

One of the Great Rapture Passages in the New Testament 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 - *“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.*

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. 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.”

Background Notes

When the apostle Paul first visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, he didn't have much time to teach the new converts. At most, Paul was in Thessalonica for only three months. During that time he “reasoned with the Jews” in the synagogue for three Sabbaths (Acts 17). So it's actually amazing how much he was able to teach the new believers in the short time he was with them. Clearly, many details of doctrine were not covered at that time.

After Paul left Thessalonica, the believers had questions about eschatology - the doctrine of future things. One specific question was: What happens to believers who die before the Lord returns? Will they miss out on any of the blessings of the kingdom? Probably some of the Thessalonian believers had died since Paul's visit, and thus these questions were raised. Thus this was one reason why Paul wrote this first letter to the believers in Thessalonica. In this letter he commended them for standing firm under persecution, and he answered the questions that had arisen about the Lord's return.

One of the great “Rapture” passages of the New Testament is found in the second half of 1 Thessalonians 4. It answers the questions of what happens to believers who die before the Lord's return, and what happens to believers who are living when the Lord returns.

Verses 13-14: *“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”*

The word “sleep” here is obviously used in a figurative sense for “death.” However, the word “sleep” is used in the New Testament only for the death of a believer – it is never used when speaking of the death of an unbeliever. And “sleep” is

only used in reference to the believer's **body**. It is **not** used for the believer's soul or spirit. The Bible does not teach "soul-sleep" - the idea that the believer's soul enters a state of unconsciousness at the time of death. 2 Corinthians 5:8 says that when believers die, they are *"absent from the body and present with the Lord"*. Scripture does not teach that there is some kind of "holding tank" - or "purgatory" - or any kind of spiritual or "soul sleep."

"God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus" (v14). What a comforting truth! When believers die, we *"sleep in Jesus"* - or *"through Jesus, we sleep."* In fact, these words can actually be translated *"put to sleep by Jesus."* So when a believer dies, you can think of it as being gently put to sleep by Jesus! What a blessed thought! Psalm 116:15 says, *"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."*

What about the body that goes into the grave? And what about the time of the resurrection of the bodies of believers? The apostle Paul answered those questions in the doctrine of the Rapture.

Doctrinal Points

1. The "Rapture of the Church" is a controversial doctrine.

Did you know that evangelical Christians are not in agreement about the Rapture of the Church – the sudden "catching up" from this world of those who believe in Jesus? All Christians believe that Jesus Christ is going to return to this earth, but Christians are not in agreement about the details of His return.

Those who don't believe in a special "Rapture" of the Church say the word "rapture" is not even found in the Bible - but that's not quite true. The word *"rapture"* comes from the Latin word that's used to translate the verb *"caught up"* in verse 17. So in that sense, the word "rapture" **is** indeed in the Bible. It's the same Latin root word from which we get the word *"raptor"* – the type of bird that swoops down and *"catches up"* its prey.

The truth of the Rapture was introduced in Scripture for the first time in this letter. 1 Thessalonians may be the earliest book of the New Testament. It was written in about AD 51, before 1 Corinthians (which includes another great Rapture passage) and before the Gospels. The Rapture of the Church was not predicted in the Old Testament, except in "type" (picture) form. For example, I believe Enoch was a "type" of the Rapture of the Church. Did you know that Enoch was "caught up" out of this world right before God's great judgment of the Genesis Flood? But the Rapture of the Church was not in explicitly detailed in the Old Testament.

Neither was the Rapture of the Church part of our Lord's "Olivet Discourse," in which He spoke about future events (Matthew 24-25, or Mark 13, or Luke 21). In the Olivet Discourse He taught about the coming Tribulation period and the return of the Lord to set up His Kingdom - not about the catching up of believers to meet the Lord in the air. *"One shall be taken and one shall be left"* in Matthew 24 is not a "Rapture verse"! However, we do believe that the Lord was referring to the Rapture in John 14 when He said, *"I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go, I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."* But the details of the doctrine of the Rapture were given to the apostle Paul to teach - under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

When Paul wrote, *“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord,”* (v15), he was indicating that the **details of the doctrine of the Rapture were given to him by revelation from the Lord Himself**. These details were not known before this time.

