

Message #11

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

A few days ago, we had a wonderful thunder storm. The thunder roared and lightning flashed all through the night. Our little dog was scared and ended up in bed with us. But as I kept hearing the thunder and seeing the lightning, it caused me to think about the fact that when you track that theme through Scripture, both of those things speak of the power of God and the judgment of God. During the Tribulation, there will be a lot of thunder and lightning displays (Rev. 6:1; 10:3; **16:18**). As I lay in bed thinking about this I started to pray, “Lord, rapture us right now.” “Take us up to meet you in the air.” Well unfortunately it didn’t happen that night, but there will come a time when it will happen and the reason I know that is because of this passage right here.

As we have been going through this epistle to the Thessalonians, it is very clear that this church loved the Word of God. That is the point that stood out to Paul about the church. As a result, he taught this church about many subjects and one of the main subjects he taught this church about was the subject of Biblical Prophecy.

In fact, the most informative passage pertaining to the prophetic prediction that Jesus Christ will rapture the church is this passage right here. What I think is so ironic about this passage is that it begins in **verse 13** with the statement, “we do not want you to be uninformed.” That word “uninformed” (αγνοεω) means Paul and his team wanted the people of this church to carefully know and understand truth pertaining to the Rapture of the Church (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 6). He did not want them at an ignorant level, but a knowledgeable level.

However, if ever there has been a teaching of the church about which people have not carefully understood or are confused about, it is the concept of the Rapture of the Church. People are totally and completely uninformed about this subject, which is exactly what Paul wrote this text to prevent.

Now the thing that precipitated this discussion is seen in **verse 13**. Paul did not want “brethren” ignorant about the fact that they will see their loved ones who died again. You will notice that the word “asleep” shows up 3 times (**v. 13, 14, 15**). This concept of “fallen asleep” is one that is a metaphorical picture of physical death. For the believer in Jesus Christ, one who dies is pictured for the loved ones as having “fallen asleep,” because there will come a point in time when there will be a reunion with that believer.

Now the main point of the text is this:

BELIEVERS IN THE CHURCH ARE TO BE COMFORTED IN THE FACE OF THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE BY KNOWLEDGE THAT RELATES TO THE FUTURE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH AND KNOWLEDGE OF A FUTURE REUNION WITH OUR LOVED ONE WHO DIED.

Now let’s begin by observing from **verse 13** that when we lose a loved one, we do “grieve.”

That word “grieve” (λυπεω) is an emotional word. It means that when we lose a loved one, there is real emotional distress, pain, sorrow and grief (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 273). However, if the loved one who dies was a believer “in Jesus” (4:14) or “in Christ” (4:16), we have the knowledge and the **hope** that we will see the loved one again.

If a person dies who is not a believer in Jesus Christ, there is grieving and then there is the additional weight of having “no hope.” But if the person is a believer, we continually have hope and knowledge that we will see that believer again.

Now as we look down through these verses you will notice that there are three verses that all begin with the conjunction “for” (γαρ) (v. 14, 15, 16). All of these verses are designed to give us hope and comfort in the face of losing a loved one.

We have great hope and comfort for three reasons:

REASON #1 – The factual reality of our belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees that Jesus will bring with Him believers who have died. **4:14**

This is very important. This is the first point Paul states right up front. Our hope concerning facing any death is all contingent upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The reason we die is because we have sinned and the hope that we have when we die, that we will go to be with the Lord, is not contingent upon how we lived our lives, it is contingent upon “in whom we believe.” Notice exactly what Paul said, “if we believe.” Our expectation of going to heaven is not based on our works; it is based on Christ’s work in our behalf and what we believe about it.

The reason why Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again was to secure the fact that we could go to heaven to be with Him when we die. The way we go to heaven is not by our works, but by our faith in Christ.

In fact, Paul’s argument here is that believers who have died in Christ are now with God in heaven and they are going to be brought back with Christ when He returns to rapture us.

