**1 Thessalonians 4:14-18**

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**The Rapture of the Church**

***13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.***

* The passage we are studying this morning is one of the most exciting passages of Scripture. But, at the same time it is also one of the most contentiously debated passages of Scripture.

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**This is a controversial doctrine**

* **But for as exciting and encouraging as these words are, they are also the source of great disagreement among truly godly men and women. Why?**
  + Because there is much disagreement surrounding eschatological events.
* On the subject of eschatology . . . the doctrine of end times events . . . there are two predominant views: **Dispensationalism and Covenantalism.**
  + **Generally, Dispensationalists believe that the prophetic events of the Tribulation, described in Matthew 24 and Revelation chapters 6-19 should be literally interpreted as pertaining to God’s future dealings with the nation of Israel . . .** 
    - **Dispensationalists believe in a literal rapture of the church**
  + **On the other hand, most Covenantalists believe that the events of Matthew 24 and Revelation chapters 6-19 pertain to the church and are either to be interpreted figuratively or they have already been fulfilled.** 
    - **Generally, Covenantalists believe the event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is not the coming of the Lord for** **His saints, but is the coming of the Lord with His saints at His triumphal “second coming” to the earth to set up His eternal kingdom.**
* So, as you can see, **there is a huge chasm of disagreement** among true brethren regarding eschatological events.
  + And even among dispensational brethren who believe in a rapture there is much disagreement regarding the timing of the event described here in our passage today.

**Why is there such disagreement among true brethren?**

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* As you spend more time studying the various views on eschatological subjects, you begin to see that there is a wide variation in eschatological views. And because of these divergent views, the question emerges, **why is there such disagreement among true Christian brethren on matters of eschatology?**
  + The single greatest reason for such large differences of opinion on matters of eschatology is because of the differences of opinion Christians hold regarding the present relationship between God and Israel.
  + **Is the nation of Israel still the chosen people of God, or has the church replaced Israel?** And how you answer that question has a major impact on your eschatology and how you interpret eschatological passages of Scripture.
* My purpose in preaching this passage this morning is to present its interpretation from the **premillennial, pretribulational perspective**, which is the doctrinal position of this church.
  + But, at the same time, I know that some of you hold to alternative views and interpretations of this passage. And to those brethren who hold to contrary views I say, **while this passage is important and of great encouragement, it is not essential that we be in complete agreement regarding its interpretation.**

**Essential vs. Non-Essential Doctrines**

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***1 Thessalonians 4:14— For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.***

* There are some doctrines that are **essential** . . . those doctrines we must believe in order to be saved. The doctrine of salvation by faith alone, through Christ alone is one of those doctrines.
  + Another essential doctrine of the Christian faith is in the resurrection of believers to eternal life. This is an essential doctrine. And these two doctrines of salvation and resurrection are clearly stated by Paul in v. 14 of our text . . . ***for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.***
  + **Here in v. 14 Paul states two essential doctrines . . . salvation by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the future resurrection of the saints to eternal life. On these two essential points we all can and must agree**.
* **But as we explore this eschatological doctrine in v. 15-17 we come to a non-essential doctrine. Specifically, the doctrine regarding the return of Christ and the resurrection of the church saints.** 
  + **On this passage before us today men and women and great faith differ in their interpretations . . . and that is OK.**

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**What is the rapture?**

* In the passage before us this morning we have one of the definitive passages teaching on the return of the Lord to receive the church saints to Himself. This return of the Lord for His bride is known as **the rapture.**
  + You will notice in our text this morning that the word **rapture** does not appear. Nor does it appear in any other text of Scripture.
* The English term **“rapture”** is from the Latin word *rapturo*, meaning “to snatch up” or “to carry off by force.”
  + But while the word **rapture** does not appear, the event of the rapture is described in v. 17 by the term ***caught up***.
  + The event of the **“rapture”** is described in v. 16-17 of this passage when Paul reveals that ***the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air***

**Belief in the Resurrection is part of our Christian faith**

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***14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.***

* As we saw in our examination of v. 13 last week, Paul begins his instruction in this passage by encouraging and reassuring the Thessalonian believers that those brethren who died before the return of the Lord would not be at any disadvantage in regard to the blessings promised by the Lord.
  + In fact, as we will learn this morning, **those who die before the return of the Lord are actually the first to be resurrected.**
* Then, having stated the blessed position of those who die before the return of the Lord, in v. 14 Paul makes an important statement regarding the importance of this passage in regard to our Christian faith. In v. 14 Paul states . . . ***For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.***
* With his statement here in v. 14 Paul equates faith in the gospel message with faith in the return of Christ to resurrect believers to eternal life.
  + Here in v. 14 Paul is, in effect, instructing us that **if you believe that Jesus died and rose again, you should also believe that when the Lord returns to resurrect all the Church age saints, the saints who have died will be returning with the Him.**
  + As we saw last week, those saints who have died are presently with the Lord, and they will be accompanying Jesus when He comes to initiate the resurrection with our new glorified bodies.

