



Let's Get Ready to Rapture

First Thessalonians 4:13-18

“You Can Sleep When You’re Dead”

The apostle Paul had taught the believers in Thessalonica about what is commonly called “the Rapture of the Church.” The rapture of the church is the event in which Jesus will return to remove Christians from the earth. Saints who are alive at this coming will be taken to Heaven without ever experiencing death.

The saints in Thessalonica lived in the daily anticipation of the rapture. They believed it was imminent – and by “imminent” I mean that it could happen at any moment.

Then something happened they had not considered. A fellow believer died. Then another. Then some others.

If Jesus was coming at any moment to take the church home, what would become of those believers who died prior to the rapture?

1 Thessalonians 4:13 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.

The use of the word “ignorant” was not a rebuke. If anything Paul was acknowledging that he had not fully instructed them regarding this issue but now wanted to bring them up to speed.

You notice he didn’t use the word “died.” He said they had “fallen asleep.” When you fall asleep at the end of the day your body lies temporarily still and resting from its labor until you awaken.

Likewise, when you die at the end of your life your body lies temporarily still and resting from its labor until it arises.

The “sorrow” in these verses is related to their ignorance of what had happened to their deceased loved ones. They grieved for them, not just in the normal way we do when a loved one dies, but even more so since they thought these deceased believers were missing out on the Lord’s coming for His church.

One thing is certain in this letter: They believed that Jesus could return at any moment to take the church from the earth to Heaven. Anyone who suggests to you that the rapture of the church is not an imminent, any-moment expectation, is just not reading the Bible correctly.

Paul did not want them to “sorrow as others who have no hope.” The “others” would be nonbelievers. It’s true that people who are not Christians have ideas about death and the afterlife. But it cannot ever be said that they have “hope.” The Bible alone

speaks with authority about life, death, and life after death. Everything else is a false hope, a fool's hope.

OK, but when, in relation to the rapture, would they be resurrected?

1 Thessalonians 4:14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

The word “if” does not suggest doubt. It suggests a logical sequence. “If” something is true, then other things follow from it. It’s better to understand the word “if” by substituting the word “since.”

What is it that we believe is true? “We believe that Jesus died and rose again.” The death and resurrection of Jesus are the foundation of our certain hope.

In His resurrection Jesus is called the “firstfruits of those who are asleep” (First Corinthians 15:20). “Firstfruits” were the first installment guaranteeing the rest of the future harvest. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead guarantees the future resurrection from the dead of all those who are “asleep in Jesus.”

Those “who sleep in Jesus” are the deceased of the church age. Notice that Jesus, referred to as “God,” “will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”

They must be with Him now, in Heaven, conscious, or He could not bring them.

When a believer dies he or she is immediately absent from their body but present in soul and spirit with The Lord in Heaven.

1 Thessalonians 4:15 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.

“The word of the Lord” was a direct revelation to Paul. When writing to the Church at Corinth, he would call the rapture a “mystery” (First Corinthians 15:51). A “mystery” in the Bible is something that was previously hidden but is now being revealed. There are types of the rapture in the Old Testament; but the teaching about the rapture is not revealed until the New Testament.

The word “we” is important, in “we who are alive and remain.” Paul always included himself among those who could be alive when Jesus returned to rapture the church.

He would also speak of his impending death in certain passages; but this is no contradiction. The Lord could and can return at any moment... But if He doesn’t, I might die – “fall asleep” – and not be “alive and remain until” His coming.

Those who are alive and remain do not “precede those who are asleep.” It’s a word of timing. The next verses give you the orderly sequence of the events that occur at the rapture of the church. Four words capture the sequence: Return... Resurrection... Rapture... and Reunion.

Jesus returns:

1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God...

We know that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven forty days later.

He said He was going to Heaven “to prepare a place for you” and that He would “come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:2-3). He was going to Heaven to build your mansion; He would return to bring you there.

This return to bring you to Heaven is not His Second Coming to earth to establish a kingdom on the earth. That occurs later. This return is the rapture.

