

# The Doctrine of The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4

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The first of the epistles by Paul to the Thessalonians may well be the first book of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> There is a wonderful paradox in the fact that this first book is also a book of last things. Its theology is essentially eschatology.

The theme of any book is discovered by noticing the consistent idea appearing throughout the book. The most prevalent concept that occurs in each chapter of 1 Thessalonians is the return of Jesus Christ. The return of Christ is related to the *hope of our ultimate salvation* (deliverance) in chapter one (1:9-10). It is the *time of reward* for faithful service in chapter two (2:19-20). Christ's return is the *incentive for holy living* in chapter 3 (3:12-13). In its full doctrinal presentation in chapter four, *it is the means of comfort and hope* amid death, persecution and affliction (4:13-18). In chapter five, it is the *motivating factor for responsible Christian living* (5:1-11) and a fitting climax to the sanctification of believers (5:23).

Thus, the eschatological doctrine of the return of Christ is to affect every area of the Christian experience. It is not an obscure and secondary doctrine for Paul. Christ's return affects the believer's salvation, sanctification, service, solace and safety. So, the Thessalonian Epistles can rightly be called **"the epistles of the advent."** George Findlay in defining the major theme of the book, enunciates the hope and plea of every true believer: "The letter breathes throughout the constant desire of the church: Come, Lord Jesus!"<sup>2</sup>

The following discussion will examine **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** to ascertain Paul's understanding of the doctrine of the rapture by investigating and interpreting the details given in. Through isolating the predominant ideas, by observing the central theme and relating it to the content of the epistle, we will reach the conclusion that 1 Thess.4:13-18 is essentially dealing with the reality of the rapture, the blessed hope of the church. Since the Thessalonian epistles contain the most predominant yet most controversial passages in the development of the pre-tribulational and post-tribulational debate, there is a need for us to search beneath the surface of this passage exegetically and theologically.

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<sup>1</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that Paul wrote this letter from Corinth in the early part of A.D.50. Almost all commentators are agreed that the letter must be dated in the early 50's. "These are among the oldest Christian writings that we have" (Leon Morris, *The First and Second Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the NT, 26).

<sup>2</sup> *The Epistle to the Thessalonians*, The Cambridge Bible, 36.

The purpose of our study is also to defend a pre-tribulational rapture position from the major eschatological section of 1 Thess.4. The interpretation of this passage in the body of the discussion will underscore the pre-tribulational eschatology of Paul. Though the time of the rapture is neither the most important nor the most unimportant point of biblical eschatology, practically it touches the important issue of the nature of the Christian's hope.

## **Background and Occasion of 1 Thessalonians**

The historical background of 1 Thessalonians is important to provide the rudiments of this discussion.

Paul on his second missionary journey (A. D. 49-50), came to Thessalonica<sup>3</sup> (Acts 17) after being expelled from Philippi. As was the custom of Paul, he preached in the synagogue first and according to Acts 17:2 his synagogue ministry in Thessalonica lasted three sabbaths. Since within the synagogue would also be found several Gentiles who were attached to Judaism, the synagogue became an important point of contact for beginning a nucleus of believers. Although a certain number of Jews were saved, most converts were idol worshippers, steeped in heathenism (1 Thessa.1:9). Reacting against Paul's successful ministry, the Jewish community incited a riot and Paul had to leave the city abruptly (Acts 17:5-10).

There is some debate as to how long Paul stayed in Thessalonica. But it seems that Paul's ministry there was limited in its duration and Paul was forced to leave the city (Acts 17:5-10). After Thessalonica Paul moved to Berea, where he left Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:14-16; 1 Thess.3:1) but left quickly for Athens where he was rejoined by his two companions. From a deep pastoral concern Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica and went on to Corinth (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess.3:1, 6). Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth. Paul rejoices at the good news he has brought (1 Thess.3:6) and writes to the Thessalonians from Corinth. Bruce confidently dates 1 Thessalonians in the earlier part of Paul's stay in Corinth and 2 Thessalonians not too long afterward<sup>4</sup>.

