



# 1 Thessalonians

## Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

September 18, 2013

### Introduction

Paul continues his letter with a number of exhortations that were necessary for the Thessalonians. As we consider the end of chapter 4, we need to remember that all epistles are occasional documents — i.e. they have an occasion and purpose for which they were written. Paul did not set out to write a systematic theology text, but rather to address issues and concerns that were pertinent in his relationship with the Thessalonian believers. However, there are times when some of these sections can provide a very clear window into a particular doctrine. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is one such section when we examine the doctrine of the rapture.

### **Exhortations Regarding Believers who have Died (4:13–18)**

Ever since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, mankind has had to contend with the reality of physical death. Over time, this inevitability has left billions of people with two major concerns: 1) What will happen to me after I die? Even for the most ardent inquisitor, the lack of contemporary witnesses who can report on the afterlife leaves us with many unanswered questions. 2) The other major concern relates to those who have been left behind. What will happen to them after I'm gone? Paul in effect answers these questions in this section of his letter.

#### The Basis for This Exhortation (vv. 13–17)

There had been a misunderstanding in the Thessalonian church on the issue of believers who have died. They were unclear about the timing of the Lord's return and the fate of those who had already died. Paul exhorted them to "comfort one another with these words" (v. 18). The words he has in mind are found in verses 14–17 and relate to the doctrine of the rapture.

#### *Paul's Concern (v. 13)*

Paul's primary concern in this section is that believers not be misinformed about the issues of death and resurrection. Sadly, many

believers even today remain in the dark and do not comprehend the promise taught in this text. But hopefully that will not be an issue for us after today!

Paul begins by addressing his statement to believers — those who are “brethren” in the Lord. The term “fallen asleep” is not a reference to the subconscious sleep cycle we go through every night. It is used as a euphemism for physical death (cf. v. 14). It is actually a common metaphor used in the New Testament for those who have died and are in a transitional state. The problem in Thessalonica was that the believers were grieving over their believing friends and relatives who had died. Paul states that they should not do this in the same manner as those without hope — i.e. unbelievers.

In this statement, Paul is inferring that believers *do* have a hope. We know this to be the hope of resurrection to eternal life at the Lord’s return. This is the same “blessed hope” Paul refers to in Titus 2:13. But consider for a moment what others believed at that time. Greek philosophy generally taught a disembodied afterlife involving the immaterial spirit. However, most people in the first century Roman Empire were pagans who did not believe in an afterlife for the dead. Paul’s point here is that believers have a hope unlike the unbeliever. We should not sorrow for believers who have died in the same way as unbelievers who despair for those who have died. Paul is not teaching that we shouldn’t grieve at all. On the contrary, our grief should be tempered by the truths taught in this text.

#### *God’s Promise of the Rapture (vv. 14–17)*

Paul begins verse 14 with a conditional if-then statement. In Greek, he uses the term *ei* (εἰ), indicating a first class condition — one which is assumed to be true for the sake of argument. Whether or not the condition and its corresponding conclusion are true in actuality depends on the context. In this case, we know from other Scriptures that those who are believers *do* believe that Jesus died and rose again. The only logical conclusion can be that believers who have died will also rise again. The words “even so” in the middle of the verse indicate that the concepts of “bringing with” and “fallen asleep” occur in a like manner to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Notice the correlation of terms:

Jesus’ death	≈	falling asleep
Jesus’ rising again	≈	being brought with God

This verse lays out the basis for interpreting “falling asleep” as physical death. Paul’s point in verse 14 is that God will raise believers who have died and will bring them with Jesus when He raptures the church and goes to the Father to engage in the *bēma* seat judgment. We saw this already in 3:13. John 14:1–6 also supports this idea.