**The Source of this knowledge—Divine Revelation**

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***1 Thessalonians 4:15a— For this we say to you by the word of the Lord***

* Then, having stated the importance of faith in this doctrine, in v. 15 Paul proceeds to reveal the source of this knowledge . . . ***for this we say to you by the word of the Lord . . .***
* Here in the opening phrase of v. 15 Paul reveals that the source of his knowledge of these things is ***by the word of the Lord*** . . . **given to him directly from God.**
* Some have questioned where Paul would have learned this marvelous, yet previously unknown, doctrine.
  + While some have suggested that Paul is merely explaining a doctrine found in Scripture, this view is rejected because there is no other mention of this event in Scripture.
  + Others have suggested that Paul is merely repeating some unrecorded revelation that was passed down as oral tradition. But this answer is unsatisfactory.
    - Everything that Paul taught concerning the Lord was given to him directly, by special revelation. Paul would not have taught something that was given to him by someone other than the Lord.
  + The only acceptable answer to the question of **where Paul got this knowledge of the return of Christ and the rapture only could have come by special revelation directly from the Lord.**
* While some skeptics argue that this seems suspicious, we know from Scripture that as an apostle, Paul received many special revelations from God.
  + We see several examples of special revelation being given from God through Paul in Paul’s revelation of **“mysteries”** in several of his letters.

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**What is a mystery?**

* From the Greek word *musterioin*, in Scripture **a mystery is something that has previously been unknown that is revealed by God. And furthermore, the information in a divine mystery is that which can only be known if revealed by God**.
  + There are a great many things that God has chosen not to reveal to mankind. For example, **one of the great mysteries that we often consider is, “since all men are equally deserving of condemnation, why does God choose one wretched person for salvation, but choose to leave another in unbelief?”**
    - **Now there is a mystery that we have all pondered.** And yet, God has chosen not to reveal the answer. And the answer to that mystery can never be known unless God chooses to reveal it.
* As you read through Paul’s 13 letters in the New Testament you realize that Paul received a lot of special revelation from God.
  + For example, in **Ephesians 5:32** Paul reveals **the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the church** as the model for the human relationship between husbands and wives.
  + In Romans 11:25 Paul reveals **the significant mystery of God’s future plan for Israel**.
  + In Ephesians 1:9 Paul reveals that **when the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior, God is revealing to us the mystery of His will in regard to salvation.**
* A wonderful example of a mystery of God being given by special revelation is found in Daniel 2.
  + In Daniel chapter 2 we learn that King Nebuchadnezzar had a terrifying dream, but he didn’t know its meaning. So, calling upon his wise men, Nebuchadnezzar tells the wise men to **tell him the interpretation of his dream.** But in order to trust that what they are telling him is true, Nebuchadnezzar **first demands that his wise men tell him his dream.**
  + Of course the terrified wise men know that they cannot do such a thing and they tell Nebuchadnezzar that his request is unreasonable. Furious with them, he orders all his wise men to be executed. But Daniel, a Jewish boy taken to become part of Nebuchadnezzar’s council at the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, asks for permission to seek the answer from God.
  + And upon Daniel and his three friends praying to God, God reveals the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and its interpretation. A great story!
* My point here is that **none of God’s mysteries can be known to man without divine revelation**. And the special revelation Paul gives here in 1Thessalonians 4:13-18 is a perfect example.
* With this statement of Paul in v. 15, that this revelation is ***by the word of the Lord***, Paul is stating that **he is not speaking his own opinion, but a special revelation given to him directly from the Lord.**
  + Most likely this revelation was given to Paul during his apostolic training with the Lord in the wilderness after his conversion on the road to Damascus.

**Two Classes of Believers**

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***1 Thessalonians 4:15b– that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.***

* Then, having revealed the source of his revelation as being the Lord, Himself, in the second part of v. 15 we see that Paul differentiates between **two classes of believers . . . the living and the dead.** Paul states ***that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.***
  + Paul’s point in this statement is that **it doesn’t matter which class you are in . . . living or dead . . . your reward, as a Christian, is exactly the same.**
* And to show you that Paul was looking for the **imminent return of Christ,** with his use of the plural, ***we***, he includes himself in the group of believers . . . ***we*** ***who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord***.
  + But is also becomes apparent to Paul, as he grows older, that he might not be alive when the Lord returns. We find evidence of this thinking in his second letter to the church in Corinth, written 5 years after this first letter to the Thessalonians. In 2 Corinthians 5:2-4 Paul writes . . .