## **The Purpose of 1 Thessalonians**

Understanding the purpose of this letter is a vital key to the interpretation of the eschatological passage in view (1Thess.4:13-18), although the exact reasons (at least the details of it) can only remain speculative.

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<sup>3</sup> The city had been founded in the fourth century B.C. by Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's army officers. He named it after his wife Thessalonica, who was Alexander's half-sister. Today as "Thessaloniki" it is the second most important city of Greece.

<sup>4</sup> F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, XXXV.

Though forcibly separated from the Thessalonians, Paul was deeply concerned about them (1 Thess.2:17-18). While they knew the essentials on the return of Christ, Paul wrote to give them the fuller information they needed. Along with encouraging the Thessalonians to further progress in the faith amidst persecutions, Paul found it necessary in his first letter to answer the false charges brought against him by the Jews. In conjunction with this, Paul answers two crucial questions concerning the time in which the dead in Christ would be raised and the time of the Day of the Lord. **Thus, the key passages in the letter are eschatological, such as the rapture of the Church (1 Thess.4:13-18) and the Day of the Lord (5:1-11).**

As this epistle makes clear the Thessalonian believers had no doubt as to the truth of the coming of Christ for them. Paul had taught them these truths when he was with them. In the apostolic kerygma of 1:9-10 Paul refers to the “waiting for His Son from heaven.... who delivers us from the wrath to come.” The Thessalonians feared that the dead in Christ would be resurrected at a different time than the rapture. The fear resulted in a question concerning the future resurrection of the dead. What will happen to Christians who die before the return of the Lord? Will they suffer any disadvantage? The church had obviously been sorrowing for recently deceased members. It was thought that they had lost the blessing of the rapture. Paul is answering these advent perplexities in this letter. He therefore wrote, “in order that you may not go on grieving....” (1 Thess.4:13).

Quoting Moffat, Best writes: “Their faith required completion, rather than correction (3:10). They were on the right path; what they chiefly needed was stimulus and direction (3:12; 4:1,10).”<sup>5</sup> Best points out that apart from eschatology there is no major doctrinal discussion on the great Pauline theological themes, justification by faith, life in and with Christ, and the church<sup>6</sup>.

From the discussion of the return of the Lord in chapter 4, it seems that the Thessalonians had some doubt or confusion concerning the time when their loved ones who had died in Christ would be raised. Apparently, they thought they would be caught up to be with the Lord at His return and the resurrection of their loved ones would be delayed, possibly until after the Great Tribulation when Christ came back to establish His Kingdom. Paul gives them the needed instruction through this letter.

The main point of contention in the pre-tribulational and post-tribulational debate resides in the interpretation of the answers given by Paul.

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<sup>5</sup> Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## The Prophetic Revelation in 1Thess.4:13-18

The understanding of the biblical theological method of progressive development of doctrine<sup>7</sup> can be a great help in interpreting this passage. The formula **“by the word of the Lord”** (*en logo kuriyo*) in verse 15 (emphasis added) marks a new revelation, not just a quotation from some unrecorded saying of our Lord. It evidently refers to the source of the revelation. The expression *en logo kuriyo* is understood in three different ways:

1. *Some recorded utterance of Jesus while He was on earth.* But there is no evidence of this in the recorded utterances of Jesus in the Gospels. Some argue that Jesus spoke these words while on earth and it is lost to us, but the substance of it is recorded in the Gospels, perhaps in Jesus’ “Olivet Discourse” recorded in Matthew 24, Mark.13, and Luke 17. Yet for a careful reader the dissimilarities between the 1 Thess.4 and the Gospel narratives far outweigh the resemblances.<sup>8</sup> Paul does not state or imply that he is directly quoting the words of Jesus.
2. *Some unrecorded saying of Jesus known to Paul (a so-called “agraphon”) through oral tradition.* Paul is quoting an otherwise unknown word of Jesus, as he did later to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:35). Morris thinks that this is one of the many things that are not mentioned in the Gospels (Jn.21:25)<sup>9</sup>. Stott also argues similarly that “Paul was quoting a remembered *logion* or saying of the historic Jesus” or making an allusion rather than a citation<sup>10</sup>. But Milligan feels that such a saying of Jesus would hardly have been passed over by the evangelists and the very want of similarity with any recorded saying of Jesus should make us the more cautious of postulating an unrecorded one.<sup>11</sup>
3. *A Direct Revelation from the Lord.* This is the more probable view. It is a direct revelatory word given to Paul. The New Living translation puts it this way: “We tell you this directly from the Lord.” Bruce notes that in the Old Testament such a word of the Lord was regularly conveyed through the lips of prophets and that Paul and Silas were themselves acknowledged as prophets.”<sup>12</sup> “The word of the Lord” was the usual Old Testament formula for such direct revelation (Isa.1:10). In the LXX

