

CAUGHT UP WHEN CHRIST DESCENDS

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18, 5: 1-11 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

It's 2017! The New Year has come. How will it go for us? Will life bring green pastures by still waters? At times, it will, as Psalm 23 teaches us. Will there also be vales of tears walking through dark valleys as Psalm 23 also teaches? Our Good Shepherd promises both to us all. Life at times will be difficult and at other times, it will be joy unspeakable. Our good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, told us in John 16: 33, "I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world, you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." God's Word has no promise of escaping all tribulation; God didn't prevent Job from losing his 10 children, his health, and his best friends weren't friendly to him as he scraped his boils. Their false theology taught that only good things happen to good, righteous people, and bad things only happen to unrighteous, sinful people.

We who are Christ-followers and disciples, must remember that we are not greater than our Lord. Jesus said in John 15: 20, "Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." **There will be** suffering for us all this coming year because that's part of our prescribed earthly journey. **There will also be** incredible joys along the way also, because "though weeping may endure for a night, joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30: 5) Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, "Suffering ripens our souls." It happened for Job. It will happen for us. God doesn't always cushion our journey. He allows life to jolt us. **We must remember that** when we get a cold, the flu, or get into an accident, or our pipes at church burst in cold weather. F. B. Meyer once said, "If we've been told that we're supposed to be on a bumpy track, every jolt along the way simply confirms the fact that we're still on the right road."

Jesus came to free us from captivity to sin, even when the prison we are in, is in our mind, with dungeon walls and cells, made-out of our own fears. Jesus promises never to leave us or forsake us. In 1 John 4:18, the Word tells us, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has-to do, with punishment and whoever fears, has not been perfected in love." Karle Wilson Baker once said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." We must learn to say with Paul in Romans 8: 31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" As we begin this New Year, it won't hurt us to take a backward look and remember what God has done for us already this past year. It won't hurt us to also take an inward look and reflect on our walk with God in the secret place of His presence where He has led us to face the future with new hope, and where He has exposed our needs. Then we need the courage to take a forward look for today and tomorrow with a new awareness of what God wants us to do and with His vision to chart the days ahead.

On Leap Year, February 29, 1948, communist authorities forced Richard Wurmbrand into the back of a van as he walked to church. This founder of Voice of The Martyrs had good reason to be afraid. In his book, “In God’s Underground,” he recalled his very thoughts that morning. He wrote, “I knew that I faced questioning, ill-treatment, possibly years of imprisonment and death, and I wondered if my faith was strong enough. I remembered then that in the Bible, it is written 366 times—once for every day of the year, -- “Don’t be afraid!” 366 times, not merely 365, to account for Leap Year. And this was February 29th—a coincidence that told me I need not fear.”

God’s church in Thessalonica had been robbed of understanding the coming of the Lord. They were afraid. It’s true in America—and it may be true with you that Christ’s coming is not comforting you. Instead of finding comfort in being caught up soon to be with Jesus, believers have been debating if this catching up will happen at all, and if it does, is it pre-trib, mid-trib, pre-wrath, or post-trib. Jesus Himself said, in Acts 1: 7—“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority.” Three of the positions in the pre-millennial view, are all saying virtually the same thing—that Jesus is coming soon, before His wrath is poured out on the earth.” That’s what God’s Word teaches as I read it. Some true believers believe we will go through the entire tribulation of all seven years—post-trib. Some believe in no 1000-year reign—a-millennial, or post-millennial, that God’s church will bring in the kingdom. I don’t share those views, but they are our brothers and sisters in Jesus. Today I desire to comfort you all, beloved, in knowing that believers soon will be caught up together with Jesus. There are five important encouragements we all need in 2017 to overcome our fears as we think of the rapture—the catching up of God’s church.

JESUS’ PLAN TO CATCH UP HIS BRIDE IS NOT ONLY FOR LIVING SAINTS, BUT FOR THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP IN JESUS. (I.)

Notice I Thessalonians 4: 13-14. We read, “But 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. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.” Notice that Paul says in I Thess. 4: 13, “we don’t want you to be uninformed—confused about the rapture.” The early church in Thessalonica was confused about the rapture and the Day of the Lord. Paul told the church in II Thess. 2: 1-3a, “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to Him, (that’s the rapture) we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the Day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way.” The spirit of Antichrist had infected people in the Thessalonica church, teaching them they were already living in the Day of the Lord. To substantiate their point

and their false teaching, they pulled out a counterfeit letter they said was written by Paul. Somebody lied and deceived them. Paul told them, “You can't be in the Day of the Lord. I told you in the first letter, speaking of our text, you'd be raptured before the Day of the Lord or the day of His wrath. I told you in I Thess. 5 that you are of the day and the Day of the Lord is for people of the night. Paul went on to say, "Let me give you another reason, why you can't be in the Day of the Lord now. The Antichrist hasn't come yet and he won't come until the apostasy—which is the great falling away of the church. Then he will come, that man of sin or lawlessness, and son of destruction. You can't be in the Day of the Lord. You're going to be raptured. The Day of the Lord isn't for you. The Antichrist hasn't come and he is a precursor to the Day of the Lord.”