Paul supports his assertion in verse 14 by linking it with special revelation in the next verse. This is the word of the Lord! Verse 15 clarifies what takes place in verse 14. Here we learn that believers who are still living at the time of the rapture will not be given priority over those who have already died in terms of the order of their resurrection and glorification. Some have misunderstood Paul’s statement to mean that he would personally live to see Lord’s return. But these fail to understand the force of the text. Paul is saying that “we [believers] who are alive [and remain alive] until the coming of the Lord...” Elsewhere Paul speaks of being raised from the dead (1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 4:14). The truth is, Paul did not know whether or not he would be alive at the return of the Lord. He speaks of the rapture as an imminent event — one that could occur at any moment! At that moment all true believers will be taken to heaven (v. 14), but Paul emphatically denies that those who are alive will be taken ahead of those who have already died.

In verse 16, we see a clarification of the Jesus’ activities in connection with this event. There are three things that accompany the Lord’s descent from heaven:

- 1) A loud command. The Lord has the authority to raise the dead at His command. Lazarus’s resurrection is just one example of this (John 11:43). John 5:28–29 speaks of His authority to raise both believers and unbelievers. This rings true of the resurrection in Daniel 12:2. However, each group of people will be raised in their own order (1 Cor 15:23–26).
- 2) The cry of the archangel. This is also involved in the resurrection. There is only one godly archangel mentioned in Scripture — Michael. Whether or not this is Michael or some other archangel is immaterial here. The ultimate authority to raise the dead rests with Christ alone.
- 3) The trumpet call of God. God the Father causes this trumpet to be blown in connection with the Lord’s return. Some who believe in a

post-tribulation rapture will connect this event with the trumpet blown in Matthew 24:31. Certainly both of these events involve a trumpet and a resurrection with the Lord. But the Matthew text refers to Daniel 12:2 and the resurrection of saints at the end of the tribulation. In 1 Thessalonians 4, we are talking about an event *prior* to the tribulation. As such this event corresponds to the trumpet blown in 1 Corinthians 15:52.

What Paul is doing in verse 16 is providing an answer to this question:

“How is it that these who are alive will not precede those who have died?”

Answer: “The dead in Christ will rise first.”

The terms “in Christ” refer to those who are in the body of Christ — i.e. the church. This is not meant to be interpreted as a broader expression of all those who have been brought into union with Christ in salvation. Notice back in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 where Paul locates the Thessalonian church “in...Christ.” The action of being placed into Christ’s body is something that occurs at the moment of salvation, but it is particularly tied to the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). Jesus promised His disciples that this baptism would occur, and we see the historical account of that in Acts 2 — on the day of Pentecost. Putting this together, we therefore conclude that the rapture only involves those who are “in Christ” — i.e. church-age believers, starting with the day of Pentecost and ending with the rapture.

In verse 17, Paul turns to deal with those believers who are still alive at the time of the rapture. The phrase “we who are alive” has led some to attack the credibility of this verse by suggesting that Paul himself would be alive at the time of the rapture. This was not the case since Paul was executed in Rome in A.D. 68 at the hands of Emperor Nero. But Paul was not saying that he would with utter certainty live until the rapture. Several other passages suggest that Paul anticipated dying one day (Phil 1:20–21; Acts 20:24, 38; 2 Cor 5:1–10; cf. Rom 8:38). The truth is, Paul didn’t know whether he would live until the rapture or not. The rapture itself is always described as being an *imminent* event — it could happen at any moment. This was even true in Paul’s day. When we consider the prophetic timeline of the future, the next event to happen from our vantage point today is the rapture. There are no specific signs

that precede it (only generalities), meaning that it is an event which truly comes very suddenly, “as a thief in the night.”

Some have also suggested that the doctrine of the rapture is unbiblical simply because the word “rapture” does not appear in the bible. But this argument is also very shallow. It would be similar to suggesting that the doctrine of the trinity is unbiblical simply because the word “trinity” does not appear in the text. However, in this case we have a leg up. The term “rapture” comes from the Latin *rapturo/raptus* — the Latin translation for the Greek word *harpadzō* (ἄρπάζω), meaning “caught up” (v. 17). What is important is the concept that is taught in Scripture.

After Jesus comes and raises the dead in Christ, this group of living believers will join them in the clouds. The theological term we use to describe this change from a physical body to a glorified body is *translation* (cf. 1 Cor 15:50–58). The two terms used to describe the location — “clouds” and “air” — are a reference to the 1<sup>st</sup> heavens. These are literal clouds in the sky (cf. Acts 1:9).