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<sup>7</sup> Progressive revelation is the concept that God’s message to man was not given in one single act but was unfolded in a long series of successive acts.

<sup>8</sup> This is well defended by Robert L. Thomas, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, The Expositors Bible Commentary, vol.11, 276-277.

<sup>9</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 141.

<sup>10</sup> John Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time*, The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 99-100.

<sup>11</sup> George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians*, International Critical Commentary, 58.

<sup>12</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary 45, 99.

(Greek translation of the Old Testament) this phrase is used again and again for a prophecy.

In 1 Cor.15:51 Paul referred to the rapture a “mystery,” a truth formerly hidden but now revealed. Paul was explaining to the Thessalonians **a new revelation** concerning the rapture and the resurrection – details that had not previously been revealed to the church. It is obvious in the passage that Paul presents additional details that had not been known in the prophecies regarding the end times. **Paul did receive direct communication from the risen Lord from the very beginning of his ministry** (Acts 9:5-6; 22:17-21; Gal.1:12; 1 Cor.11:23). In 1Thess.4 we find another new revelation, an unveiled mystery. “What the apostle is about to utter was specially revealed to him, and in that revelation his utterance had its contents and authority, the reception of it conveying the commission and the qualification to tell it.”<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, we must admit that the most natural understanding of the formula “by the word of the Lord” is that it is a reference to **a direct revelatory prophecy**. Paul is here announcing a new truth which has been previously unknown. If this is granted, Paul is not referring to the resurrection in general, or to a post-tribulational resurrection of the saints, for such a truth was revealed in the pages of the Old Testament. Paul, just as infallible as any of the prophets of the old dispensation, **is declaring a new truth**. Paul is not teaching the fact of resurrection here, but the new revealed truth concerning the rapture and the fact that at the rapture the living would not have any advantage over the dead in Christ.

If the Thessalonians had believed that they would be going through the period of the Great Tribulation, they would have rejoiced that some of their dear ones had missed the Tribulation and were with the Lord. If they had a post-tribulational understanding of the return of Christ, would it not be better to be with the Lord? The Thessalonian believers evidently believed that they would not experience the time of the Tribulation and hence they waited for the return of Christ, grieving over their dead ones in Christ whom they thought had missed the blessing of the glorious event of the rapture.

## Outline of the Passage

1. Character of the instruction - v.13.
2. Contents of the instruction – vs.14-17.
  - a. Assurance concerning their dead - v.14.
  - b. Revelation concerning the two groups (“we who are alive and “those who have fallen asleep”) – v.15.
  - c. Manner of Christ’s return - v.16.

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<sup>13</sup> John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, 154.

- d. Consequence of Christ's return - v.17.
- 3. Comfort and encouragement in the instruction - v.18.

## **The Interpretation and Argument of the Passage in Relation to Eschatological Events**

The importance of this passage and its relationship to the rapture doctrine is well noted by Walvoord: "Probably more pre-tribulationists base their conclusion for a pre-tribulational rapture on 1 Thess.4 than any other single passage of Scripture."<sup>14</sup>

The reason for the grief of the Thessalonian believers is not explicitly stated (4:13) but a general inference can be drawn from the context. Paul had given them some instructions about the second advent doctrine while he was with them, but he was unable to stay and complete the instructions. They were left with several questions. Some of their members died possibly because of the persecution they had to bear, and their friends wondered anxiously if this meant that they would forfeit all share in the blessings which believers would enter at the return of Christ. Paul now writes to set their minds at ease, basing their assurance on a direct revelation from the Lord ("by the word of the Lord"). Christians who have died, Paul writes, will be at no disadvantage when Christ returns, for the first thing that will happen when He does return will be that the dead in Christ will be raised, not until that happens, will the believers who are still alive join them to meet their Lord, and be eternally in His presence. Paul then gives a sequence of eschatological events to establish this fact.

