

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

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Ready for the Rapture

Related Topics: Death of the Believer; Hope Beyond the Grave; First Coming of Christ; Second Coming of Christ; The Translation of the Church; The Imminent Return of Christ for the Church; The Rapture; The Historical Nature of the Doctrine of the Rapture

We noted at the beginning of our study of this amazing letter from Paul to the Thessalonians that each chapter closes with a reference to the Return of Christ. The close of Chapter 4 contains one of the most important passages of the New Testament concerning prophecy and eschatology (study of last things).



1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 13But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18Therefore encourage one another with these words.

IT IS OF TREMENDOUS IMPORTANCE for us to know the chronological context of this letter. He wrote this letter during his 18-month stay in Corinth on his second missionary journey. The letter is dated between 49-51a.d.

I point this out for several major reasons:

1. Because of the attitude of contemporary Christian leaders towards the prophetic nature of the Bible. Some of the most well known figures in contemporary church culture would tell you that eschatology and prophecy are not only unimportant to the Church, they are actually counter-productive to the Great Commission.
2. There are those who say that the doctrine of the Rapture was not taught in the early Church. That it is a relatively new teaching introduced by a guy named Darby in the mid-late 1800s. Both of these are staggering to me because Paul's chronicled ministry in the 1st century AD says otherwise. And most importantly, the Holy Spirit who is the author of the Scriptures, says otherwise. We know from the record of Acts that Paul spent three weeks in Thessalonica with these men and women. We know from this very letter the content of his preaching and teaching.

In those few weeks Paul taught these new believers about The great doctrines of Salvation. He taught them about Election. He taught them about the Power of the Gospel. He taught them about Repentance and Salvation from the wrath of God. In those few weeks Paul taught these new believers about how that great salvation translates into daily living, "This is the will of God for you." In those few weeks Paul taught these new believers about the coming of Christ for the Church. The subject of the imminent return of Christ for the Church was so important in the mind and

heart of the Apostle Paul that he made sure these brand new baby believers knew of it and looked for it.

3. I want to point out that these believers in the Mid - 1st Century AD were expecting Jesus to come at any moment!

The early church lived with a sense of the imminence of Christ coming for the Church. Without a doubt, none of the apostles or early Christians thought that the Church Age, in which we find ourselves, would last 2,000 years. They never set a date for the return of the Lord, but they were looking for Jesus to come for His Church in their lifetime.

We need to set up our study of these verses by making a clear distinction between the Rapture and the Second Coming of Jesus. The Rapture is the coming of Jesus for His Church. The Second Coming is Jesus coming to the earth a second time. The second coming of Christ takes place at the end of the Great Tribulation. In it Jesus comes to the earth with His Church to sit upon the throne of David and rule the earth in righteousness for 1,000 years, after which He will usher in a New Heaven and a New Earth.

Listen to what Peter says about the subject of prophecy

2 Peter 1:19-21 19And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, 20knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 21For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Old Testament prophets, carried along by the Holy Spirit, spoke and wrote volumes about the coming of the Messiah of Israel and about the glory of His Kingdom.

CRUCIAL:

Sometimes the Old Testament prophet would describe Messiah as Isaiah did:

- A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
- A Lamb of God
- A suffering servant by Whose stripes we are healed.

Then the same prophet would describe the glory and the majesty of that incomparable servant of and declare His Name to be:

- Wonderful Counselor
- The Mighty God
- The Everlasting Father
- The Prince of Peace.

WE CAN'T MISS THIS:

They foretold these things but they didn't know how it would roll out in history.

1 Peter 1:10-11 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, 11inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

To them, and to all of Israel, there was one great prophetic promise and vision. The followers of Jesus, being Jews, saw Jesus in that same way. When they heard John the Baptist announce that the Messiah was in their midst they were thrilled because of all that the Old Testament prophecies had declared about the Messiah and His Kingdom. They saw Jesus as the One who would lead Israel out from under the bondage and yoke of the Roman government. They saw Jesus as the One who would establish forever the kingdom of Israel. They were filled with those glorious expectations.

IMPORTANT:

That is why they could not process the words of Jesus when He said that He was going up to Jerusalem where He would be betrayed and turned over to the Romans, beaten, crucified and buried, but in three days later rise again.

That is why they were absolutely crushed when the One they believed to be the Messiah died on the Cross like

a felon, like a criminal.

For them, the death of Jesus marked the death of every prophetic vision that they had read in the Bible.

Luke 24:17-21 And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. 18Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" 19And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. 21But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

You see, they did not yet understand that there was first:

- A coming of the Messiah in humility (born in a manger - raised in Nazareth)
- A coming of the Messiah for the purpose of taking upon Himself the sins of the world, shedding His blood for the redemption of sinners

They did not understand that in that FIRST COMING, He would not establish the glorious Messianic Kingdom foretold in the Old Testament. Those promises would be fulfilled in a SECOND COMING. In that coming the Messiah will come not in humility to die, but in glory and power to rule and reign forever and forever.

They did not understand that it would be in His Second Coming that He will fulfill the promises made to the nation of Israel in Isaiah.

Isa. 9:7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

CRUCIAL:

The Old Testament prophets, the Old Testament Jews, and the disciples of Jesus NEVER SAW an age between the suffering and glory of the Messiah. This long age is known as the age of the Church. This age BETWEEN the FIRST and SECOND coming of Christ is the parenthetical period of history that punctuates the 69th and 70th Weeks of Daniel (Dan. 9).

Dan. 9:24 "Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city,

The First 69 "weeks" from March 14, 445 BC out to April 6, 32 AD had to do with the First Coming of Messiah at the end of the 69th "week" he would be cut off for the sins of the nation.

