

THE BOOK OF FIRST THESSALONIANS

"The Rapture Question" (2)

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction

1. There are wild ideas circulating about the second coming of Christ. The need for direct teaching on the subject is patent. The same was true in the days of Paul and the early church at Thessalonica.

2. The major concern of that church was what had happened to those who had died in the Lord. To explain their situation, Paul reminded them of the truth of the rapture. Yes, that word "rapture" is in the Bible. It is rendered "caught up" (4:17). Far from being the figment of a theological system, it is the Word of God. It must be taught with authority.

3. The rapture is related solely to the church, the body of Christ. There is nothing in it to refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), nor to the destruction of Jerusalem (under the Romans), nor to the conversion of the soul (the matter of salvation). It is back to the basics to get a thorough grasp on the Word. The need to rightly divide the Word never becomes forward more needfully than at this juncture (2 Tim. 2:15). The rapture question is a part of the dispensational system of truth.

4. To help the Thessalonians get the matter straight, Paul removed their ignorance (4:13). By doing this, he provided hope (v. 13) and comfort (v. 18). The order of events which he outlined are important and clear. Here they are:

1. STEP NO. 1: CHRIST'S DESCENT v. 16.

The person involved here by the term "Lord" is not any member of the trinity save the Son. This is why the emphatic reflexive pronoun is used: "himself." This affirms the bodily resurrection of Christ and His aliveness. The singular verb adds to the identification of the person as the Lord Jesus. Having come from heaven before, it is natural for Him to do it again (cf. John 3:13). The preposition attached to the verb accents His descent,

while the "from" relates to His coming "from heaven" in the sense of separation from that place. Elsewhere it is noted that He will come "from heaven" in the sense of "out of it" as to source and from an earthly viewpoint (Phil. 3:20). Incidentally, the verb here is nowhere else used of our Lord's return.

2. STEP. NO. 2: SOUND EXPRESSED v. 16.

There is a threefold use of the preposition "in" in the original Greek. Each one adds some significant emphasis to the declared movement of our Lord at this moment. It will be a spectacular event indeed: 1) The "shout" is from a root which means "order, command." It is the shout of a commander. Christ comes now as the Victor over death (1 Cor. 15:54-57). 2) The "voice" heard is that of "an" archangel. While only one is named in the Bible (Jude 9), others may well exist. The anarthrous construction leads one to believe this. This may also be the explanation for the shout of the previous phrase. 3) Finally, there is the trumpet of God. Elsewhere it is referred to as the "last trump" (1 Cor. 15:52). While many have identified this with the "last trumpet" of judgment in Revelation (Rev. 11:15-19), this just could not be. Both as to time and to meaning, the two differ. More than likely, the reference is to the trump to move and break up camp (Num. 10:1-10).

3. STEP NO. 3: DEAD RAISED v. 16.

The use of the word "dead" is to be connected with the term "asleep" (vv. 13-15). The "asleep" are in fact the "dead" and there is no such suggestion as soul sleep which has been advanced by heretical groups. This is the core question for the church. They wanted to know what was to happen with their dead. Here is the answer. Those who died being "in Christ" would rise first. This technical phrase "in Christ" notes that those to be raised are the body of Christ. They are true believers (1 Cor. 12:13). Israel has another time for resurrection (Dan. 12:1-3; Isa. 26:18, 19; Ezek. 37:1-11). The wicked dead are not raised until after the millennium (Rev. 20:12-15).

4. STEP NO. 4: LIVING RAPTURED v. 17.

The use of the connective "then" does not mean there

is an interval. Rather, this is a suggestion of order. It is best to see it this way since the living will not be taken without the dead (v. 15). Further, both are raptured as the term "together" teaches. In fact, the Greek adds a word for time so that the dead and the living are raptured simultaneously and harmoniously. It all takes place "in the clouds" (cf. Acts 1:11). The truths here surely must have brought peace to the hearts at Thessalonica. It should do the same for us. One segment of the church will not go without the other! There is no such thing as a "partial rapture" else the word "together" has no meaning. The "we" of the text means the "church," the "in Christ" people.

5. STEP NO. 5: CHRIST'S PRESENCE v. 17.

Twice the Greek uses the preposition "into" in this verse: "into a meeting" and "into the air." Hence, the truth is clear--the rapture relates to a particular experience "in the air" and it relates to a meeting "of the Lord." There is absolutely no possible way by which the description here could be identified with the coming of Christ as explained for Israel (Zech. 14:1-3; Rev. 1:7). Since the problem related to the church's concern over the "departed," the final word is that they will "meet" and will never part again for they will "ever" be with the Lord. The final arrangement has come!

Conclusion It is a matter of convenience to present the truth here as "steps." In truth, there is no time for "steps" since it will all take place in a "moment" (Greek: an atom of time), like the movement of the eyelid (1 Cor. 15:52). Virtually the rapture will be timeless. The event will take place before anyone has time for action of any sort. It is absolutely necessary that you be ready to go. Are YOU?