### **The Descent**

The eschatological events begin with Christ descending from heaven - **the Lord Himself** (emphatic) not an angel or His representative, but He Himself. The verb used with Christ is *katabaino* ("descend") which indicates from the context where the person or object descends (4:16) and the meeting point is in the air. The context determines the destination of the descent. As Gundry assumes "*katabaino*" does not always mean "a complete, uninterrupted descent"<sup>15</sup> (see "*katabaino*" used in Luke 6:17; 10:30; Jn 4:51; Acts 8:38; 23:10). If the purpose of the descent is to meet the saints in the air, then Gundry is right. Gundry's implication is that after meeting the saints in the air, the Lord continues to the earth. This would fit in well with a post-tribulational rapture scheme. But here the destination of those caught up in the rapture is heaven and not earth (4:17). In John 14:3 also the promise of Christ is that "I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." This is Christ's personal promise of His return to receive His

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<sup>14</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and The Tribulation*, 103.

people to the Father's house. Jesus was leaving to prepare a place for them in heaven, the Father's house.

### **"A Shout, the Voice of Archangel, Trumpet of God" (4:16)**

The manner of Christ's return is further elaborated in 4:16. He returns with **three signs**. **First, there is a shout** indicating a word of command (an authoritative utterance) which issues from a person of authority to the one inferior either in rank or in person. The word has a military tone to it indicating a battle cry. The purpose of this shout may be to awaken "those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."

**The second sign is the voice of the archangel.** There is no definite article with "voice" or "archangel." It may denote a vocal utterance such as an archangel uses. The word "archangel" occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Jude 9 where **Michael** is called the archangel. Jewish tradition knew of seven archangels. Some expositors think that the voice of an archangel refers to Michael's call (Dan.10:13) to angelic hosts to assume their battle positions for the conflict during the following Tribulation period (Rev.12:6-8). It seems that an archangel will add His voice to the Lord's shout of command.

**The third sign is the trumpet of God.** The addition "of God" does not mean that God blows the trumpet but defines the sphere to which it belongs. The trumpet in Scripture is a sign of assembling, a sign of going forward, and a sign of war. The trumpet in 1 Thess.4:16 is parallel to the last trumpet in 1 Cor.15:52<sup>16</sup> ("...last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound") and not to be confused with trumpets in other time periods.

Some commentators see these three signs together suggesting one idea. This interpretation is possible in this context. "The three phrases may express a single idea, that of 'the voice of the Son of God' by which the dead will be called forth, His 'command' being expressed by an archangel's voice,' and that again constituting the 'trumpet of God'"<sup>17</sup> Similarly Swindoll takes this three signs "as a sort of "wake-up call" to those who sleep, a summoning of those who are alive, and perhaps even a warning to those unbelievers who do not know that the day of the Lord is about to come."<sup>18</sup> Hogg and Vine paraphrase the idea as 'with a shout in the archangel's voice, even with the voice of the trump of God.'<sup>19</sup>

**A distinction is to be made between the "trumpets" in the rapture passages and the Tribulation passages.** The identification of the "seventh trumpet" of **Rev.11:15** with the

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor.15-51-58 is a parallel passage to 1 Thess. 4:13-18. But in the Corinthian passage Paul answers the question, what happens to those who do not die at the time of the rapture – the rapture of the living saints.

<sup>17</sup> George G. Finlay, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, Cambridge Greek Testament, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Swindoll's Living Insight New Testament Commentary, 71.

<sup>19</sup> C.F. Hogg and W.E. Vine, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, 143.

