

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
The Rapture
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Christians today are repeatedly exposed to a very complex explanation of end time prophecy. They are exposed to this through mediums such as Tim LaHaye's "Left Behind" books and films, popular books such as those written by Hal Lindsey a few decades ago, and the messages of many TV and radio preachers. According to this currently popular view, Jesus will return at the end of this age, but He won't descend all the way to earth. At that point in time, the dead church age saints will be resurrected and the living saints will be transformed and together they will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Let's call that resurrection number one. Seven years later, Christ will come all the way to earth, and the Old Testament saints and the saints who have died since the first resurrection seven years earlier will be resurrected. Let's call that resurrection number two. A thousand years will pass. During this time, people in resurrection bodies will share the earth with people still in their mortal bodies. At the end of this thousand years, the saints who died during that thousand year period will be resurrected and the lost who died in their sins in all the ages will resurrected. Let's call that resurrection number three.

This complex scheme involving three resurrections is not the explanation of end time events found in our doctrinal standards. There is a very good reason for this. Our doctrinal standards

were written in the 17th century. The currently popular view was not developed and taught until the 19th century. Our doctrinal standards teach one general resurrection at the end of this age immediately following by a general judgment and eternity. We find this in our Larger Catechism, Questions 87 through 90. I believe this much simpler scenario is what Scripture teaches. Here is what Jesus taught:

John 5:28-29

- 28 Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice
29 and come forth -- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

Matthew 13:30,38-43

- 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."
38 The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one.
39 The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.
40 Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age.
41 The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness,
42 and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

43 Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Matthew 25:31-34,41

31 When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.

32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:..."

41 Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:..."

Jesus had a simple explanation of end time events. He will return at the end of the age and there will be a general resurrection and a general judgment. For other verses which teach this same simple explanation of the end of the age, see Daniel 12:2, Acts 24:15, Romans 2:5-16 and 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10.

Let's now look at our passage for tonight. The Christians at Thessalonica were concerned about the Christians who had already died and thus obviously would not be alive when Jesus

returned. They wanted to know if these Christians who die before Jesus returns are at any real disadvantage.

Let's now look at Paul's answer to that question. First, Paul answered the Thessalonian's concern about the dead in Christ by assuring them that the dead in Christ are already with Jesus in heaven and that their disembodied spirits will accompany Jesus at His bodily return to earth.

1 Thessalonians 4:14

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

That the dead in Christ are now with Jesus in heaven is also taught elsewhere in Scripture:

Philippians 1:21-23

21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

22 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell.

23 For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.

2 Corinthians 5:8

8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

Luke 23:43

43 And Jesus said to [the thief on the cross], "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Secondly, when Jesus does return, those who are then dead will be raised first. In other words, if any saints will have an advantage when Jesus returns, it will not be those who are then alive. It will be those who are then dead, for they will be raised up first.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-16

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.**

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.**

Let's look further at what these verses teach us about the resurrection of the dead at the bodily return of Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16, we read that the Lord will descend with "a shout" (NKJ) or "a cry of command" (ESV) or "a loud command" (NIV). When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, we read "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!'" (John 11:43). At the time of the general resurrection, Jesus will no doubt cry some command for the dead to come forth from their graves, and they will obey. John 5:28-29 says, "the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth..." In addition to this loud cry of command, there will be the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God, all summoning the dead to come forth.

Thirdly, those who are then alive will be transformed and raptured.

1 Thessalonians 4:17-18

- 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.

The Greek in verse 17 which is translated “we ... shall be caught up” is translated “rapiemur” in the Latin Vulgate. The perfect participle of this Latin verb is “raptum.” This is where we get the term “rapture.” It refers to the catching up of the saints at the return of Jesus to meet Him in the air. Those alive at the time are transformed into a glorified state, just as if they had experienced the resurrection unto life, without their ever having experienced physical death. At that moment, the living saints who had been transformed and the dead saints who had been resurrected are together raptured or caught up in order to meet the Lord in the air as He descends to earth.

The modern, complex view says that the saints will meet Christ in the air because there will be a seven year delay before Christ finishes His descent to earth. There is a better explanation based on a special meaning of the Greek word here translated "meet." This word "is to be understood as a technical term for a civic custom of antiquity whereby a public welcome was accorded by a city to important visitors" (**Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**, I.380). This word was "the ancient expression for the civic welcome of an important visitor or the triumphal entry of a new ruler into the capital city and thus to his reign" (**The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology**, I.325). In other words, when a king of antiquity

approached his capital city to begin his reign from that location, citizens of the city went out to meet him and to escort him into the city. It was the ancient equivalent of rolling out the red carpet.

