

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>Revelation</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>26</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Revelation 6:14-17; 1 Thess. 4:13-18</b>		
<b>Date:</b>	<b>March 28, 2021 (a.m.)</b>		

### THE DAY OF THE LORD (Part 2)

We have already seen the emphasis in this epistle on the return of Jesus Christ. Paul has related the coming of Christ to our *salvation* (1:9-10), *service* (2:19-20), and *stability* (3:11-13). In this particular passage and the one immediately following it, Paul is relating Christ's return as a comfort for *sorrow* (4:13-5:11). The cause for this sorrow is not explicitly stated, but a clear inference can be easily drawn from the passage itself. Some of these believers had died, and those who had lost loved ones were not only sorrowing because of their deaths, but were also grieving because they feared that their departed loved ones would not participate with them in being united with the Lord at His return. Hiebert's analysis is, in my opinion, correct: "Verse 15 . . . indicates that they feared that those who failed to live until the coming of Christ would be at an irreparable disadvantage at His return.<sup>1</sup> They thought that there was a peculiar advantage attached to survival until the end time (cf. Dan. 12:12). They fancied that those who had departed would miss the blissful reunion, or at least come behind those who lived until the *parousia* (i.e., the return of Christ). Thus their grief was not just a natural sorrow for their own loss, but grief for the supposed loss of their loved ones sustained by their deaths before the return of the Lord."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Paul is writing this paragraph in order to comfort his readers concerning the fate of their fellow believers who have died. As we shall see, their comfort lies in the fact that deceased believers will be resurrected at the Lord's coming so that they can join with the living believers in being caught up to be with the Lord forever. Unfortunately, the intent of this passage has been marred by underlying theological debate concerning the *time* of Christ's return in relationship to a future, seven year period of tribulation predicted in Daniel 9:24-27. Specifically, the debate is this: will the events in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (i.e., the "rapture" 4:17) come *before* the tribulation (Pretribulationism), or *after* the tribulation (Posttribulationism)? It is our purpose in this study to examine this passage *apart from* this debate, reserving an analysis of the issue in question until after an examination of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.

- I. **THE CHARACTER OF THE INSTRUCTION.** Paul does not want his readers to lack knowledge and thus be grieved concerning Christians who have died (4:13). The character, or nature of Paul's instruction specifically concerns what happens to *believers who have died before the Lord returns*. The expression for these deceased believers, "those who are asleep," is a euphemism used throughout the New Testament depicting the nature of death for the believer. It indicates the restful effect of death and points to its temporary nature. It is the body that is asleep (not the soul, cf. 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23) and therefore just as sleep has its awakening, so also the body of the believer will have its awakening. Paul's desire is to impart certain information *about those who have died* so that those who are living will "not sorrow, even as the rest who have no hope," i.e., nonbelievers. This instruction is designed *not* to prohibit our natural sorrow that comes from *our sense of* (temporary) *loss* at the death of a loved one; rather, it is designed to prohibit that sorrow

which mourns the *supposed loss of the loved ones* because of their death. This kind of sorrow is not for Christians. In contrast to the utter hopelessness of the nonbeliever, we as believers have a unique hope in the face of death. Our hope is that those believers who have died have simply fallen asleep in Christ, and they will awaken at the resurrection of their bodies at the return of Christ, forever to be with Christ and other believers.

