence of God. And then they say, "Well, the rapture's

a modern invention by John Darby, and it's just something that men invented to get people living for the Lord, but it's not biblical."

It's interesting that if you go back and read the early church fathers, they spoke of the Lord's coming as though it was imminent. The word "imminent" means that nothing has to happen before the Lord returns. They evidently believed that the Church could be caught up to be with the Lord at any moment. I believe the doctrine of the rapture is that imminent hope that Jesus Christ will come again. We don't look for signs, we don't look for wonders, we look for Christ. Everything about the Scriptures is that we should be living and looking for Jesus Christ—Amen?—that He could come, we're the Bride, and He will take us home. All this stuff that denies the rapture, I think that they're not clearly making a distinction between the rapture and the Second Coming, and we'll see that tonight, but the Bible clearly teaches that Christ will come and catch the Church, the Bride of Christ, up into the air to meet Him and we will forever then be with the Lord.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:17, we have the word "caught up." The Greek word is *harpázō*. It means to snatch up or to take away by force. It's so very important. Now, it is a New Testament doctrine. It's called the "mystery," and in Ephesians 3:5, a "mystery" is actually defined for us as something that in ages past " . . . was not made known . . . is now revealed." Both the Church, which is a "mystery," and the rapture, which is a "mystery," is not really in the Old Testament. There might be some pictures of it there, but it's not in the Old Testament. It's a New Testament "mystery" or revelation.

Another great rapture verse, 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, where Paul says, "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . . this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" It's a revelation of the rapture of the Church. We have it in John 14, if you're taking notes, 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15, and this is a limited list, but we also have it in Philippians 3:20-21 where Paul says, "For our"—citizenship—"is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: 21 Who shall"—when He comes—"change our"—King Jimmy says, 'vile' bodies, it's bodies of humiliation—"that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious"—resurrected—"body." So, there's the resurrection of the dead in Christ in the rapture, and there's the translation of the living in Christ in the rapture.

What I want to do tonight is look at five facets of the rapture. We're going to look at the problem of the rapture, the pillars of the rapture, the participants of the rapture, the plan of the rapture, and then the profit of the rapture as we go through 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. If you're taking notes, write it down. First, the problem of the rapture seen in verse 13. Go back there with me. Paul says, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren." Somebody said, "This is the largest Christian denomination in America, the 'ignorant brethren.'" If there's anything we're ignorant about, we're ignorant about what happens when we die and about the rapture of the Church. He says, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which

are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.”

There are some key words that I want to focus on, verse 13: “ignorant,” “sleep,” “sorrow,” and “hope.” This is giving us the background and the setting for Paul’s words in this text, “. . . ignorant . . .” Now, what was happening was Paul had taught the believers in Thessalonica that Christ was coming soon, but He hadn’t come yet and some of their Christian friends were dying, and they were troubled thinking—this is the key, listen carefully—that those Christians who died would miss the Lord’s return, that those Christians that died would be at a disadvantage to us who “are alive and remain” when the Lord returns. They were freaking out about their loved ones who died in the Lord thinking, You can’t die, Jesus hasn’t come back yet. You’re going to miss the rapture. You’re not going to get to be a part of it, so Paul wanted them not to be ignorant about that situation. He wanted them to have hope beyond the grave. This text is all about hope beyond the grave.

One of the most common questions I get as a pastor, and it kind of troubles me, I get it from Christians all the time, is “What happens when we die?” As believers, the Bible’s very clear what happens to a Christian when they die. Let me give you some verses, 2 Corinthians 5:8. It says, “. . . to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.” The minute you die... the word “death,” by the way, means separation. It doesn’t mean cessation, it means separation. The minute you die, you leave your body but you don’t cease to exist, you go to be with the Lord. You’re with the Lord.

Write down Philippians 1:21. Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,” another great verse. Where do we go when we die? We’re with the Lord, it is gain. In Philippians 1:23, Paul said, “. . . having a desire to depart,”—which is death—“and to be with Christ.” When a believer dies, they’re with the Lord. So, how can you sorrow as those who have no hope when you know your loved ones, when they died, they are with the Lord and in His presence. So, don’t be “. . . ignorant”—about those—“. . . which are asleep.”