REASON #2 – The factual reality of the revealed Word of the Lord concerning His coming gives us hope and comfort when a loved one dies. **4:15**

Now the data pertaining to the matter of having hope in the face of death or the matter of believing in the Rapture of the Church is, “by the word of the Lord.” Our view of what happens to a loved one who dies or our view of the Rapture of the Church is not invented by some cult; it is a direct revelation of Jesus Christ, which He has revealed to His church. All false religions have their views of life after death, we have the truth from Jesus Christ who died and arose from the dead.

Now the first thing I want you to see is that Paul includes himself in this section by saying, “we.” Paul says, “we who are alive.” This point reveals two facts about Paul:

(Fact #1) - Paul did not expect to die but expected to be part of the we group who would be raptured.

(Fact #2) - Paul did not expect to go into the Tribulation and did not expect to see the Antichrist. (I Thess. 5:9-11; II Thess. 2:7-8)

So Paul’s belief about the future was twofold.

A. He believed in the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

B. He believed in the pre-tribulation Rapture of the Church, because he was not looking for the signs of the Tribulation.

Now what he specifically says in **verse 15** is that we who are alive do not precede those who are asleep as being with the Lord. In other words, the comforting thought here is that we are living here and they are living presently with the Lord.

The reason why God is able to bring our loved ones with Him when He returns is because they are with Him now.

Dr. Warren Wiersbe told a story that one time he said to a friend, whose wife had died, “I hear you lost your wife, I am very sorry.” His friend said, “No, I didn’t lose her. You can’t lose something when you know where it is and I know exactly where she is.”

REASON #3 – The specific details of the Rapture of the Church gives us hope and comfort when we lose a loved one. **4:16-17**

There are ten specific chronological details about Christ’s coming for us that are designed to comfort us:

Detail #1 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church. **4:16a**

Now the Lord is identified in this context by four different names: He is identified as **Jesus**, which means He is the Savior (**4:14**); He is identified as **God**, which means He is Deity (**4:14**); He is identified as being the **Lord**, which means He is the sovereign ruler and master over everything (**4:16**); and He is identified as being **Christ**, which means He is the Jewish Messiah (**4:16**).

Those titles paint a very clear theological picture of who Jesus Christ actually is. He is Jesus the Savior. He is God the Sovereign. He is Lord the Divine Ruler. He is Christ the Jewish Messiah. So what Paul reveals here is that the Divine Person, the God Savior Jesus Christ, is personally going to come back to get the Church.

Detail #2 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church in a descent from the sphere of heaven. **4:16b**

The preposition “from” means His departure point of descent is heaven. Now the statement is not that He might descend; it is that He will descend. The future indicative means this is a definite fact, He is going to descend from heaven to get His Church.

Detail #3 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church by means of a shout or command. **4:16c**

We are not specifically told exactly what the shout or command will be. When Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, His command was “come forth” (John 11:43). Probably the actual words of the command will be “Come up here” (Rev. 4:1).

Detail #4 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church with the voice of an archangel. **4:16d**

The angel is not named. There are two good possibilities as to which angel. It is possible it is Gabriel who was certainly involved in announcing things about Jesus Christ (Luke 1:19, 26). Others believe it will be the archangel Michael (Dan. 12:1; Jude 9).

We do know that angels are actively involved with the churches (Rev. 2-3), which means they will be actively involved in the conclusion of the Church Age which is the Rapture. Furthermore, they also will be actively involved in the entire prophetic things that will follow the Rapture of the Church (i.e. Rev. 7:1; 8:2).

Detail #5 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church by means of a trumpet of God. **4:16e**

Now the noun “trumpet” is singular, not plural. This is not a reference to the “seven trumpets” that occur during the Tribulation (Rev. 8:2). This is a trumpet that blasts, announcing the end of the Church Age. In fact, Paul calls this in I Corinthians 15:52, the “last trumpet,” meaning this is the last event of the Church Age.

Now the trumpet sound was a blast on a horn that signaled several things to people:

- 1) It signaled the arrival of some special person of the Roman world.
- 2) It signaled some special military movement or declaration of war (Joshua 6).
- 3) It signaled some special festival or worship assembly alarm (Numbers 10).

The Rapture will signal all three. The Rapture of the Church will signal the arrival of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It will be a major heavenly military movement involving a major heavenly army and it will signal something very unique and worshipful in the program of God.

