

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

The Coming of Christ for His Church 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Part 1

Are you interested in the future? I can't imagine that there is anyone here this morning who is not extremely interested in such things. Hopefully, I will therefore have your attention as we begin to examine **1 Thess. 4:13-18** which contains wonderful detail concerning a future event that theologians call the "rapture."

1 Thess. 4:13-18 "But we do not want you to be uninformed brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. (14) For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (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, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. (16) For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. (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, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. (18) Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Though this passage does in fact contain wonderful detail concerning a future event that we call the "rapture" I am sure you noticed that the rapture is never mentioned by name. This event gets its name from the Latin translation of the English words "caught up" in **V. 17**. The Latin word for "caught up" is "rapture." Someday in the future the church is going to experience the event described in **1 Thess. 4:13-18**. Someday in the future the church is going to experience the "catching up." Someday in the future the church is going to experience the "rapture."

The hope of the rapture, the hope of being caught up to be with Christ is a comforting hope. In fact the first time that Christ mentioned the reality of this event to His disciples it was for the express purpose of comforting them. In **John 14** Jesus had just celebrated the last supper with the disciples. And he has made it very clear that he was leaving them and He sensed they were troubled. And He shared with them these wonderful words. **(1) "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. (2) In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. (3) And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."** Let me ask this question? What do you think Christ is referring to when he mentions His father's house? He is referring to heaven. Christ told His disciples that he was going to heaven in order to prepare a place for them. And after this place was prepared what was he going to do? He is going to come again and receive them to Himself that where he was they would be also and or in other words that they would be in heaven with Him. The disciples had left everything to follow Jesus ... They loved Him! The Bible tells us God created the heavens and the earth in six days. Christ has been preparing a place for us in His father's house for almost 2000 years. This will be quite a place!!

The promise by Christ to return and receive his disciples to himself and then take them to the place that he had prepared should not be confused with the 2nd coming of Christ to the earth which is also prophesied.

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The “catching up” of **1 Thess. 4** or the “receiving” of **John 14** involve the translation of believers from the earth while the 2nd coming involves the coming of Christ to the earth to establish the Millennial Kingdom. The Millennial Kingdom is a future 1000 year kingdom in which every promise to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David concerning the land of Palestine and the Jewish nation of Israel will be fulfilled. The rapture is the hope of the church. The 2nd advent and the millennial kingdom is the hope of the nation of Israel.

When will this take place? This is a matter of debate. There are several different answers given to this question. But all are tied to another future event commonly referred to as the “tribulation” or the “70th week of Daniel.” Therefore, before seeking to answer “when” we need to look at the tribulation or 70th week of Daniel. The tribulation is a seven year period of time prophesied in both the Old and New Testaments that is designed to accomplish two very clearly stated purposes.

First of all to bring to conclusion “the times of the Gentiles (Luke 21:23-24). **“Woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people, (24) and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.”** Or in other words until the 7 year tribulational period is concluded. But in addition to the Gentiles, God has a second purpose.

To prepare for the restoration and the regathering of Israel in the millennial reign of Christ. In **Zech 12:9-10** **“And it will come about in that day that I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. (10) And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him.”**

It is interesting to note that these two purposes have no relation to the church whatsoever. This future 7 year period certainly does not appear to have any particular significance for the church. But even so there are those who believe that the church will go through the tribulation. These people believe in a “posttribulational rapture.” There are others who put the rapture just prior to the end of the tribulation just prior to the Day of the Lord. These people believe in a “pre-wrath rapture.” Then there are others who believe that the church will go through only a half of the tribulation. These people believe in a “midtribulational rapture.” Clearly there is a lot of differences in respect to the timing of the rapture. Which one represents the particular position of Valley Bible Church. None of the above. We believe that the rapture will take place just prior to the so called “tribulation.” We therefore believe in a “pretribulational rapture.”