That’s the second key word I want to explain there in verse 13, it is a metaphor for death. It’s used a couple times in our text tonight. The idea conveys three basic things. First, it’s only used for Christians. Only Christians in the Bible are referred to “sleeping” in death. Have you ever seen somebody sleeping, and they look like they died? I used to travel with a dude. It used to frustrate me so much. He would crawl into bed, lie on his back, cross his hands like this, and sleep straight on his back, and immediately go to sleep and wouldn’t wake up for anything all night. I felt like slapping him. Sometimes I’d look at him, Is he alive? Is he alive? You sometimes see people sleeping and they look like they’re dead. So, it became a metaphor for death. It looks like we’re sleeping.

Secondly, it’s only for the physical body, never the soul. Never does the Bible say the soul sleeps. It’s a doctrine that’s not taught in the Bible. The body is asleep because it’s in the grave. Do you know the word “cemetery” means resting place? The place that we put our loved ones, they’re resting, waiting for the “Great Gettin’ Up Morning,” the resurrection.

Thirdly, it conveys the idea of only a temporary state. Sleep is only a temporary state. I took a nap today. I took off this afternoon from the school of preaching and, yes, Pastor Miller went home and took a nap. And, I didn't have to fill out my will, kiss my wife goodbye and say, "I'll never see you again. I'm going to go to sleep." You go to sleep with expectation you're going to wake up, so I set my alarm. My alarm goes off, you get up. You go to sleep with the expectation of getting awakened, right? So, when we lower our loved ones...this is my favorite verse to read at a cemetery when we're burying a person who dies in Christ. We do not " . . . sorrow . . . even as others which have no hope." We don't sorrow because we know they're with the Lord, and their bodies are only "sleeping." There's a "Great Gettin' Up Morning."

This is seen in the picture in John 11 where Lazarus is brought back from the dead. Remember when Jesus found out that Lazarus was sick and He said, "He's only sleeping," and then He heard that he died and said, "He's only asleep. Let us go that I may awaken him." Jesus, to prove it, stood outside Lazarus' tomb and said, "Lazarus, come forth." By the way, I believe with all my heart, if He hadn't said, "Lazarus," the whole cemetery would have emptied. So, He's just saying, "Lazarus only right now. We'll get the rest of you later. Lazarus, come forth," and he came out of that grave. There's going to be that day when that resurrection will take place. So, what a blessing, they're only asleep, don't be sorrowing.

The word "sorrow." We do sorrow. It's natural. Even as Christians who have loved ones in the Lord who died, it is a hard, difficult separation but it's only temporary. Our hearts break, and we feel that void. It's so hard to be bereaved. When Jesus saw the people weeping at the grave of Lazarus, the Bible says, "Jesus wept," that means His eyes watered, and a tear just trickled down His face. We do have sorrow. It would be unhuman not to have sorrow, but it's not a hopeless sorrow.

That's my fourth word in verse 13, "hope." Even in death there is hope. So, it's a hope in Christ. So, do you have a hope beyond the grave in Jesus Christ.

We move from the problem that was taking place there in Thessalonica, verse 13, to the pillars of the rapture, verse 14 to the first part of verse 15. Let's read that, the pillars. He says, "For if,"—literally, it's since—"we believe,"—so, he's affirming we do believe—"that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus,"—notice they're sleeping in Jesus, so they were believers, they were saved, they were born again, they followed Jesus—"will God bring with him." When the Lord comes to rapture us who are alive and remain, He will bring them with Him. How marvelous. How glorious.