CRUCIAL INSIGHT:

In Ephesians 3, Paul describes that great parenthesis that the Old Testament prophet never saw. He essentially said, "Hid in the councils of God from the beginning of the world was this mystery"

Mystery = musterion

A "mystery" in the Bible is not a problem to be solved, a case to be cracked through investigation and deduction. It is a secret known only to God until He reveals it.

THE BIG IDEA:

This great parenthesis in which we now live was something that the prophets of the Old Testament never saw, it was a a musterion. But now this mystery was revealed.

The thing that nobody had yet known, but now God had revealed, was that:

- Christ should die in His first appearing without establishing the Kingdom
- The Gospel of the Son of God should be preached to all of the world, INCLUDING the gentiles.

- This parenthesis between His FIRST and SECOND comings would bring into existence a thing called the Church.

CRUCIAL INSIGHT:

In John 14, in the very shadow of the cross, the night before Jesus died on the cross, Jesus introduces for the very first time the event known as the RAPTURE. This event, which Paul addresses in [1 Thessalonians 4][10, would Mark the end of the Church Age and resume once again God's dealing with Israel during which God would conclude the 70th week of Daniel 9 during the 7 years of the Great Tribulation.

At the end of that 70th week of Daniel the Messiah would come a SECOND time to the earth to establish His glorious Kingdom. Here is how Jesus introduces for the very first time the subject of the RAPTURE.

John 14:2-4 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4And you know the way to where I am going."

He tells them that BEFORE He comes a SECOND time in glory and power to fulfill the promise of a glorious Kingdom, He is going to go away! He's going to heaven where He will prepare a place for those who put their trust in Him. And then someday, He's coming again to take His Bride, the Church, to His Father's house, "That where I am, there you may be also."

NOTE WELL:

"I will come again." Jesus is not talking about death. In death, our spirit departs the body to go be with Jesus.

Jesus says that He's coming for us. In other words, before He returned to the earth in glory to establish His kingdom on earth, He was going to take His disciples home to glory first. Without a doubt, I was not completely understood by those men on that night. They did not expect a Messiah who was going away to prepare them a place and then come back to take them to a place that He had prepared. That was not the Messiah that they were expecting.

You and I might know these verses and take them for granted, but His disciples were totally confused. It was not completely understood by the early Christians. Just as it is not completely understood by many Christians today.

INTERESTING:

Paul's point in this passage is not primarily the RAPTURE of the Church. He breaks into the subject of the Rapture in dealing with a question about what happens to the believer who dies before the rapture takes place. These believers in Thessalonica believed they would be caught up to be with the Lord at any time (CH. 1), but they were concerned about whether or not the resurrection of their loved ones would be delayed, possibly until after the great tribulation when Christ came back to establish His kingdom. Paul writes to answer this question.

1 Thes 4:13 13But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

1. Christians DO sorrow when our loved ones in Christ are taken away from us in death.
It is not a lack of faith to do so.
It is not a lack of Christian maturity to do so.
2. Their sorrow is NOT like those who have no hope.
An inscription has reportedly been found on a pagan tomb at Thessalonica, "After death there is no revival, after the grave no meeting of those who have loved each other on earth." That is NOT the sorrow of the believer.
The sorrow of the believer is an ache over the absence of the loved one on this side of heaven.
3. Why does the unbeliever have NO hope?
Because for the unbeliever there is no certainty beyond the grave, that's why they resort to "they're in a better place", "they're right here with me", "there's really no such thing as hell", "everyone is going to heaven", "we all come back and get a second chance." Because the unbeliever truly has NO hope of

heaven apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus, they have NO hope of being accepted into the presence of God because they are yet in their sin, as would you and I apart from trusting Christ.

4. A Christian has a wonderful hope that after this life there is going to be a glorious, unending, perfectly joyful existence in the presence of God. All of that will be enjoyed with our loved ones in Christ who have gone on before us.

What is the basis for that hope that is given, what establishes that hope as certain and sure?

1 Thes 4:14 14For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Unless we are absolutely certain concerning the death and resurrection of Christ, we have no hope. REAL HOPE has its origins at the cross of Christ. It is there that Christ died for our sins; it is there we learn that we had a substitute. One who was able to save us and one who provided a sufficient sacrifice for our sin.

REAL HOPE has its origins in the resurrection of Christ, the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus from the grave is God's apologetic for faith in Christ. The stamp of certainty. It guarantees that the death of Jesus is sufficient in the eyes of God to SAVE me from the penalty and power of sin.

So here we have the background and foundation for what Paul is about to say about the rapture and those who have died before the Rapture. What a starter dish for communion!

The reality of a FIRST and SECOND coming of Christ. There was the FIRST coming of Jesus. He came humbly to serve and give His life as a ransom for sin. There is going to be a SECOND coming of Jesus. He will come in power and glor to sit upon the throne of David and establish the Kingdom promised by God to Israel.

REMEMBER — The reality of a FIRST and SECOND coming of the Messiah was not clear until after the Cross and Resurrection. Then there is that parenthetical period of time between the FIRST and SECOND comings of Jesus. During this "AGE" God has been dealing primarily with the non-Jewish people of the world. YOU AND ME! Like the two comings of the Messiah, this Church Age was a total mystery. This was unknown until after the death and resurrection of Jesus when it was revealed to the apostles.

Christian, as you take the bread and cup they speak to you about the hope that belongs to you beyond the grave because Jesus died and rose again for you.

Are you without hope today? What is the basis of your professed hope?

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