

**The Rapture of the Church:
The Eschatology of 1 Thessalonians**

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Introduction

The return of our Lord Jesus Christ, also referred to as the second coming of Christ is a core tenant of the Christian faith. The second coming of Jesus is initiated by one of the most debated events among scholars and lay people alike – the rapture. The Bible is clear about this reality from the Gospels to Revelation, and Jesus himself promises in John 14:2-3, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”¹. The rapture of the church is the most anticipated event among Christians and serves as a vehicle of hope to carry us through this life with joy and expectation.

There are some believers who hold differing views regarding when this glorious event, the rapture, will occur. This paper is not a comparison or discussion of the various eschatological views, but it is important to acknowledge they do exist. My eschatological view is not labeled, rather, I seek to understand the topic from the perspective of biblical interpretation because I believe the Word of God speaks clearly regarding the subject. I will not attempt to promote a view, simply because I do not have one; however, I will attempt to faithfully exegete what the Bible says about the rapture from the perspective of 1 Thessalonians.

The word “Rapture” does not literally appear in the New Testament, but it does present itself conceptually through interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 where Paul says believers will be “caught up together in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air”². The phrase “caught up” in the Greek is translated from the word “harpazō” which means to “catch away” or “catch up”.

¹ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the King James Version (KJV) of this Bible software.

² Ibid. 1 Thessalonians 4:17

According to Matt Stephon in his article *The Rapture*, the Latin word for this phrase is “rapio” and it has the same meaning of being “caught up”³. I preface this paper with this information to provide some transparency regarding the term “rapture”, and to add credential to my usage of the term throughout this document.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to inform the reader as to how this paper is constructed and what to expect while engaging the work. The Apostle Paul addresses the subject of eschatology to some degree in each chapter of the book of 1 Thessalonians; a series of movements from minuet to allegro which lead to a crescendo at the end. It is for this reason that I take a somewhat musical composition approach to this paper. From Paul’s initial eschatological minuet in chapter one, to the celebratory crescendo in chapter 5, I will attempt to compose a biblical symphony of sorts. It is my hope and intention to provoke thought and inspiration as this paper is read.

Movement 1: Setting the Expectation

The Church in Thessalonica while effective in the work of the Lord, was subject to the many challenges which confront those who dare to be faithful in Christ. One of the most prevalent of these challenges presented itself in the form of Jewish opposition to Paul’s teachings and the persecution which resulted consequently⁴. Despite the persecution, the saints in Thessalonica persevered and continued their faithful Kingdom service as admonished by Paul, the founder of the church and their brother in Christ⁵. It is in verses 9 and 10 of chapter 1 where Paul performs the first movement of his eschatological piece, as the Apostle acknowledges how

³ (Stephon 2018)

⁴ (Walvoord and Zuck 1989) 1 Thessalonians – The Occasion of the Letter

⁵ Ibid. 1 Thessalonians – The Purpose Letter

the Thessalonian Church, “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God”⁶. More specifically, Paul continues saying, “and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”⁷. What a powerful statement gently nestled at the end of the chapter, to provide a bit of hope to a persecuted Church whose faith is under unrelenting attack.

Paul quietly reminds the Church that their troubles will not last always (to coin a phrase from the African American worship experience), because God’s Son who was raised from the dead is coming from heaven to rescue them from God’s imminent wrath. This offers more than a glimmer of hope for this persecuted Church, but also raised a glaring question: “when is this going to happen?”, a question of some import from the Thessalonians that Timothy may have taken back to Paul. Some theologians suggest that they were not only persecuted, but some of the saints were also dying, not having seen this glorious return of Jesus which may have been taught by Paul during his stay in the city, and the living saints were grieving as a result⁸.

The Thessalonian Saints misunderstood the efficacy and the scope of the promise of Christ’s return. They assumed that the return of Jesus for his Church would only be realized by those who were alive at his coming and concluded that those who died prior would not benefit from the promised deliverance from God’s wrath when it was unleashed. Paul is now gently broaching the subject in this minuet and whetting their appetite for the more substantial revelation to come later in the letter. To be certain, the Apostle will not dangle such an enticing carrot in front of these believers without ultimately rewarding them with it in the end.