### 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, & 3<sup>rd</sup> Heavens

There are three senses in which the Scriptures can refer to the heavens.

- 1) 1<sup>st</sup> Heavens: This refers to the sky and generally includes everything contained in earth’s atmosphere. It is the realm in which birds fly, and includes clouds, rainbows, air, wind, and rain.
- 2) 2<sup>nd</sup> Heavens: This refers to everything in the universe beyond earth’s atmosphere. It is called the “firmament” during the creation account (cf. Gen 1:6–17). It includes the sun, moon, stars, and distant celestial objects.
- 3) 3<sup>rd</sup> Heavens: This refers to the dwelling place of God the Father. Although God is omnipresent (everywhere), this is the place where God chooses to manifest His presence in a special way and is home to a great host of angels. It is also the place where Paul was caught up to (2 Cor 12:2) and where many of John’s visions took place in the book of Revelation.

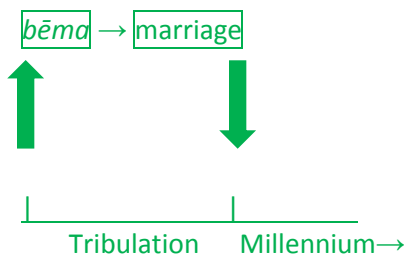
The movement of Christ we see in our text is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> heavens (v. 16) to the first heavens (v. 17), and then back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heavens. The end of verse 17 indicates that we will be with the Lord forever. From this point forward, we only need track the Lord’s movements to discover the location of the glorified church. During the tribulation period, it will be with the Lord in heaven. At the Second Coming, the

church will return with Him to the earth and participate in His kingdom as He rules over the earth for 1,000 years.

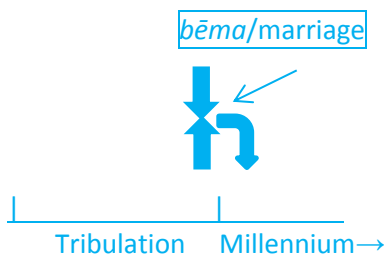
### Pre-Trib vs. Post-Trib Views of the Rapture

The view of the rapture taught in these notes can be described as pre-tribulation. In other words, the rapture occurs prior to the seven year period of tribulation that will take place in the end times. There are other views which some have taught that place the rapture at a different point on the prophetic timeline. There is not space to cover every variation here, but one I will address in this context is post-tribulationism. This view puts the rapture at the end of the tribulation and becomes effectively the same event as the Second Coming.

#### Pre-Trib Rapture

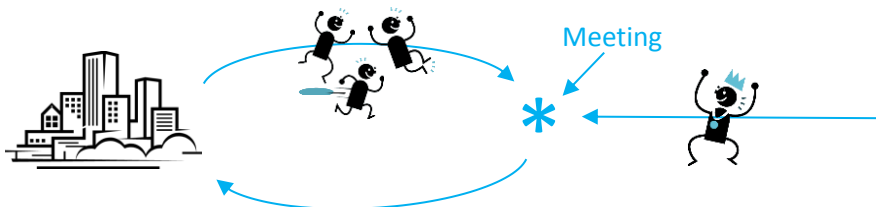


#### Post-Trib Rapture



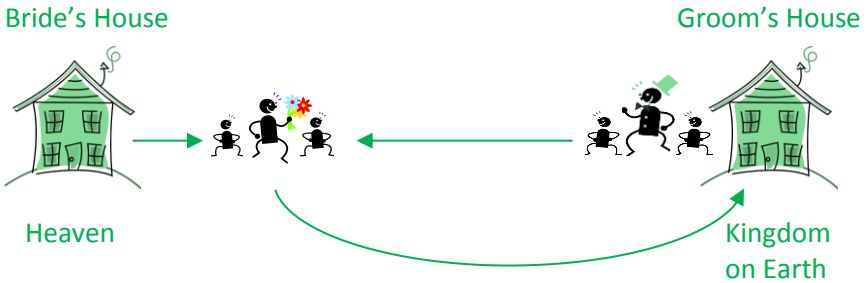
### Post-Tribulation Interpretation of Verse 17