When Jesus returns there are three sounds:

1. The “shout” is a word of command. These things occur by the power of His word. Jesus needs only to speak in order to accomplish these things.
2. The “voice of an archangel” indicates an accompanying archangel. The only archangel mentioned by name in the Bible is Michael, although there may be others.
3. “With the trumpet of God” may indicate that the archangel blows a trumpet; or that Jesus’ voice is as the sound of many trumpets.

The dead in Christ are resurrected:

1 Thessalonians 4:16 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.

The “dead in Christ” are all the church age saints who have “fallen asleep” prior to this return of the Lord. This resurrection does not include the saints of the Old Testament. They have their own resurrection to look forward to, at a different time, described in other Bible passages.

The “dead in Christ” will be resurrected. Their bodies have been “asleep.” Whether they were properly buried or whether they were cremated or whether their bodies were dissolved or destroyed in some other manner... No problem. The resurrection of those bodies is not a reconstruction of their original molecules. Resurrection is described in the Bible by comparing your body to a seed that is planted in the ground. The seed dies and dissolves; out of it arises a beautiful flower. The flower is connected to the seed but is very different from it.

If you fall asleep before the return of Jesus, your body is like a seed. God will raise it and it will be a new, glorified body that is fit for eternity. Your soul and spirit will have been with Jesus in Heaven from the moment of your physical death. At the resurrection your soul and spirit will become housed in your glorified resurrection body.

We’ve already mentioned that Jesus is the “firstfruits” of the resurrection. It guarantees believers will follow and be like Him in their resurrection. Jesus died on the Cross and His physical body was put in the Garden Tomb. His soul and spirit were conscious and alive and three days later His soul and spirit were housed in His resurrection body – a new, glorified physical body that was transformed from the body in the tomb. What happened to Jesus will happen to all those who have fallen asleep in Him.

The rapture:

1 Thessalonians 4:17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...

Jesus said “first” the dead in Christ would be raised. “Then” He will rapture living believers. It will all happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye; but it is orderly.

“Caught-up” is the Greek word harpazo. In Latin it is rapere, from which we get the word rapture.

Some people try to confuse you by saying that the word “rapture” never occurs in the Bible; that we made it all up. Well, it does occur in Latin translations. But if it troubles you, then call it the harpazo! The expression is not as important as the event.

The “dead will be raised” and we who are alive and remain “shall be changed” and gotten ready for “incorruption” and “immortality.”

Will your clothes be left behind? What will happen to pregnant women? Your mind boggles! I would suggest to you that the rapture will be an unprecedented global disaster for nonbelievers to deal with. Just think of the traffic accidents when millions of cars are suddenly without their drivers.

We will “meet the Lord in the air.” The Lord does not return to the earth at the rapture; He is not coming yet to establish His rule over the earth. Something has to happen before He establishes His kingdom – the seven year Great Tribulation. In the rapture Jesus is coming to take His church home to Heaven before the Tribulation.

Paul believed the rapture was imminent; he always included himself as a possible participant.

The Thessalonians believed it was imminent; so much that some of them quit their jobs to wait for it.

It would have been the perfect opportunity to tell them it was not imminent, but Paul did not. He maintained that the rapture could occur at any moment but exhorted them to work hard in order to maintain their witness.

The Doctrine of Imminence is very definitely taught in Scripture. Every position other than the Pre-tribulation Rapture is incompatible with imminence. The Tribulation has a very definite starting point, mid-point, and ending point. If the rapture occurs anytime after the Tribulation starts it cannot be said to be imminent at all.

The reunion:

1 Thessalonians 4:17 ... And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

“We” includes those who have “fallen asleep” and those who are “alive and remain” when the Lord returns in the rapture. All the saints of the church age will be in their glorified bodies and taken to Heaven to “always” and forever “be with the Lord.”

“Comfort one another with these words” is just as applicable today as it was in the first century. I almost always share this passage of Scripture at a funeral, especially graveside. In it is the certain hope of reunion for Christians. If those who die are Christians,

they are fallen asleep in Jesus; and you – if you, too, are a Christian – will be reunited with them in eternity.

No other religion or philosophy can give anyone anything other than a false hope, a fools hope, of reunion.