I want you to note three pillars of our hope of the rapture. First, Christ's death, the death of Christ, verse 14, "For it we believe that Jesus died and rose again,"—but notice first of all is the death of Christ. As I pointed out, he's not saying, "if" as though there's a possibility we don't believe that, he's actually affirming that. It's what's called a first class condition which assumes the fact Christ is crucified on the cross. What do we believe as Christians about the cross? We believe that when Jesus died on the cross that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself; that Jesus, the virgin-born, God-Man who lived a sinless life, voluntarily gave His life on

the cross as a substitutionary death for us, that Jesus died on the cross in our place. The cross of Jesus Christ was a substitutionary atonement. Let me add the word penal substitutionary atonement. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” That’s what we believe, verse 14, about Christ’s death on the cross.

Secondly, we have a foundation for the hope beyond the grave, it’s called the resurrection of Christ. Verse 14, “. . . and rose again.” So, Christ died on the cross and then He rose again. What do Christians believe about the resurrection? That Jesus Christ, three days after being put in the grave, that He physically, bodily, gloriously rose from the dead. By the way, God the Father raised Him from the dead, the Bible teaches. Jesus said, “I will raise Myself from the dead, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” And, the Bible teaches the Holy Spirit raised Christ from the dead, so all three of the Godhead were involved in that resurrection, and His resurrection was a resurrection in a new, glorified body. Jesus came from heaven through the womb of the virgin Mary, took on humanity, lived a sinless life, died a substitutionary death, He was buried, then rose from the dead, He was ascended back to heaven and exalted at the right hand of God the Father. Amen? And, that’s not the end of the story. He’s coming back again. Where is Jesus right now? In heaven seated on the throne, and He’s coming back to rule and to reign. But before that, He will pick up the Church or catch up the Church in the rapture that we might be with Him when we come back at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Notice the third pillar in our text, verse 15, the first part, that is, the revelation from Christ. Notice verse 15, “For this we say”—notice the “we” there. There’s a whole bunch of “we’s” in this passage. Paul actually believed that it was possible that he would be alive when the Lord returned, which supports what’s called the doctrine of imminency—that Christ will come at any moment. Paul believed that. He wasn’t looking for the Antichrist, he wasn’t looking for the tribulation, he was looking for Jesus Christ. Verse 15, “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord,”—notice that phrase. It’s “by the word of the Lord,” this is the revelation of Christ Himself. I already gave it to you, John 14, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” Paul revealed it, too, in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, this is “the word of the Lord.”

Let’s move, thirdly, to the participants of the rapture. That is found at the end of verse 15. He says, “. . . that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not”—precede —“them which are asleep.” You have those who are living when the Lord returns, then you have those who are dead when the Lord returns. There’s two groups: alive in Christ, and the “asleep” or dead in Christ. Now, go back to verse 15 and look at it with me. “. . . we which are alive and remain,” these are believers which comprise the Church, the body of Christ, that are alive when the Lord comes back to take the Bride, the Church, home. This is the imminent hope of the believer.

Notice there’s also the second group, verse 15, “. . . them which are asleep.” If a Christian dies before the rapture, they go to be with the Lord; but their body is laid in the grave and they’re

waiting for the resurrection of their body when they'll have a glorified body, they'll be with the saints triumphant in heaven for all eternity. So, will all Christians, living at the time of the rapture, be taken? The answer is yes. I don't believe in a partial rapture. I don't believe that the rapture is for the "deeper life club," the super saints, the really spiritual believers, and that it's a reward for walking close to the Lord. If you are saved, you are part of the Church, you are in Christ; and if you are in Christ, you will be raptured, caught up to meet the Lord in the air. So, "... alive and remain," and "... them which are asleep," as we're going to see, they'll be caught up by the resurrection of their bodies, reunited with their soul and spirit, and we'll all join together meeting the Lord in the air. What a glorious, glorious day that will be! So, all Christians caught up, the dead in Christ resurrected, and we are all reunited together in heaven. Remember, it's the rapture of the Church. If you are a child of God, you are part of the Church.