Christians do not all agree on how to put the details together - in fact, there is substantial disagreement. That’s why we hear all those terms like “pre-millennial,” “amillennial,” “post-millennial,” “pre-tribulational,” “mid-tribulational,” “post-tribulational,” “partial rapture,” etc. So - the Rapture of the Church is a controversial doctrine.

2. The Rapture of the Church is a comprehensive doctrine.

The doctrine of the Rapture is a comprehensive doctrine. It covers the details completely. There are no loose ends. The doctrine of the Rapture enables us to draw our eschatological charts in detail and (we believe) correctly.

Verse 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.”* It’s hard to say whether we’ll hear all three sounds distinctly – the shout of the Lord, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God – but I think we’ll hear something! Maybe you’ve heard about the practical joke that was played on an Emmaus Bible College student years ago. He fell asleep in class. The instructor had the other students tiptoe out, and then one of the students blew a trumpet in the hallway. You can imagine the trauma of the sleeping student as he suddenly awoke!

At the Rapture, believers who have died in Christ will rise first, with their resurrection bodies. Then the living Christians will be changed, and caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air!

We believe the Rapture of the Church is the next event on God’s “eschatological chart.” The Lord could come at any time - even today! Notice that the apostle Paul expected the possibility that the Rapture would occur in his lifetime. *“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”* (v17). Notice what Paul did **not** say. He didn’t say **those** who are alive and remain - he said **we** who are alive and remain” will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Obviously the apostle Paul believed that the Rapture could occur at any time – even during his lifetime and the lifetime of those with whom he was writing - not necessarily immediately, but certainly imminently.

We believe the Bible teaches that the Rapture is “imminent” - it could happen at any time. There are **no** biblical prophecies that must be fulfilled before the Rapture can take place. Therefore the future Tribulation period must take place after the Rapture (and we’ll study that in chapter 5). That’s why we believe the Rapture of the Church is **pre-Tribulational**. The Rapture of the Church is a comprehensive doctrine.

3. The Rapture of the Church is a comforting doctrine.

Verses 17-18: *“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. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”*

Did you ever wonder what you’ll be doing at the time of the Rapture? I hope I’ll be doing something worthwhile! It would be great to be reading the Bible or witnessing, when the Lord comes back for His Church.

In any event, the Rapture of the Church is a comforting doctrine. Since the bodies of those who sleep in Christ will be raised and changed, and the living will be caught up bodily, the doctrine of the Rapture assures us that in Heaven we won’t be floating around like spiritual jellyfish! We’ll be provided with “resurrection bodies” - like our Lord’s resurrected body! Our resurrection bodies will not be subject to aging - **or to sin!** What a wonderful truth!

And just think - we will meet our loved ones who have died in Christ! But best of all - **we’ll be with the Lord forever!** The Rapture of the Church is a comforting doctrine!

Practical Application

Remember, believers do not sorrow as others sorrow.

Verse 13: *“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”* When a believer dies, we sorrow. We experience grief at the absence of a loved one. It’s not wrong to grieve when a believer dies. The Lord wept when Lazarus died, even though He was going to raise him up.

But we do not grieve in the same way as unbelievers grieve. Unbelievers have **no hope!** Outside of Christ there is no hope - there’s only loss and sorrow. We know that believers who die are with the Lord, and we know that we will all be together again someday. The bodies of believers are temporarily asleep, but their bodies will be raised and changed into resurrection bodies at the time of the Rapture. We have a wonderful hope!

Do you know the Lord? Do you have the hope of eternal life? I can’t think of anything more sorrowful than growing older and facing death without the Lord. Without hope.

But for the believer - death is just a stepping-stone into eternal joy and happiness! So remember - believers don’t sorrow as unbelievers sorrow!