⁶ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. Verse 9

⁷ Ibid. Verse 10

⁸ (Nicholl 2004) pp. 19-20

Movement 2: The Promise of Hope

Paul begins Chapter 2 with a barrage of acknowledgments, accolades, and affirmations to lay a foundation of much needed assurance. As the founder and spiritual leader of this Kingdom congregation, Paul uses the influence of his calling and Apostleship to offer these faithful followers of Christ some inspiration and a dose of spiritual self-esteem to accentuate their value to the work of the ministry. It is imperative that spiritual leaders provide positive affirmations periodically, so that the people who diligently serve on the front lines feel appreciated and are motivated to continue the fight. In his book, *Insight on 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Chuck Swindoll says, “Simply put, leadership is ‘inspiring influence’. It’s the ability to light a fire in people’s hearts and minds that motivates them to do things they never thought possible”⁹. Indeed, these saints needed inspiration, and Paul provided it in the form of an encouraging word of personal validation with eschatological impact.

In verse 19 of Chapter 2, we are exposed to the second movement where Paul concludes his approval of their faithfulness as he communicates his approval of the Church at Thessalonica. Paul emphatically expresses his personal pride in their labors and alludes to the fact that they will be his testimony and evidence of good fruit when Jesus returns for the Church. The Apostle says, “For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.”¹⁰. Oh, that a figure of such biblical significance would stand as a witness to my life of service in the presence of the Lamb on the day of judgment! To paraphrase Paul, “I am going to parade your faithfulness and

⁹ (Swindoll 2016) p. 28

¹⁰ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. Chapter 2:19

character before Christ so that he sees and appreciates how you have served in his name!”. Of course, we must all stand before our Lord on that day on our own merit, but the sentiment is beyond amazing coming from someone like Paul.

Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are the source of his pride. They fill his heart with a joy and gladness that can only be rewarded by providing a personal testimony of the depth of their love for Christ on the day of his return. This is not a hint or subtle inference that Jesus may return; this is a literal statement of fact that we will be in the very presence of Christ at his second coming. The overarching idea that Paul is attempting to project is that the Thessalonians will be there with Jesus, in his presence – in his face, and when they are, the Apostle will demonstrate his personal appreciation for the support they have provided for his work in the ministry. What an amazing offer of hope for a group of believers who are unsure of what the actual end will be. I like this movement because it rings of the melodious sounds of eternity with God, and the Church at Thessalonica needs this heartfelt boost of hope in the eternal life to come.

Movement 3: Assurance for All the Saints

In what I deem the third minuet, Paul intensifies his effort to encourage the saints at Thessalonica and builds the energy of this eschatological symphony. In Chapter 3, Paul minces no words in his attempt to let the Church know how much he wants to be in Thessalonica so he can personally minister the Word to them. The continual persecution of the church in conjunction with the Thessalonian’s uncertainties about the rapture weighed heavily on Paul, so he sent Timothy in his stead to get a report on how the saints were fairing. Timothy reports that

the church is actually doing quite well, in fact, this resilient group of Christians continues to impressively display the love of God despite the external problems they are facing¹¹.

Now it is time for the execution of the third movement, the opportunity Paul uses to encourage the Thessalonians and give them even more hope in the return of Jesus Christ once again. Paul prays that God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son of God would guide them into a spirit of love and holiness that will establish them securely in the hope of Jesus' return for all believers, those living and those who sleep. At the end of verse 13, Paul references, "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints."¹² The phrase "with all" in this portion of the text is interpreted from the Greek word *pas*, which in this context carries the connotation of "everyone", or "every one of". This more than implies that Paul is referring to all the saints – those living and those who now sleep. This is the encouragement the Thessalonians need, a Word of hope that speaks to the eternal security of those precious saints who have died for testimony of the Lamb, and the faith of Jesus¹³.

Movement 4: Clarification, Confirmation, and Celebration

In Chapter 4, Paul increases the intensity of this the eschatological piece, building to a crescendo worthy of the highest praise of God. Verses 1 through 8 urge the Thessalonians to excel in their walks of Sanctification, a call to improve an already commendable and pleasing lifestyle. This is a marvelous Segway into the looming topic to which Paul will soon shift their attention – the Rapture. Sanctification in living is not an option as a follower of Christ, it is a commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and should be adhered to in all faithfulness and

¹¹ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. Chapter 3:6-7

¹² Ibid. Chapter 3:13b

¹³ Ibid. Revelation 12:11

obedience¹⁴. Living a sanctified life is Christian preparation for readiness of the return of the Lord Jesus. When Jesus comes to claim his bride for the great marriage supper, he expects her to be clothed in as pure clothing as possible, and the process of sanctification is the cleansing method available to us as believers to better present ourselves acceptable in his presence.