II. **THE CONTENT OF THE INSTRUCTION.** Christians who have died will be resurrected first at Christ's coming and will join with living believers in being caught up to be with the Lord forever (4:14-17). The assurance that the dead in Christ will have a share in participating in the events at Christ's return is grounded in the historical facts of the death and resurrection of Christ. *The future of the believing dead is just as certain as the certainty of the fact that Christ died and rose again.* There is no reason to sorrow for departed loved ones because when God acts to bring back the risen Christ at His return, they will return with Him. Interestingly, since Paul has spoken of the resurrection of Christ, we might have expected him to say that God will also "raise up" the deceased believers. Instead, he assures us of their association with Christ at His return. This clearly indicates that these readers' cause for sorrow was not whether those who had died would rise, but whether they would have participation in the events of Christ's return. The specific instruction that follows comes "by the Word of the Lord." Although this could be a reference to some unrecorded teaching of Jesus while here on the earth (cf. Acts 20:35), it is more probable that this statement refers to revelation from the Lord that was directly given to Paul in order to answer this particular question (cf. Acts 9:5-6; 22:17-21; Gal. 1:12; 2:2; 1 Cor. 11:23). The revelation is this: the living will not have any "advantage" over the dead at the return of Christ. The transformation of the living believers at that time will not occur before the resurrection of the dead believers (v. 15). Therefore, any further cause of sorrow for departed loved ones is unjustified. Those who have died will share in the same destiny as those who are still alive at the Lord's return. The specific details of the relationship between the living and the dead saints at Christ's return are now given (v. 16, 17). When the Lord's descent from heaven is heralded by God by means of "a shout," "the voice of the archangel," and "the trump of God," the dead in Christ will be resurrected *first*. In other words, the raising of the bodies of those who are descending with the Lord in a disembodied state will take place *before* the living saints are "caught up in the clouds." This denotes the fact that these two groups will unitedly, as one redeemed group, arise to meet the Lord. The living saints will at this time be reunited to their deceased loved ones, and together they shall always be with the Lord. Wherever the Lord is, His glorified saints will be in permanent union with Him. The verb translated "caught up" in verse 17, as we have seen, is of particular interest for our study. The Latin verb for this, as we have previously noted, is *rapturo*, from which we derive our English word "rapture." This verb can also be rendered "to snatch up, sweep up, to seize, to carry off by force." This text therefore is the clearest and the most important verse concerning the rapture of the Church at the return of Christ. Either side of the theological debate does not deny the fact that there is a rapture. The debate is over the precise time of this rapture: is it pretribulational or post-tribulational? But putting this issue aside for a time, we cannot miss the point of this instruction. This is stated in verse 18.

III. **THE APOSTLE'S ENCOURAGEMENT (5:11).** The knowledge of this "Blessed Hope" for all Christians should enable them to comfort one another greatly (4:18). The value that this revelation is designed to have for us as believers today is one of comfort. In light of this instruction concerning the hope of departed loved ones in Christ, we *together* have reciprocal responsibility of comforting "one another." Paul himself does not seek to comfort his readers; rather he exhorts them to actively seek to comfort one another. But

the comfort lies in the very words that he has given to them. Thus our responsibility is to use the Word of God in the ministry of comfort one to another. What is the basis for this comfort? It is grounded in the fact that our departed loved ones will one day share in all the glories of Christ's return along with those of us who are alive at His return. Together we shall be forever in *union* with our Lord and with one another.