Fourthly, the plan of the rapture. This is where he kind of lays it all out for us, verses 16-17. He says, "For the Lord himself"—this is how it's going to go down—"the Lord himself"—He's not going to send someone else. He's not going to send Gabriel or Michael or some angel. "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven,"—and there will be—"a shout,"—this is the shout of a command of victory—"with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds,"—notice where we're going to meet—"in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air." We used to sing that old gospel song, "There is going to be a meeting in the air, / In the sweet, sweet by and by; / And all the saints will gather over there, in their home beyond the sky." And that's what the Bible's teaching here in this passage, "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up"—harpáz ÒÀ snatched up, raptured—"together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we"—forever—"ever be with the Lord."

Let me break this down. There's the return of Christ, verse 16, "For the Lord himself." Remember when Jesus in Acts 1 was on Mount Olivet with His disciples forty days after His resurrection and He ascended back to heaven? Sometimes we miss that glorious event, the ascension of Christ, where He physically, bodily, literally just went right back up into heaven. You talk about an exit—that is sweet! You know Elijah got taken up to heaven in a chariot, "Swing low, sweet chariot, / Coming for to carry me home," I can dig that.

Can you imagine, they're talking to the Lord and all of the sudden He just started to lift off. He just started lifting off the ground, and He went right back up into heaven. The apostles were standing there, gazing up into the heavens, and an angel showed up, "You men of Galilee, why are you staring at the heavens?" Which, I see a little humor in that. I was thinking I'd tell the angel, "If you just saw what we saw, you'd be looking up, too. It was amazing." The angel said, "... this same Jesus," catch that statement, "The same Jesus that you just saw go into heaven is going to come back the same way." Again, that's a promise in God's Word. Jesus Christ is coming back visibly, bodily, gloriously, the Lord Himself. Notice it says, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven,"—which Jesus described in John 14 as "my Father's house." It's a place. It's a real place. It's a prepared place.

Then, notice there's a shout. That "shout" is a shout of command. Remember, John 11, I just alluded to, "Lazarus, come forth," and Lazarus came out of the grave. I believe the Lord will say, "Come forth." Then, there's " . . . the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God." Don't confuse this "trump of God" with the seven trumpets of Revelation, and that's what gets people messed up, they try to believe in a midtribulational rapture or a posttribulational rapture. They try to identify the trumpets as being the same. This is the trumpet for the Church, this is not a trumpet of God's wrath on a Christ-rejecting world; this is a trumpet that calls the Church up, this is not a trumpet that calls God's wrath down. A lot of times it's because they don't pay attention to detail that they get the doctrines confused or the Scriptures or the passages in the Bible. So, there's " . . . a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God."

Actually, in Revelation 4, John says, "I heard a great voice from heaven say, 'Come up here,'" and in Revelation 4, the Church is actually then in heaven. Then, in Revelation 5, they're worshipping God in heaven. In Revelation 6, the tribulation starts on earth, and the Church is not seen again on earth in the book of Revelation until Revelation 19, when they come back from heaven with Christ, in glorified bodies, riding on white horses when Christ comes back in His Second Coming glory, power, and majesty. So, there's going to be the return of the Lord.

Here's the second phase of the rapture, resurrection. The dead will be resurrected. Notice verse 16, " . . . and the dead in Christ shall rise first." This is a statement that confuses people a lot about this passage on the rapture. They'll ask the question, rightfully so, "I thought that when a Christian dies, they go to heaven. Then, why are they being resurrected?" Here's the answer. It's talking about their physical bodies. They are in heaven with the Lord. The resurrection is of the body. This is not the resurrection of their soul or their spirit, they've gone to be with the Lord. They're in what theologians call the intermediate state—they're with the Lord, they're in His presence—but they're waiting for their glorified body. Some people say, "When we get to heaven, will we recognize each other?" Charles Spurgeon said, "You think we're going to be dumber in heaven than we are on earth? We'll know each other." We'll know each other completely and immediately. It'll be glorious. When it says, " . . . the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then,"—notice it's a future tense, it's referring only to their physical bodies.

Write down Romans 8:23, " . . . waiting for . . . the redemption of our body,"—our bodies will be redeemed. That's phase number three of our salvation. In 1 Corinthians 15:53, it says, "For this corruptible must put on incorruption,"—that's the resurrection of our bodies.

