

"The Rapture of the Church"
I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Mililani Community Church
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Today our subject is the Rapture of the Church. The word "rapture" means "to snatch away or to take out." The Rapture is the next event on God's calendar of coming world events predicted in the Bible. One day—we don't know when—Jesus Christ is coming in the air to gather out of this world all those who believe in Him. We will be transported to a place more glorious, more beautiful, more awesome than we can even comprehend. Jesus said in John 14: ***"...I go to prepare a place for you; and if I go I will come again to receive you unto myself that where I am there you may be also."***

Those who are without Christ will be left behind to face their most terrible time of judgement the world has ever known. It will be a time of the outpouring of the wrath of God upon the earth called the Tribulation.

Let me give you a little chronology of prophetic events before we look specifically at this passage: The Rapture is the first phase of the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus will first come in the air to snatch believers out of this world before His wrath falls upon the earth. The bodies of the dead in Christ will be raised from the dead at that time, and together we will meet the Lord in the air and go to be with Him. Then SEVEN SEALS mentioned in Revelation will then be opened and judgements will come down upon the earth. SEVEN TRUMPETS will blow and more judgements will come upon the earth. SEVEN BOWLS of judgement will be poured out on the earth. The wrath of God poured out on the earth will be so terrible, that people will cry out for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. Listen to Revelation 6:15-17: ***"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"***

Lots of people will be saved in the midst of these judgements—both Jews and Gentiles—144,000 Jews and a host of Gentiles will come to Christ. Many will be martyred for their faith, maybe a majority of them. Climaxing this period will be the Battle of Armageddon, and in the middle of that battle, Jesus will return to the earth with his saints to reign upon the earth. Satan will be cast into the bottomless pit.

Now let's look specifically at this passage: Paul had taught them about the Second Coming of Christ. Christ's return was a moment-by-moment expectation for them. But now some of them had died. They had some concerns: Where are our loved ones now? Will we be reunited with them? When Christ comes, will they lose out on the great event of His return? So Paul takes pen in hand to write back to them. In verse 13 the

PROBLEM IS STATED. In verses 14-18 the PROBLEM IS ANSWERED. **It is a revelation about the future as it pertains to believers who have died.**

First...

I. THE PROBLEM STATED (13): What happens to believers who have died prior to the coming of Christ for his church?

Read verse 13. Four times in the NT Paul says this. It means: "I want you to know something." ***"I want you to know about those who are asleep, that you sorrow not, as others who have no hope."*** He is writing concerning believers who are asleep (dead). Sleep is a euphemism for death. Death is described in the NT as a sleep. But we are not to understand this as meaning that when a Christian dies he goes to sleep. The person does not go to sleep when he dies. The person goes to be with Christ. Listen to Paul's testimony as he faced the prospect of death in a Roman prison: ***"For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far..."*** (Phil. 1:21-24). ***In II Corinthians 5:8 we read*** "Absent from the Body, present with the Lord."

What sleeps? The body sleeps. II Corinthians 5 speaks about the Christian's body as an earthly tent--a dwelling. We are spiritual beings. Our bodies are just our dwellings, our tents. You can't see me!! You only see the tent I live in, which one day if Jesus doesn't come soon will be dismantled, taken down, and put away. I won't have any more need for it because I, the person, will move out of my body and into the presence of the Lord! The body will sleep---put into the earth to await the resurrection when it will be awakened and reunited with the real person who will return with Jesus.

So that is what Paul says here: ***"I want you to know something concerning those who are asleep (whose body is asleep) that you sorrow not.."*** Paul is not excluding sorrow when we lose loved ones or friends. but he is saying that Christians should not grieve as the pagans. The Christian should not grieve as those who have no hope! We grieve over having to part for a time. but not like those who have no hope.

Many people reject the idea that the Christian faith is the only true faith and that Jesus is the only way to God. Lots of people don't want to believe that. We live in an age of easy compromise and tolerance. Lots of people want to believe there are many roads to God. You take your road. I'll take my road. We are all going to meet in the same place. But there is only one way. Paul clearly teaches here that for those who are outside of Jesus Christ, there is no hope!!!! Let me read to you some inscriptions on tombstones from the pagan world of the first century.

Outside of the modern city of Thessalonica archaeologists found this inscription on a grave: "After death no reviving; After the grave no meeting again." Here is another one: I was not, I became, I am not, I care not. Theocritus wrote: Hopes are among the living; The dead are without hope. Lucritius wrote: No one awakes and arises who has once been overtaken by the chilling end of life."

That is the hopelessness of pagan religion of the first century----and of today. But Paul says---I want you to know something about those who sleep--about believers who have died.

II. PROBLEM ANSWERED (14-18): Events surrounding the return of Christ for his church

We can outline the facts of revelation which Paul presents here in five points:

1. Return
2. Resurrection
3. Rapture
4. Reunion
5. Reassurance

(Read verses 14-15) *"For if we believe..."* We can translate this "Since we believe!" We do believe that Jesus died and rose again. If we don't we are not Christians. Because that is a brief summation of the gospel. He delivered it to the Corinthians.....(Read I Cor. 15:1-4). When we believe that message and receive the person of Jesus Christ, we are saved from eternal judgement. So we believe.

And because we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we can also then believe something else---"*that even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.*" Our Christian hope is rooted in history. The fact that Jesus died and rose again makes possible the fact that he is coming again! If he had not risen, he could not come again. The fact that he has risen also makes our resurrection certain. He is the first fruits of them that sleep--That means there is much more fruit to follow. Because he arose, we too shall rise!!!!