We at Valley Bible believe therefore that Jesus could therefore return at any moment. This means that when I wake up in the morning I am not looking for the events prophesied in the tribulation. Whether that is the emergence of the antichrist, or his peace pact with the nation of Israel, or the abomination of desolation or any of the horrible judgments that are mentioned in the Book of Revelation. I AM LOOKING ONLY FOR ONE THING I AM LOOKING FOR JESUS. I BELIEVE IN A PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE. AND I BELIEVE THAT THIS DOCTRINE IS STRONGLY SUPPORTED IN **1 Thess. 4:13-18.**

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Why was Paul writing this passage to the Thessalonians? Without a doubt it was to comfort them. Look at V. 13 **“But we do not want you to be uninformed brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.”** And then again in V. 18 **“Therefore comfort one another with these words.”**

What was the problem? Why did the Thessalonians need comforting? It would appear that though Paul was only in Thessalonica for a very short time he was able to excite them about the prospects of Jesus returning to catch up the church to Himself. In 1 Thess. 1:9-10 Paul says, **“For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God. (11) and to wait for His Son from heaven.”** And they apparently assumed that His return or His coming was going to take place very soon. How soon? So soon that they did not anticipate that any Thessalonian Christian was going to experience death before this blessed event would take place. This was the source of the problem. This is what led to their grief. When certain Thessalonian believers died it raised a number of unsettling questions in their minds. Certainly high up on their list of questions would be, “Had their brothers and sisters in Christ somehow been cheated out of this glorious event? Had their brothers and sisters in Christ who had died somehow been cheated out of the rapture?” Paul writes the verses that we have read this morning to answer these questions.

These Thessalonian Christians did not believe in a posttribulational rapture, they did not believe in a pre-wrath rapture, they did not believe in midtribulational rapture if they had then they certainly would have anticipated that many of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ would have to die before Jesus returned to catch them up to Himself. What did they believe in? They believed in a pretribulational rapture. They were however were very confused about the consequences of Christ’s delay in coming to catch them up. Therefore Paul writes this passage to fill in some very important information that he had failed to give them or which they had misunderstood on his first visit about those who had died so that they might be comforted.

Will this new information that he gives them attempt to alter their belief in the imminent return of Christ? Absolutely not! Will this new information that he gives them attempt to introduce or attempt to persuade them that there are additional events that must take place before Jesus catches them up to Himself? No! Their belief in the imminent return of Christ was not challenged by Paul. Why? Because this is exactly what Paul had taught them. Their belief in the imminent return of Christ was not challenged by Paul because their belief in the imminent return of Christ was correct. He could return at any time. So, if he didn’t challenge their belief in the imminent return of Christ what did he do? He gave them more detail concerning Christ’s return which addressed their concerns about those who had died?

Look at V. 13 **“But we do not want you to be uninformed brethren about those who are asleep.”** When Paul speaks of those who are **“asleep”** he is referring to those Thessalonian believers who were no longer living. Why did Paul refer to those Christians who had died as sleeping? The answer is very simple. Let me ask you a question, “What happens to sleeping people” They wake up! And so will the dead, they will also wake up.

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The scriptures commonly referred to those who had died as sleeping to emphasize the temporary quality of death. In fact the word for “asleep” (KOIMETERION) that Paul uses in this passage is the word from which we get our word “cemetery.” It was the early Christians optimistic word for a graveyard. It was for them a sleeping place. Everywhere we turn in the New Testament with see this temporary view of death.

We see this in **John 11:11** when Jesus was speaking to his disciples about the death of His friend Lazarus, **“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep.”**

We see this in **Acts 7:59-60** when Luke records for us the final words of Stephen, the first martyr of the church, **“And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And having said this, he fell asleep.”**

We see this in **1 Cor. 11:30** when Paul refers to the discipline of certain believers, who had while participating in communion services persisted in living sinful lifestyles. **“For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. (30) For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.”**