Verses 9 through 12 are a continuation of apostolic admonition as Paul emphasizes the need to also excel in the love already being expressed by this beloved Church. There is never a substitute for the expression of love by those who profess a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Love is the indicator that we belong to God and that we are the disciples of the Lord Christ our Savior¹⁵. Though the Thessalonians demonstrated the love of God with spiritual proficiency, there is always opportunity for improvement with those who live a life of progressive sanctification.

Verses 13-18 is where the sounds of the fourth movement penetrate our spiritual ears, and we hear the increasing allegro of the rapture of the church. I believe this is what the letter is all about. Yes, there are critical topics covered that are necessary for the Thessalonians to read and receive, but the pearl of great price here is what Paul has to say about the rapture. The eternal security of those who have died before the second coming has weighed heavily on this church, and now is the time for their Pastor to set all the records straight. Paul addresses the subject using three main points to ensure that these beloved Christians have an answer to this prevailing question.

Clarification

¹⁴ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. Chapter 4:1-8

¹⁵ Ibid. John 13:35

First, Paul provides clear and unambiguous clarity as to the eternal fate of those who have fallen “asleep” in the Lord¹⁶. The word “asleep” in verse 13 is *koimaō* in the Greek, and it means to be dead. In no uncertain terms, Paul is attempting to put the Thessalonians’ minds at ease about what will happen to those who have died in the faith when Jesus returns for his church, and he does not want them to have the slightest doubt. Paul says, “we do not want you to be uninformed”¹⁷, or in other words, he does not want them to be ignorant and unknowing about this wonderful truth. Not only is this a Word of truth, but it is also a precious promise; that those who have died in Christ Jesus will also rise and be with him when he returns¹⁸, and in fact, they will rise to meet the Lord before those who are still alive! What a blessed hope and assurance for this body of believers who have struggled with clarity about the eternal security of those who have labored and died in faithfulness, and in some cases, in the defense of the faith.

Confirmation

In verses 16-17, this movement escalates its intense resonance, and the climax of this piece is quickly approaching as Paul provides a brief, yet descriptive overview of what the return of the Lord Jesus will be like. The Thessalonians were looking for hope, something they could cling to with deep aspiration, something that would answer the questions they pondered with uncertainty. While this brief paper does not afford me the opportunity to conduct a full exegetical examination, there is more than enough information about the rapture in 1 Thessalonians to provoke critical thought about the subject. Thus, I begin this rapid overview of the rapture of the Church.

¹⁶ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. 1 Thessalonians 4:13

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. Verses 14-15

Paul begins his abbreviated dissertation on the rapture by announcing its advent with the literal coming of the Lord Jesus, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God”¹⁹. Jesus will come down from the heavens at the announcement of an archangel and at the sounding of a trumpet, to reap the harvest of the earth²⁰. Scholars have debated the meaning of these words since the discovery of the letter, and to this day, the true meaning has been skewed by theological over analyzing and doctrinal bias. I believe the Bible interprets itself, and the true meaning of these words have already been revealed in the narrative of Revelation Chapter 11 where the seventh trumpet sounds – the last trump to be precise²¹. According to 1 Corinthians 15:52, it is after the last trumpet sounds that the rapture of the church takes place; that glorious event where the dead in Christ will be resurrected from the their graves in a moment and in the twinkling of an eye.²² Since there are seven trumpets to sound during what is called “The Great Tribulation”, it is clear that the “last trump” is referring to the final trumpet of that series. Consequently, the Church will be delivered from the ensuing righteous indignation which will be poured out upon the earth from the seven vials which are filled up with the wrath of God²³. This is amazing news for the Thessalonians because in these initial words of the Apostle, they are finally able to find the hope they have been looking for regarding the eternal fate of their beloved brothers and sisters who have died in Christ.