***2 Corinthians 5:1-4— 1 For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, 3 inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. 4 For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.***

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* + Then, in Philippians 1:19-24, written 5 years later, during his first imprisonment, we see Paul speak of death and a looming reality and the realization that his death before the return of Christ was more likely . . .

***Philippians 1:21-24— 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.***

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* + And finally, in his final letter to Timothy, Paul bids farewell as his life is about to end . . .

***2 Timothy 4:6— For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.***

* + But until that time, Paul lived every day with the expectation that he would be alive to see the Lord’s return.
  + And furthermore, from Paul’s statement in v. 15 that **we *who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep***, Paul is stating the fact that **the departed saints will have the priority position . . . the *dad in Christ* will be the first to be resurrected.**

**The First Event of the Rapture—the arrival of the Lord from heaven**

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***1 Thessalonians 4:16a— For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God***

* Then, after having revealed **who is included** in the rapture event, Paul then proceeds to describe **what will happen at the rapture**.
* The first event that occurs at the rapture is recorded in the first part of 1 Thessalonians 4:16 . . . ***For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God . . .***
* From the moment the Lord ascended to heaven in the clouds, in Acts 1:9, Christians have been looking for Him to return in the same way.
* And since His ascension, nearly 2000 years ago, the Lord has been seated on His throne at the right hand of the Father, in glory. Now, in v. 16 we learn that at the rapture the Lord will leave His throne and ***descend from heaven***, exactly as the two angels in Acts 1:11 promised He would.
  + No angel or other emissary is sent for this mission. The rapture is a very personal role the Lord will personally perform as He comes for His bride, as He promised He would in John 14:3 . . . ***"If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.***
  + The rapture is the fulfillment of this promise made in John 14:3.

**How does the Lord arrive?**

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***v. 16— with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God***

* And notice how the Lord arrives. In v. 16 Paul describes how the Lord arrives ***with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God***.
* The Lord’s arrival is described in three ways . . .
  + ***with a shout***
  + ***with the voice of the archangel***
  + ***with the trumpet of God***
* I previously explained that the ***shout***of the bridegroom’s party has its origin in the Jewish wedding tradition, and is seen in the parable of the 10 virgins in Matthew 25:5-6 . . .

***Matthew 25:5-6— 5 "Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. 6 "But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'***

* + In the Jewish tradition, a member of the bridegroom’s entourage would **shout** to announce the bridegroom’s arrival for his bride. Here in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 we have the same picture. The Lord Jesus arrives for His bride ***with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God***.
  + Just as a Jewish bride does not know when her bridegroom will come for her, so the Bride of Christ does not know when Jesus will come for His bride.
* In this three-fold description of the Lord’s arrival I believe the second and third events . . . ***the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God*** . . . are descriptive of the first.
  + In other words, the ***shout***of the Bridegroom’s arrival is comprised of the ***voice of the archangel*** and ***the trumpet of God.***
  + Both the ***voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God*** are symbols of the divine presence.
  + Just as the arrival of the American President is always announced by the playing of “Hail to the Chief,” so the arrival of God is announced by ***the trumpet of God.***

**The second event—the rapture of the church**

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***1 Thessalonians 4:16c-17a—and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,***

* Then, following the arrival of the Lord, Paul then proceeds to describe the second part of the rapture event . . . ***and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,***
  + Here in this description of the rapture Paul reveals that, **just as he explained in v. 13, the dead in Christ will be resurrected first, followed immediately by those who remain alive.**
* In stating the sequence of events . . . ***then we who are alive and remain*** . . . there is no implied lapse of time between the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection of the living. The events will be nearly simultaneous.
* An important fact should be noted in the description of the rapture event. Note that the Lord does not return to the earth. During this event Jesus remains in the sky . . . **we go to *meet the Lord in the air***.
  + So, contrary to what some people mistakenly believe, this event is not the second coming of Christ. That event . . . the second coming of the Lord to the earth . . . does not occur until the end of the Tribulation.
* And just as ***the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God*** announce the arrival of God, the image of the Lord arriving to receive the church ***in the clouds*** is also a sign of divine presence, as we see in Psalm 97:2 . . .

***Psalm 97:2–Clouds and thick darkness surround Him;***

***Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.***

* + Likewise, in Exodus 19, when Moses goes up on Mt. Sinai to meet with God, the entire mountain is enveloped in a cloud and the presence of God.
* Now, here in v. 17 we encounter **“the rapture word.”** The Greek word for ***caught up*** is *harpazō* and means “to be snatched away” or “taken away.”
  + As I said earlier, the Latin translation of *harpazō* is ***rapturo***, from which we get the English word “rapture.”
* The act of being ***caught up to meet the Lord in the air***,described here in v. 17, is the rapture event.
  + It is at this moment that every believer, **from every generation** **of the 2000 years of the church age**, is resurrected to eternal life and taken to be with the Lord forever.
  + For those Christians who are fortunate enough to be alive at the moment of the Lord’s coming, their earthly lives will instantly end and they will be transformed to their heavenly lives. They will not experience death, but will instantly be transformed and given new, imperishable, glorified bodies.