Does this mean that when we die that our spirit goes into a state of unconsciousness only to wake up later at some future time? Absolutely not. Nowhere in the scriptures do we see the spirit of man taking a siesta. What does Paul teach us? What is the hope of the believer? **2 Cor. 5:9** is very clear **“Absent from the body present with the Lord.”** This hope was expressed by Stephen in the passage that we have already read when he cried out **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”** But someone may say, “Well what about the unsaved perhaps their soul sleeps.” Nowhere does the scriptures indicate this either. You will remember the story of Lazarus and the rich man in **Luke 16**. What happened to the spirit of the rich man when he died? His spirit went to a place that Jesus called “Hades” where he certainly did not take a nap but rather experienced conscious unrelenting torment. When the scriptures speak of individuals sleeping in respect to death it is not speaking of their spirit sleeping but rather to their body sleeping, their physical body which will one day be woke up at the time of their resurrection.

When Paul tells the Thessalonians that he did not want them to be **“uninformed about those who are asleep”** he was saying that he did not want them to be **“uninformed about those believers who had died and whose bodies were now in a state of repose while their spirits were in the presence of God.”** He wanted to make sure that they knew that these believers whose physical bodies were now asleep in a sense and whose spirits were in the presence of God would not miss out on the rapture. He wanted them to know this in order that **“they would not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.”**

We should not misunderstand what Paul is saying by this phrase. Grieving at the death of a loved one is very normal and natural. The scriptures tell us that Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus. Paul is not giving this information about Christians who had died in order to keep the believers from grieving but rather he is giving this information that they would not grieve as the world who has no hope.

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We need to understand that we never say a final goodbye to believers. There is a future hope of reunion. And the event that will be described in **1 Thess. 4:13-18** will be the granddaddy of all reunions in respect to the church. Yes, we may as believers experience a temporary separation with loved ones who may die but we can be assured that there will be a future reunion. We can be assured that there will be a future coming together. This is a blessed thought. This is a comforting thought.

Certainly it is far more comforting for believers who have this hope than for others who in the world have no hope at all. What a horrible thing to say goodbye to someone you dearly love with no hope of a future reunion. This certainly was the case when Paul wrote these words to the Thessalonians. Certainly at the time of Paul there were certain philosophers that taught a life after death. But the common teaching at that time was no such hope. People lived with hopelessness for the most part. There was no hope at all of a reunion with departed loved ones.

I believe that this has somewhat changed today. I believe that the vast majority of Americans hold to some kind of belief in a life after death. Whether that means that they believe that their spirit will be released to some great spirit in the sky or if their spirit will come back in the next life as a monkey or cat. Americans for the most part believe in a life after death. But these beliefs are typically based on nothing but their wishful thinking. Which at best can perhaps numb some of the pain of separation that death brings. But this is a far cry from what we have been as Christians.

I believe in a life after death because of a historical fact that was testified to by the men and women who witnessed it. THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST. I BELIEVE THAT BECAUSE HE LIVES ALL THOSE THAT PLACE THEIR FAITH AND TRUST IN HIM WILL LIVE ALSO. AS CHRISTIANS WE ARE NOT FOLLOWING CUNNINGLY DEvised FABLES BUT RATHER A VERY HISTORICAL AND DEFENSIBLE FAITH MADE REAL TO US BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

When a Christian brother or sister in Christ dies certainly I will feel grief but I in no way will experience the degree of grief that the world feels because I KNOW THAT I HAVE NOT SAID A FINAL GOODBYE BUT RATHER, A GLORIOUS REUNION IS GOING TO TAKE PLACE AT AN EVENT DESCRIBED IN VV. 14-18. So what should we be looking for when we wake up in the morning? Should we be looking for the unfolding of the tribulation and the events that are described as taking place during the tribulation in **Rev. 6-18**? This is not what the church is instructed to be looking for. Rather we are to be looking for the Lord to return and catch us up to be with Him. And this is the event that is being described in these verses.

In these final verses we will be examining four different facts concerning this great and glorious event described in VV. 14-18. My prayer is that in this examination we will join with the Thessalonians in their wonderful anticipation of the return of Christ at the rapture and be confident that all those believers we have known and loved will be there.