Notice the phrase: *"Those who sleep in Jesus God will bring with him."* This is proof positive that our believing friends and relatives are alive and with the Lord!!! Because when the Lord returns, he is going to bring their spirits and souls along with him (verse 14). God will bring them with him. The body is sleeping, but the person is there with the Lord and will come with him.

Just what their lives are like in the presence of the Lord--I can't tell you. They are alive, vibrant, happy, rejoicing, serving. They are with him. Though the tent has been dismantled, they are in God's presence!!!

Verse 15: READ. Paul is saying: "I believe I may be alive at the rapture!!!" He didn't make it. He didn't know that 2000 years would pass and maybe more. But that was his hope. Maybe we will be among those who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord. If so we will not get a head start on those who have fallen asleep. Paul said this because they were asking---"our relatives have died and are buried. And you said the Lord is coming. Are they going to miss out on that?" Answer: Verse 15: Those who

live until the coming of Christ will have no advantage over the dead in Christ. We will get no head start on them.

How will it work out?

In verses 16 through 18 Paul explains how it will work out:

First...

1. THE LORD HIMSELF WILL DESCEND (v. 16)

Read verses 16 *"The Lord himself will come down from heaven..."*

Acts 1:11 *"This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."*

The angel said... *"He shall so come..."*: personally, visibly, gloriously. He will come. He will not send angels. The Lord himself is coming for you and me! He will descend from Heaven. That's where he is now since his resurrection and ascension---sitting at the right hand of the Father. He will get up from His throne, and descend to the earth. The believing dead--whose bodies are here, but who are with Him will come along.

There will be three unique sounds involved in this event:

The Lord's loud command
The voice of the archangel
The trumpet call of God

"He will descend with a loud command.." Like a military captain gives to his men. I believe it will be to the dead bodies of believers. Like He said to Lazarus. "Lazarus!! Come out!" And he came. John 5:28 says those "in the graves shall hear his voice." Someone has said---"It will be like the words of the bridegroom to the bride in the Song of Solomon, "Arise my beloved and come away!" "Rise up my darling, my beautiful one, and come away."

"With the voice of the archangel..." Michael the archangel according to Daniel 10 is engaged in a struggle with demon forces. This will be the signal of victory. Michael will shout victory!

"...and with the trumpet call of God." I Corinthians 15:51-52 also relates His return to the sound of a trumpet. The Jewish people were familiar with trumpets. When the children of Israel were on their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, every morning before they started their journey they would have seven trumpets blow—to break camp, to fold the tents, and so forth. When the last trumpet sounded, this meant MOVE OUT! The trumpet call of God will be a sign that it is time for us to move out!! After this trio of announcement, things will happen:

2. THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD IN CHRIST (v. 16)

"The dead in Christ will rise first.." Verse 16

Redeemed souls coming with Jesus to be reunited with redeemed and resurrected bodies. Bodies like His glorious body, never again subject to sickness and death.

The dead in Christ shall rise first. Not all the dead!!!! The dead in Christ—means those who have trusted him as Savior. Many graves will not open for 1,000 years till the Great White Throne where they will arise to stand in judgement before Christ.

Then...

3. THE RAPTURE OF LIVING BELIEVERS (v. 17)

“After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...” Verse 17

Verse 17 "caught up" Latin *rapturo* is the word from which we get our English word "rapture." Before we can rise to meet the Lord in the air something is going to have to happen to us! Our loved ones who have died will have resurrection bodies and we will need one too. And we will get it. I Cor. 15:51-52, 53, 54

Then...

4. OUR REUNION IN THE AIR (v. 17)

“Caught up together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Verse 17. It will be a **glorious meeting**: because we will have glorified bodies. Jesus prayed in John 17:22-24 that we might one day see His glory and share in it. Paul says in Romans 8:17-19 that the sufferings we endure today are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. It will be an **everlasting meeting**: for we shall be "forever with the Lord." This was his promise. We will go to the Father's house (John 14:1-3). We will be there, later to return to reign with Christ (Rev. 19).

This meeting will also be a **time of reckoning**: The Bible speaks of the "Judgement Seat of Christ" in Romans 14:10 and II Cor. 5:10 The Greek word *bema* which is translated judgement seat, referred to the place where the Olympic judges awarded crowns to the winners. Our works will be judged and rewards given (I Cor. 3:8-15).

Don't confuse the Judgement Seat Of Christ with the Great White Throne Judgement of Rev. 20:11-15. One is only believers. The other only unbelievers. One is immediately after the rapture. The other is after the thousand year kingdom. One determines rewards for service. The other determines the amount of judgement.

We will not only meet the Lord, but we will also be reunited with our believing friends and loved ones who have died. "Together with them." Will we recognize them? Of course! On the Mount of Transfiguration the three disciples knew and recognized Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:1-5). We will know each other and we will know believers we have never met.

Finally,

5. OUR REASSURANCE FROM THIS TRUTH (v. 18)

"Encourage each other with these words." Christ is coming. There will be a great reunion. We will meet the Lord and be forever with him!

CONCLUSION

There is a quaint inscription on a gravestone in an old British cemetery not far from Windsor Castle. It reads:

Pause, my friend as you walk by;

As you are now, so once was I.

As I am now, so you will be.

Prepare, my friend, to follow me!

I heard about a visitor who read that epitaph and added these lines:

To follow you is not my intent, until I know which way you went!

We Christians have a wonderful assurance and hope, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His promised return. Do you have that hope today? Are you ready for the rapture, or will you be left behind? Have you trusted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? Let's live our lives this coming week and this coming year anticipating his coming. The Apostle John tell us ***"He that has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure."***

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