This is a very important moment in the program of God, which signals the end of the Church Age, and it will be announced by the trumpet blast.

Detail #6 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church and there will be a resurrection of all those who died in Christ. **4:16f**

This is a very special moment in the program of God and a very “selective” resurrection. This is the moment when all saved believers who have died are raised and receive their new final glorified bodies. This resurrection is very unique to the Church Age and has nothing to do with the resurrection of all the unbelievers (Rev. 20:5) or the resurrection of O.T. Israel (Dan. 12:2).

Believers who die are with the Lord now and they are in a recognizable state; however, this is the moment they get their new and eternal glorified body. Carefully observe that the ones who are resurrected here are called “dead in Christ.” So this specific resurrection includes all believers who have died from Acts chapter 2 until the moment of the Rapture. There will literally be a resurrection of millions of believers.

Detail #7 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church and there will be a catching up into the air of all those who are alive in Christ. **4:17a**

The actual word “rapture” comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word used right here. The Greek word translated “catch up” (αρπαγησόμεθα) is translated into Latin by the word “rapio” or “rapturo,” which is the word from which we derive our word rapture.

The parsing of the verb “catch up” is significant. It is a definite fact (**Indicative Mood**) and at a future moment which could be the next future minute, hour, day, month or year (**Future Tense**) believers will be the recipient of the action of the rapture (**Passive Voice**).

Now this word “rapture” is used in the N.T. in some very eye-opening ways:

- 1) Matthew 11:12–“take it by force”
- 2) Matthew 12:29–“carry off”
- 3) Matthew 13:19–“snatch away”
- 4) John 6:15–“take Him by force”
- 5) John 10:12, 28, 29–“snatch away”
- 6) Acts 8:39–“snatched Philip away”
- 7) Acts 23:10–“take him away by force”
- 8) II Corinthians–12:2, 4–“caught up”
- 9) I Thessalonians 4:17–“caught up”
- 10) Jude 23–“snatch them out”
- 11) Revelation 12:5–“caught up”

So at the moment of the Rapture, as a believer you will have no say in this—you will be taken by force up into the sky. You will be snatched out of this world in a moment and twinkling of an eye.

Detail #8 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church and there will be a reunion with all those who have died in Christ. **4:17b**

In Luke 7, Jesus raised up a widow's son who had died and the text says that He "gave him back to his mother" (Luke 7:15). It is a very tender moment. We may assume this will be a similar type of moment when we will be reunited with family members who have died in Christ.

One of the first things that will happen will be a reunion with your loved ones who have died in Christ. What a wonderful and glorious moment this will be.

Detail #9 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church and we will meet Jesus Christ. **4:17c**

I have no idea who you think is the most important person you have ever met on this earth, but whoever it was won't compare to meeting Jesus Christ.

Notice what this text says: this will be the moment when we "meet" the Lord. It does not say this is the moment we come back with the Lord. This meeting apparently occurs in our present atmosphere in the air and then according to John 14:1-3, we go from the first heaven back with the Lord into the third heaven.

Jesus is going to escort us back to His father's house, which is the third heaven location. One of the things that Jesus prayed when He was here on earth was that we might get to see Him in all of His heavenly glory (John 17:24).

This will be the moment when we are introduced to Jesus Christ and then He takes us back to the third heaven and we get the privilege of seeing Him in all of His glory. This is the moment when His great prayer is answered.

Detail #10 - The Lord, Himself, will return to rapture His Church and we will be with Him forever. **4:17d**

We will be with the Lord forever.

Warren Wiersbe told a witnessing tactic of the old Presbyterian preacher Robert McCheyne. He used to ask people, "Do you think Jesus Christ will return today?" Most of them would reply, "No, not today." Then Mr. McCheyne would say, "Then my friend you had better be ready; for He is coming back at such an hour as you do not expect" (Lk. 12:40) (*Be Ready*, p. 99).

This passage presents two ways you may potentially meet the Lord: 1) Death; 2) Rapture. Are you ready to meet Jesus Christ today? If you were to die, where would your soul go? If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you may be comforted in knowing that you are all eternally ready when we face death or the Rapture.