Another confusion was that the word on the street and in the pews at Thessalonica was that those who died or fell asleep in Jesus like Ray and Margaret Reese or Betty Domson recently—that those dying before the Rapture would miss it. So the church, at least some of them, believed that lie and grieved for those who died before Jesus came to catch away His bride. They grieved as those who had no hope. But notice v. 14. Paul said, “Let me be clear. Be comforted. You have heard misinformation. Believers who die in Christ, all such believers will go up in the rapture—we read, v. 14--“God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.” This was comfort for the fearful and broken-hearted. Don't confuse the expression, “fallen asleep in Jesus” as the same as the false doctrine of “soul sleep.” When we die, it is not our soul that sleeps, but our body does. James 2: 26 is clear that, “the body apart from the spirit is dead.” At death, the soul—how we feel and the spirit—who we are, go to be with the Lord, if we are believers. We become absent from the body, present, that's soul and spirit with the Lord-II Cor. 5: 8. Secondly,

JESUS' PLAN TO CATCH UP HIS BRIDE CAME TO PAUL IN A WORD FROM THE LORD THAT THOSE ALIVE WHEN JESUS DESCENDS WILL NOT PRECEDE THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP IN JESUS.

(II.) Notice verse 15. “For 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.” At the death of our believing loved ones, it's not true that we lost a loved one. No, you can't lose someone when you know where they are. Should I encourage you that we, at least, some of us, may be alive when Jesus comes to catch away His bride? I am encouraging you. God wants every generation to be ready for His return. Notice in v. 15 that Paul used the expression, “we who are alive.” He himself lived in expectancy of Christ's return for His bride. This expression in v. 15, “a word from the Lord,” what does it mean? ‘Is there any such thing as “a word from the Lord”?’ The Bible is our Word from the Lord. What God has said in His Word will strengthen and guide us through the difficulties and opportunities we face. God sometimes does give a direct word to His children such

as telling Abraham, “whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you.” (Genesis 21: 12) Paul spoke here in our text about “a word from the Lord” about the confusion going on in Thessalonica. I Samuel 3 describes a time when “the word of the LORD was rare.” (v.1). When God spoke to young Samuel, the boy mistakenly thought it was the aging priest Eli calling him. Eli finally recognized God was speaking to the boy, Samuel, so he told the boy to respond to God’s voice by saying, “Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears” (v.9). Samuel listened. He became known as a man who lived faithfully and fearlessly, “for the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by “the word of the LORD” (v.21).

Whenever we open the Bible, listen to a sermon, or pause to pray, it’s a wonderful practice to say, “Lord Jesus, speak to me by Your Holy Spirit. I’m ready to listen and I’m eager to obey.” But a caution is in order here! Be assured there are thousands of believers who have misled others by saying something they want to happen is “a word from the Lord.” Never say it is “a word from the Lord” unless you are certain it is Him by His Holy Spirit who has spoken to you. Know of a surety that any word from the Lord we receive, such as “His okay to take a job” or “His direction of whom to marry,” is never from Him if it contradicts His holy Word. No “word from the Lord” we receive will become part of the eternal Word of God as I Thess. 4: 15 or have that same authority. Denying a word from the Lord is real is also dangerous. Joseph denied the word from the Lord his betrothed—Mary had received, and he almost divorced her because he failed to believe she had heard from the Lord and His angel before her conception. To say we have a word from the Lord when we don’t is dangerous, and to say another doesn’t have a word from the Lord can also be dangerous. Remember I John 4: 1—“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Any word or message we preach must agree with God’s holy word and confess Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, incarnate. I trust we will neither be afraid for God to speak to us by His Spirit, nor ever willing to try to get our own way by claiming our desire is a word from the Lord. God forbid. Thirdly,

JESUS’ PLAN TO CATCH UP HIS BRIDE INVOLVES THREE MIGHTY HAPPENINGS MAKING UP THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH. (III.) See v. 16a. “For 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...” In Matthew 24: 4, Jesus prophesied that many will come in the last days in His name and say, “I am the Christ.” They will lead many astray. Don’t be deceived. When Jesus comes, there will be three evocative happenings. Evoke means to call up or call forth. (1) The first happening will be **a shout or a cry of command**—and that shout may be what we read in Revelation 4: 1, “And the first voice, which I heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here!” (2) **The voice of an**

archangel—this may well be Michael mentioned in Jude 9, but be sure, the angelic hosts will share in the victory shout when Jesus comes to take us Home to heaven.

(3) **The sound of the trumpet, or the trump of God**—two shouts and one trumpet, and it is yet to happen. Be ready! Fourthly,

JESUS' PLAN TO CATCH UP HIS BRIDE IS A TWO STEP RAPTURE, FIRST, THE DEAD IN CHRIST, THEN THOSE ALIVE, REMAINING.