**Our resurrection to glory**

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***1 Thessalonians 4:17— Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.***

* This resurrection into eternal glory is stated at the end of v. 17 . . . ***and so we shall always be with the Lord.***
* The end result of the rapture is that the entire church . . . every Christian, from all time . . . is taken to heaven where we will live with the Lord ***always.***
* It is because of this wonderful truth . . . that we will be going to be with the Lord forever . . . that we should all rejoice over this passage of Scripture. And it is because of this wonderful news that I love this passage so much.

slide 16

***1 Thessalonians 4:18— Therefore comfort one another with these words.***

* In closing this passage regarding the Lord’s coming for His bride, Paul then issues his readers a command . . . ***therefore comfort one another with these words.***
* Here in v. 18 Paul uses a present tense command meaning that we should not only ***comfort one another with these words***, but we should **continually *comfort one another with these words***.
  + **Here in this command by Paul we are called to remember and be encouraged and encourage others by this promise from God.**
* **What do you think about the rapture? Do you even think of the Lord’s return?**

* + **Do you long to see the Lord coming in the clouds to take you to heaven? Are you comforted by these words?**
* As I mentioned at the beginning of this message, there is much disagreement regarding the interpretation of this passage. Many good brethren vehemently disagree with what I have just taught. **And I understand why they disagree with me.** I think they’re wrong . . . but I understand why.
* In looking at this passage from the premillennial, pretribulational perspective, I find great comfort and encouragement, as Paul says I should.
* From the premillennial and pretribulational perspective I believe the events described here by Paul will occur **prior to the beginning of the Tribulation** . . . the 7 year period in which God will pour out His wrath upon the earth, and a time in which more than half of the world’s population will die.
  + The reason this passage offers such hope and comfort is because **the church will be spared the suffering and devastation that will occur during the Tribulation.**

**Four Views on the Rapture**

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* For those of us who are dispensational . . . we believe that God’s promises to Israel remain in the possession of the nation of Israel . . . there are **4 views on the timing of the rapture**.
  + The **pretribulational view** sees the rapture occurring prior to the beginning of the Tribulation.
  + The **midtribulational view** sees the rapture occurring at the mid-point of the Tribulation.
  + The **pre-wrath view** sees the Tribulation as being divided into two parts . . . man’s wrath and God’s wrath. This view sees the rapture occurring after man’s wrath has come upon the earth, but before the beginning of God’s wrath in the Tribulation.
  + The **posttribulational view** sees the rapture coming at the end of the Tribulation.
  + So, you can see that there is much disagreement regarding the timing of the rapture.
* Without getting into a detailed explanation for **why I believe the pretribulational view has the best support**, I want to offer a couple of reasons in support of this view.
  + **First**, we know from the book of Revelation that during the 7 years of the Tribulation . . . **the 7 years of God’s wrath being poured out upon the earth** . . . that more than half of the world’s population with die from war, pestilence, famine and plague. That’s **more than 4 billion people who will die in 7 years.**
    - And because of the persecution of Satan and the anti-Christ, those who receive saving faith during the Tribulation will be singled out for persecution and death by the evil ones. **Most Christians will die during the Tribulation**.
    - If the Church is the bride of Christ . . . and we are . . . it seems likely that God would not want His Son’s bride to show up at her wedding after having suffered terribly under the Father’s wrath.
    - And we learn from two verses in 1 Thessalonians that the church will not suffer God’s wrath.
    - Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, ***Jesus will rescue us from the wrath to come.***
    - And, again in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 . . . ***For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,***
  + **Second**, we know from Scripture that **the coming of the Lord is** **an imminent event**. **He can come at any moment.** But all views, except the pretribulational view, see the Lord returning at some point during or after the Tribulation. This means the rapture is not an imminent event.
    - Since Paul lived in the hope of the Lord’s imminent return, it seems unlikely that he expected the Tribulation to begin before the Lord could return. Paul looked for the return of Christ at any moment.
  + **Thirdly**, if the church will be forced to endure part of the Tribulation before the coming of the Lord, **that is not be a very comforting thought**.
    - In effect, we would have to adopt the attitude that **after we have suffered for awhile, the Lord will come for us. How do you comfort one another with those words?**
    - There’s not much comfort to be found in that. In fact, we would look upon those who have already died as being the fortunate ones!
* This morning we have learned a doctrine that has provoked a great deal of animated and heated debate over the centuries.
  + I hope that the premillennial pretribulational view I hold to is correct. I long to see and be with the Lord and I am anxious for Him to come for us.