Adherents of this view build their strongest argument from the expression “to meet the Lord.” They suggest that the word “meet” (from the Greek *apantēsis* ἀπάντησις) is used in the New Testament as a technical term to describe a dignitary coming to a city. In this scenario, the leading citizens would come out of the city to meet the dignitary and escort him back to the city. Additionally, they suggest that this entire event is referred to by *parousia* (παρουσία) — “coming;” and the meeting is described by *apantēsis* (cf. Matt 25:6; Acts 28:15). Additionally, they see Matthew 24:40–41 as an illustration of Matthew 24:31; and view the word “taken” as a reference to the rapture. This all occurs *after* the tribulation (Matt 24:29).



### Pre-Tribulation Interpretation of Verse 17

When we examine the verb *apantēsis* in Greek along with its cognates, it does refer to a meeting. But it does not refer to the direction taken after the meeting (cf. Mark 14:13; Luke 17:12 — these verses describe a meeting taking place, but no return journey after the meeting). This is also true in the Septuagint (LXX) — the Greek translation of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Sam 4:1; 13:10; 30:21). Furthermore, Matthew 25:6 refers to the marriage custom of first century Judaism. According to this custom, 1) the groom’s party leaves his house; 2) the bride’s party comes out to meet the groom’s party; and 3) the whole party returns to the groom’s house. In order for the post-trib scenario to work, the entire party would have to return to the *bride’s* house. But that is not first-century Jewish wedding custom. The custom was that the party returned to the groom’s house. This is seen in Matthew 25:10 — “went in with him” refers to the groom’s home where the wedding took place.



There is also a problem with the parallels that post-tribulationists draw between 1 Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 24:31. The better parallel for Matthew 24:31 would be Daniel 12:2. It is a gathering of the elect at the end of the tribulation that would involve all *Jews* who are believers — whether dead or alive. Thus Matthew 24:31 is talking about a gathering of the elect which includes resurrected Old Testament saints and also those who are alive at the end of the tribulation. The problem with seeing the rapture in Matthew 24:31 as illustrated in 24:40–41, is verse 39. Those “taken away” in the days of Noah were taken by the flood in judgment. This is an illustration of what will take place in the future. In order to make the post-tribulation view work, you have to reverse the illustration in verses 40–41 in order to make the words “taken” refer to the rapture. The post-trib view stands the illustration on its head by saying that the ones taken are those being raptured. It is much easier to follow the illustration of verse 39 and understand the ones taken in verses 40–41 as being taken in judgment. Those who are allowed to

remain in verses 40–41 are allowed to remain and enter the kingdom. This is also consistent with the judgment of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31–46. The sheep are those godly Gentiles who survive the tribulation and are allowed to enter the kingdom. The goats are the ungodly Gentiles who are removed from the earth in judgment and not allowed to enter the kingdom (i.e. they are killed in the process of setting up and establishing the kingdom. This takes place in a 75 day transition period after the Second Coming. — cf. Daniel 12:11–13). In the end, the pre-tribulation rapture position has greater support and is more consistent with the context of these individual passages.

#### The Exhortation to Comfort One Another (v. 18)

The teachings in these verses about resurrection and glorification can provide a great comfort to any believer today. Are you worried about other believers who have died? Fret not! They have been instantly taken into the presence of the Lord upon death and will be reunited with their glorified bodies at the rapture. Are you worried that you will miss out on the blessing of meeting the Lord face to face? Fret not! Every believer who is living at the time of the rapture will be translated — but only after those who have died. Are you worried about politics, wars, and world events spiraling out of control? Fret not! Today's troubles do not begin to compare with the horrors of the tribulation period. God will spare the church that agony and remove them from the earth prior to that awful time. There is much to be thankful for and much comfort to be taken from this passage! Let's not forget to remind one another of these truths when we face death and tribulations today!

~AWB