Then, thirdly, the rapture. So, the return, the resurrection, and the rapture. This will be the rapture of the living in Christ. Verse 17, "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up." As I said, the Greek word is *harpázō* and if you had the Latin Vulgate Bible, it would be *raptus*, where we get our word "rapture," which is Latin. So, the rapture is in the Bible. I don't understand people that say, "The word 'rapture' is not in the Bible." If you have a Latin Vulgate Bible, it is in the Bible. Whether it's in the Bible or not, the word doesn't matter because the event is described for us in the Bible; and if you pay attention to details, the rapture is clearly a different event than the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and there's at least seven years between the two.

You have to be raptured to get to heaven, to be able to have new, glorified bodies to come back in Revelation 19 in what's called the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The rapture technically is not really a coming of Christ back to earth, it's only a catching of the Church up to heaven, to meet Him in the clouds. He doesn't come back to earth, He catches us up to meet Him in the clouds.

In 1 Corinthians 15:52, it's going to happen, "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." That word "moment" we get the word "atom" from it, a split-second atom. So, ". . . in the twinkling of an eye," the flutter of your eye.

Fourthly, we move to reunion, verse 17. We will be ". . . together with them." Remember why he's writing these words, they were upset. They were sorrowing about loved ones who have died in Christ are going to miss the rapture. They're going to be at a disadvantage to us. They're going to miss out on heaven. So, he says, "No, we'll be together with them." Underline that phrase, ". . . together with them," together with them. Who? With those who have died in Christ, those who have died in the Lord.

Notice also, verse 17, that we'll meet, ". . . in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air." In the Second Coming, we will come back with Christ. In the rapture, we're caught up to meet Christ; and in the Second Coming, we come back with Christ. In the rapture, it only involves the Church, and the Church is caught up to meet Him in the air. In the Second Coming, every eye shall see Him. Jesus said in Matthew 24, "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming"—Second Coming—"of the Son of man be." Every eye will see Him. It will be glorious. It will be fantastic, and it will be followed by Him establishing His Kingdom on earth for one thousand years, which will then flow into the eternal state. You've got to know that the rapture is a separate event from the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Verse 17, here it is, ". . . and so shall we ever be with the Lord." Won't that be wonderful? Face to face with Jesus. Faith becomes sight. You'll be able to reach out and touch His face. Can you imagine getting a big hug from Jesus Christ? A kiss on the cheek? "Welcome home, My child. Welcome home, ' . . . thou good and faithful servant . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

It closes in verse 18, and I love this, with the profit. The profit or benefit of the value of the rapture, "Wherefore"—here's the conclusion—"comfort one another with these words." Three things: comfort, cleansing, and compels. First, it comforts us, ". . . comfort one another with these words." You know, if you're burying a loved one in the grave and you wonder, "Will I see him again?" Comfort yourself with these words. If you're wondering, "What's happened to my loved one who has died?" Comfort yourself with these words. I love the idea that ". . . ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope." Through the tears, through the pain, through the bereavement, through the loss, we have the hope of the resurrection of our loved ones that we know they're with the Lord and they're waiting for us to be reunited.

You know for them, too, they're in the eternal state. There's no waiting for them, they're with the

Lord, and it's just like a flash we'll be with them and it will be in the presence of the Lord. What a glorious truth!

Then, there'll be something that we believe as the rapture, it cleanses us because 1 John 3:3, write it down. It says, "And every man that hath this hope in him"—the coming of the Lord—"purifieth himself, even as he is pure." It's a purifying, cleansing hope. So, it's a comforting hope, it's a cleansing hope, and thirdly, it compels us.

Write down 1 Corinthians 15:58. I love it. Paul says, "Therefore, my beloved,"—this is at the end of the rapture verse—"be"—listen carefully—"ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." Isn't that great? We know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord. How marvelous. How wonderful that we can live a life of serving the Lord, and we can go to our eternal reward, and we can hear those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Let's pray.