¹⁹ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. 1 Thessalonians 4:16a

²⁰ Ibid. Revelation 14:14-16

²¹ Ibid. Revelation 11:15

²² Ibid. 1 Corinthians 15:52

²³ Ibid. Revelation 15:7

The crescendo continues to build in verse 17. Paul further explains ²⁴that those who are alive at the return of Jesus in the rapture will be “caught up”, as previously mentioned is *harpazō* in the Greek, a phrase which means to be taken away by force, to be snatched away, or to be carried off. Where to? The answer to that inevitable question is to join the dead in Christ who have been resurrected as we all meet Jesus in the air, and we will be with him from that instant forward into eternity. Yes, there are other events that will take place around and beyond that point, but those are out of scope for this paper. Regardless, we can all rest assured that when the rapture takes place, we will all be together with our Lord eternally, and no believer will be left behind.

Celebration

There is much to be thankful for and much to celebrate as believers in Jesus Christ simply because we belong to him, but I can think of nothing more celebratory and praise-worthy than the Biblical truth that Jesus Christ is coming back to rapture his Church. In verse 18, Paul finishes the crescendo of this movement with an admonition to the Thessalonians to “comfort one another with these words.”. The word “comfort” means to exhort, to beseech, and to most importantly, console. The rapture is not a subject of fear and consternation; it is a subject that should bring happiness, peace, assurance, and joy. Paul instructs the Thessalonians to talk about the rapture with enthusiasm so that the brothers and sisters in Christ can celebrate the fact that in the future, dead or living, they will be snatched away to be with Jesus in the air, and forever be with him. What an exciting climax to this eschatological piece written by Paul, one that satisfies the burning hunger of the Thessalonians to be filled with assurance regarding the end times.

²⁴ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. 1 Thessalonians 4:18

Movement 5: Closing Summary

The Thessalonians were fully knowledgeable about at least one facet of the rapture - its timing. Paul begins Chapter 5, verses 1-3, acknowledging their understanding of when the Church would be caught away to be with Jesus when he says, “For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.”²⁵. This is a clear indication that they did not know when the rapture would take place, in fact, they were fully cognizant of the fact that it would sneak up on them like a thief approaches in the darkest hours of the night. Though they did not know exactly when the rapture would happen, Paul is clear that there will be signs that the time is drawing near.

In her book, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, Amy Johnson Frykholm tells the sad but true story of the “Millerites”, followers of William Miller, a Baptist farmer who taught his own interpretation of eschatology in the 1800’s²⁶. Literally thousands of people believed Miller’s teachings in which eventually, specific dates for the end of the world were named, and what was called “The Great Disappointment” ensued as those dates came and went without the return of Jesus ever taking place²⁷. Frykholm’s illustration demonstrates the veracity of Jesus’ own words when he said, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”²⁸.

Paul finishes this movement and the entire eschatological symphony in verses 4-11 by summarizing the topic which he has just so eloquently presented. He offers the Thessalonians

²⁵ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. 1 Thessalonians 5:2

²⁶ (Frykholm 2004) Page 105

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Matthew 24:36

words of warning and encouragement, instructing them to be vigilant, and to keep their eyes open to see the signs of the second coming of Christ. Paul reminds them that they are not in the dark, the Word of truth has been revealed to them through good preaching and teaching, so there is no excuse for them being caught off guard and not caught away²⁹. He also reminds the Church that when Jesus comes back, the dead in Christ and believers who are living at the time will all be gathered unto their Lord together, and that they should continually comfort one another with this knowledge³⁰.

Conclusion

The Church, believers in Jesus Christ, will have to endure many days of tribulation according to the book of Revelation and other related biblical references, but before God pours out his wrath, those days will be shortened³¹. The elect of God, those who have believed in the name of Jesus Christ to make him Lord in their lives, will be spared the divine indignation of our Holy God. We will be raptured, caught up in the air to be with Jesus when he returns for his bride – the Church. Even though we may have to suffer for a season, the blessed hope we have is eternity with God our Father, and with our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁹ (Olive Tree Bible Software 1998) Scripture quotations and references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) version of this Bible software. 1 Thessalonians 5:4

³⁰ Ibid. 1 Thessalonians 5:11

³¹ Ibid. Matthew 24:22

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