**CONCLUSION:** In 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52, the same apostle who penned the Thessalonian epistles informs us that the translation rapture of both the dead in Christ and those living at that time will take place "at the last trumpet." I concur with Gundry, who equates this trumpet with the "great trumpet" in Matthew 24:31.<sup>3</sup> Dispensationalists, in a desperate attempt to save face, are forced to resort to semantic gymnastics in attempting to get around the obvious – that 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52 refer to the *same* event.<sup>4</sup> The late George Ladd, an accomplished NT scholar, summed it up in these words, "This glorious event, the Rapture of the Church, is a mystery (1 Cor. 15:51). A mystery is a divine truth, purposed by God ages ago, but revealed to men only in due time (Rom. 16:25-26). The *mystery of the Rapture is not the time of the Rapture*, as pretribulationists assume; it is the *fact of the Rapture*. God has never before revealed to men what would be the particular lot of the living saints at the end of the age. The doctrine of resurrection had long been taught (cf. Dan 12:2), but the fact that the living are to put on their resurrection bodies at the moment of Christ's return without passing through death and join the resurrected dead in the presence of Christ is revealed for the first time through the Apostle Paul. There is an intimation of it, we believe, in Matthew 24:31, when Jesus spoke of the angels gathering the elect from the four corners of the earth; but this prophecy lacks the details which give to the Rapture its specific character. *How* the elect are to be gathered together is not indicated by our Lord. The mystery of the Rapture, therefore, is not the truth that the Rapture is to occur before the Great Tribulation. It is the *fact* that the living dead will be bodily transformed at Jesus' Parousia and as a result of the transformation will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and so be ever with the Lord. There is no affirmation in the Scripture that the Rapture will take place before the Tribulation begins. Such a teaching is an inference, not the assertion of the Word of God."<sup>5</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> We pointed out earlier that *koimeterion* (sleeping place) is the source for our word “cemetery.” F. F. Bruce makes this helpful observation: “While Paul prefers to use *koimāsthai* for the death of believers, neither he nor any other NT writer uses it for the death of Christ himself. In 1 Cor. 15:20, Christ, being raised from the dead, is *the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep* (*tōn kekoimāmenōn*), but he is nowhere said to have *fallen asleep* in this sense himself. This is not because the figure would have been thought inappropriate for the death by crucifixion; it was no more inappropriate for death by crucifixion than death by stoning, yet it is used of Stephan (Acts 7:60, *ekoimēthe*) Chrysostom (Hom. 7, ad loc.) says that, whereas departed believers are called *those who are asleep*, it is said of Christ that *he died*, because the mention of resurrection immediately follows. But the uses of the straightforward verb *apothnaskein* (to die) of Christ is probably intended to stress the reality of his death, as something not to be alleviated by any euphemism. The reality of his death points to the divine miracle accomplished in his resurrection. His people’s resurrection is a corollary of his, and therefore their death can be described as *falling asleep* in the new Christian sense of that figure, but there was no precedent for *his* resurrection. *If we believe that Jesus died and rose again*, the fullness of Christian hope follows. The continuing life of his people depends on, and is indeed an extension of, his own risen life (cf. Rom. 8:11; also John 14:19, *because I live, you will live also*.)” *Word Biblical Commentary: 1&2 Thessalonians* (Word, 1982), p. 97. Murray Harris points out: “Is it not true that after someone falls asleep, they are asleep? Paul spoke of certain Christians who had *fallen asleep* (1 Thess. 4:14-15; 1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20). Are they then *asleep* – in suspended animation until they are awakened at the resurrection? The relevant verb, *koimaomai*, is more than a polite expression for death (*pass away*) borrowed from conventional usage, since it is applied solely to Christians. In the present tense, this verb can refer to physical sleep: *be asleep* (Matt. 28:13; Luke 22:45; Acts 12:6). But in Paul’s letters in reference to death, it bears a *point* or *punctiliar* sense: *fall asleep* (1 Thess 4:13-15; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51), even when it is used in the present tense: *those who have fallen asleep* or *those who, from time to time, fall asleep* (1 Thess. 4:13), *a number have fallen asleep* or *a few are, from time to time, falling asleep* (1 Cor. 11:30). So the verb depicts entrance into the state of death without implying that the state of death is one of suspended animation or loss of consciousness. Christians who die *fall asleep* to the present world; they are no longer active in *our* earthly world of time and space. Yet they are fully alert to *their* new environment, for they are not only resting from their labors in joyful satisfaction (Heb. 4:10; Rev. 14:13) and safe in God’s hands (Luke 23:46; cf. Acts 7:59); they are *alive to God* (Luke 20:38) and *live spiritually, as God does* (1 Pet. 4:6). They are in the presence of Christ in enriched fellowship with him (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; see part 2, ch. 61). If the *intermediate state* between death and resurrection were one of unconsciousness, how are we to explain Paul’s preference (2 Cor. 5:8) or desire (Phil. 1:23) to depart to Christ’s presence? Even with all its frustrations, an active conscious life on earth in communion with Christ would undoubtedly have seemed to him to be preferable to a post-mortem state of unconsciousness and total inactivity. It is also possible that this verb (*fall asleep*) may allude to the peaceful manner of the death of Christians, whatever the mode of their death. How apt is it that we learn that Stephen *fell asleep* (Acts 7:59-60), even though he died under a hail of stones!” *Navigating Tough Texts: A Guide to Problem Passages in the New Testament* (Lexham Press, 2020), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> D. E. Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness* (Moody, 1971), p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Zondervan, 1973), p. 148.

<sup>4</sup> cf. J. D. Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Zondervan, 1975), p. 189, where we are told that “last” does not actually mean “last.” He writes, “The word *last* may signify that which concludes a program, but is not necessarily the last that will ever exist.” Why would Pentecost seek to avoid the *plain* meaning of the text? His dispensational system forces him to impose a meaning on text that otherwise could not exist. Listen to his own words: “Inasmuch as the program for the church differs from that for Israel, each may be terminated by the blowing of a trumpet, properly called the last trumpet, without making the two last trumpets identical and synchronous as to time.” Note carefully here what Pentecost is saying. Because he reads the text with a preconceived understanding determined by dispensational categories he makes the text say something that will not contradict the dispensational system. Keith Mathison, like so many others, has pointed out the error of this system. “No text in the entire Bible tells us that God will rapture the church out of the world seven years before the second coming of Christ. Pretribulationism, as dispensational scholars themselves admit, rests entirely on their definition of the church. If that definition is wrong, then pretribulationism is wrong. If it is right, then pretribulationism is at best possible or probable. We have already demonstrated that the dispensational doctrine of the church is biblically indefensible. Where does that leave the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture? According to its most able defender, it means that pretribulationism must be self-evidently wrong.” *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (P&R, 1995), p. 120.

<sup>5</sup> G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and The Rapture* (Eerdmans, 1956), p. 80.