This word is found two other places in the New Testament. It occurs in Matthew 25 in the parable of the foolish virgins:

Matthew 25:1-10

- 6 **"And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'"**
- 7 "Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.
- 10 **"... the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding;** and the door was shut.

This word also occurs in Acts 28 in the account of Paul's arrival at Rome:

Acts 28:15-16

- 15 And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to **meet** us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.
- 16 Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.

A second Greek word (*υπαντησις*), closely related in both form and sense to the one already mentioned (*απαντησις*), is also used to refer to this ancient civic custom (**TDNT**, I.380). These

two related Greek words are used interchangeably in the parable of the foolish virgins to refer to meeting the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1,6). This second Greek word is used in John 12:12-13 to refer to those in Jerusalem who poured out of the city with palm branches to meet Jesus at His Triumphal Entry into the city:

The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to **meet** Him, and cried out: "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' The King of Israel!"

This Triumphal Entry meeting does appear to be a significant parallel to the Rapture meeting of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In both events, people rush forward to meet Jesus as the Messianic King in order to accompany Him on the remainder of a journey. At the Triumphant Entry, some accompanied Jesus perhaps all the way from Bethany and at least from Bethphage where Jesus began riding the colt. As Jesus neared Jerusalem, pilgrims there for the Passover came out to meet Him and to accompany Him for the remainder of His trip. At the Second Coming, the spirits of the righteous dead will accompany Jesus on His journey from heaven. At the time of the resurrection, these spirits will unite with their raised and glorified bodies. Then the resurrected saints together with the transformed saints will go to meet Jesus to accompany Him for the remainder of His journey to earth.

Notice that in all of these usages of the two related Greek words translated "meet," there is no hint of any significant delay in the

journey. The use of the Greek word translated "meet" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 indicates that the resurrected saints will meet the Lord in the air to honor Him with an escort for the remainder of His descent to earth. Thus, the saints will meet Christ in the air at His Second Coming to give Him the "red carpet treatment" when He comes to earth to renew it and to rule over it for eternity.

According to this explanation of these verses, the rapture and the second coming are two aspects of the same event, and not two discontinuous events which occur seven years apart. Let's quickly look at three passages which confirm this. The first is Titus 2:11-13:

- 11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,
- 12 teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age,
- 13 looking for **the blessed hope and glorious appearing** of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...

This verse refers to the appearing of the great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Is this referring to God and to the Savior Jesus as two distinct entities? Or is this phrase "God and Savior" a compound reference to Jesus alone? The phrase is a compound reference to Jesus alone. We know this because in the Greek, there is only one definite article before both words and not a separate definite article before "great God" and a separate definite article before "Savior Jesus Christ." Therefore, Jesus is

our “great God and Savior.” The same rule of grammar tells us that “the blessed hope” and the “glorious appearing” are a compound reference to one event. If “the blessed hope” and “the glorious appearing” were two separate events, there would be a separate definite article before both expressions, but there is not. There is only one definite article before them both. Thus, “the blessed hope,” a term referring to the time of the rapture of the saints, will occur at the same time as “the glorious appearing,” a term referring to the time of the second coming. Thus, the ESV has the translation "our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory." The NIV has "the blessed hope -- the glorious appearing." These translations make clear that “the blessed hope” and “the glorious appearing” are two descriptions of the same event, just as “great God” and “Savior” are two descriptions of the same person, Jesus.

The same basic truth is taught in our second passage to consider, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8:

- 6 since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you,
- 7 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,
- 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In these verses, Paul is referring to an end time event in which Christians will experience rest and their wicked enemies will

experience divine wrath. The time when the saints will experience rest is the rapture, and the time when the wicked will experience judgment is the second coming. Paul saw this rest and judgment not as two events occurring years apart but as two aspects of one general event.

Our third passage to consider is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6:

- 1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.
- 2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.
- 3 For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.
- 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.
- 5 You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.
- 6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.

At the end of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about the rapture. Then here in chapter 5, Paul exhorted the same Thessalonians to be watchful regarding the day of the Lord when sudden, inescapable judgment will come upon the children of darkness. There is no evidence here that the time of the rapture and the day of judgment will occur years apart with the first involving "church saints" and the second, a distinct group called "tribulation saints." Paul spoke of both as directly relevant to the "church saints" at Thessalonica.

Let me close by reminding you that you need to prepare for this coming day by trusting in Jesus. For those who trust in Jesus, this coming day will be a day of rest. For those who don't, it will be a day of judgment. I once met a young man who told me that he was putting off trusting Jesus until after the rapture. He thought he could live a worldly life until the rapture, and then he would have seven years to come to Jesus in faith. Beloved, there is not going to be a period of time between the rapture and the second coming for people to get right with God. You need to do it today. Today is the day of salvation. There is no promise of another opportunity tomorrow.