(IV.) Notice v. 16b-17a. “And the dead in Christ will rise first.” Then, we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...” God has an order for everything He does. Jesus will return in the air. Notice it. That’s when we will fly away as we sing. Suddenly, millions of believers will vanish. One of our men asked me this week, “What will our employers do when we vanish?” They will be calling the employment office. That will be our first time to see the face of our Bridegroom. Beloved, there are two resurrections coming. The famed Greek scholar, Dr. Kenneth Wuest, gives 5 major meanings of “caught up together,” – **harpadzo**. Each of these five meanings adds special understanding to the doctrine of the Lord’s return to meet us in the air. (1) **To catch away speedily**. This rapture, from the Latin word for harpadzo—rapio or rapturo. After Philip led the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord, he was harpadzo—caught away speedily. Paul said in I Cor. 15: 51, that it will happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump.” (2) **To seize by force**. After Jesus’ miracles, John 6: 15, they wanted to harpadzo Him, to take Him by force to make Him king. When Jesus comes, some of us may be so entrapped as saints to the world, that as the angels nearly dragged Lot and his family from Sodom, we will scarcely be saved-I Pet 4: 18, or as Paul says, in I Cor. 3: 15-saved as through fire. (3) **To claim for one’s own self**. This is seeing the rapture from Jesus’ point of view as He claims us for His Bride. (4) **To move to a new place**. This word was used of Paul being caught up, raptured to the third heaven in II Cor. 12: 2 even as the rapture will be the fulfillment of John 14: 1-3—Jesus moving us to the place He has gone to prepare for us. (5) **To rescue from danger**. The word harpadzo was so used of Paul being rescued from being torn to pieces in Jerusalem. This use of the word goes along with I Thess. 5: 9-10 that Pastor Larry read, “for God has not destined us for orge—wrath, speaking of last part of the Great Tribulation, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with Him.”

At this rapture in the air, Jesus will call up only those who are saved by grace through faith in Him--the 1st resurrection. At the end of time, after the millennium, there will be a 2nd resurrection or a resurrection of judgment. Don’t confuse the Judgment Seat of Christ with the Great White Throne Judgment. Following being caught up in the forever reunion of all believers, those fallen asleep in Jesus and those living believers, the Judgment Seat of Christ will be a judgment of works for

believers, as Christ will determine our rewards for service—Romans 14: 10 and I Cor. 3: 13. Rev. 20: 6 tells us, “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection. Over such the second death/second resurrection has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with Him for a thousand years.” Only unbelievers will be judged at the Great White Throne Judgment—and there, it will be determined the amount of judgment which will differ—but these are the goats referred to in Matthew 25: 41. Fifthly, and lastly,

JESUS’ PLAN TO CATCH UP HIS BRIDE IS SO WE WILL ALWAYS BE WITH HIM FOREVER, AND THIS SHOULD ENCOURAGE US ALL. (V.)

Notice v. 17b-18. “Caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Notice in I Thessalonians 5: 11. Paul repeats himself saying, “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you are doing.” We see the word meet the Lord and what a meeting it will be! The Greek word for meet is **apantesis**. It is a special word used only 4 times in the New Testament and it means the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary, such as a priest or king or magistrate. We as Christ’s Bride are dignitaries. Peter says in I Peter 2: 9-“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people of God’s own possession. And to think—that meeting in the air will be with the King of all kings, and the Lord of all lords. What a meeting in the air! What a glorious meeting it will be for we then will have glorified bodies like Jesus’ glorified resurrected body. It will be an everlasting meeting, for we read, “And so will we always be with the Lord. It will be a meeting also with a rewarding and reckoning time as the Bema Seat, or Judgment Seat of Christ will have Jesus judge our works in His name and rewards will be given, I Cor. 3: 8-15. It will be a grand reunion meeting as death has been the great separator, but the Lord in the air will be the great Reconciler and the Eternal Reunion Organizer. Do you think Jesus may come today? You say, no, not today. Then I tell us church, you’d better be ready, for Jesus said He is coming at an hour we do not expect—Luke 12: 40. I close with the old song, by Mae Taylor Roberts in 1925. “A Meeting In The Air.” How I pray God will give us such a looking forward to the coming of the Lord!!! “You have heard of little Moses in the bulrush You have heard of fearless David and his sling You have heard the story told of dreaming Joseph And of Jonah and the whale you often sing There are many, many others through the Bible I should like to meet them all, I do declare By and by the Lord will surely let us meet them At that meeting in the air Many things will there be missing in that meeting For the mourner’s bench will have no place at all There will never be a sermon preached to sinners For the sinners have refused to heed the call There will be no mourning over wayward loved ones There will be no lonely nights of pleading prayer All our burdens and our anguish will be lifted At that meeting in the air. CHORUS: There is going to be a meeting in the air In the sweet, sweet bye and bye I am going to meet you, meet you there In that home beyond the sky Such singing you will hear never heard by mortal ear 'Twill be glorious, I do declare And God’s own Son will be the leading One At that meeting in the air.” There the doubters will be missing all together, All the skeptics will be absent on that day. There will be no grumblers present to disturb us, and the Achans will be busy far away. There the saints will have his seal upon their foreheads, dressed in raiment none but ransomed ones can wear, All who have the wedding garments will be present at that meeting in the air.