“last trumpet” of **1 Cor.15:52** and the “trumpet of God” in **1 Thess.4:16** *is the most important key to the mid-tribulation rapture theory.*<sup>20</sup> *But this is only an argument from analogy and not by exegesis.* In Rev.11 the scene is that of the glorious appearance and revelation of Christ to establish His Kingdom on earth (Rev.11:15-19). The chronology of events in Rev.11 is never associated with the rapture. There is no translation of the church in Rev.11. **The seventh trumpet in Rev.11 is “last” only in relation to the other six of the series.** In Rev.11 it is the *trumpet of an angel*, whereas in 1 Thess.4 it is the *trumpet of God*. The trumpets in Revelation pertain to judgments during the Tribulation, whereas the trumpet in 1 Cor.15 and 1 Thess.4 is related to the church.

In **Rev.10:7** we read that, the seventh trumpet which is about to sound may *last for a period of time* (“But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel”). In **Matt.24:31** a great trumpet serves to gather the elect of God, Here the angels sound this trumpet, and this is clearly stated as “after the tribulation of those days” (**Matt.24:29**). In point of time Matt.24:31 trumpet is *after* the seventh trumpet of Rev.11:15. **So Rev.11:15 is not the last trumpet.**

The distinction of these trumpets is valid based on the results from each trumpet blast. The seven trumpets of Rev.8-11 bring judgment and cosmic calamities whereas the trumpet of 1 Thess.4 occurs at the resurrection and rapture of Christians. It is a scene of salvation and deliverance. Also, the former trumpets are clearly sounded by angels whereas the latter trumpet is not. It is more likely that Paul has in mind the silver trumpets of redemption described in Num.10:2-10. They were made of silver half-shekels of redemption (Exod. 30:12-13). In their journeys through wilderness the trumpet was the signal to “pack up and march.” They were on their way to the promised land. This last trumpet is a beautiful symbol of the Rapture.<sup>21</sup>

In his strong frontal attack against the pre-tribulational Rapture view, Rosenthal makes the last trumpet equivalent of the entire Day of the Lord, the period of the final eschatological judgment. He writes: “The last trumpet will be nothing more, nothing less, nothing different than the final, climatic eschatological outpouring of the wrath of God.”<sup>22</sup> According to Rosenthal’s interpretation, the last trump arises out of the seventh seal (Rev.6:17; 8:1), and

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<sup>20</sup> Mid-tribulation Rapture view holds that the rapture of the church occurs at the midpoint of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel/midpoint of the Tribulation.

<sup>21</sup> T.E. Wilson, *1 Thessalonians*, What The Bible Teaches, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-wrath Rapture of The Church*, 193. This view argues that the first three-fourths of the Tribulation is the wrath of Man and the wrath of Satan, and not the wrath of God. The rapture of the church will occur before the final, most intense period of God’s wrath, sometime after the midpoint, just prior to the Day of the Lord. There is nothing particularly new in this view. It seems to be a modification of mid-tribulational rapture or some varieties of post-tribulationalism.



the rapture occurs at the last trump<sup>23</sup>. He further notes "... the Rapture must occur at the opening of the seventh seal and immediately prior to the beginning of God's wrath."<sup>24</sup>

The confusing position of Rosenthal is because he does not take into serious consideration the distinction between the trumpets (as shown earlier in our discussion). Rosenthal tries to equate the last trumpet of 1 Cor.15:52, 1 Thess.4:16, Joel 2:1 and the trumpets of Revelation 8. A careful examination of the biblical text shows that Joel 2:1 is a command to sound warning trumpet in Israel as an alarm of impending war and calamity. In Rev.8 -11 also trumpets signify no hope. They are trumpets of fire and blood; the downpouring of God's judgmental wrath. **In all these trumpets, the trumpeter, purpose, time and results are vastly different.**

### **A Resurrection (4:16)**

"The dead in Christ shall rise first." The dead in Christ will be raised just before the translation and transformation of the living. The entire procedure will happen instantaneously, "in a moment in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor.15:52). The word "moment" is from *atomos* from which we get the word "atom" and denotes indivisibility of the smallest conceivable quantity. The resurrection of the dead and the translation of the living will occur instantaneously, in an indivisible instant of time.

Already in 4:14 Paul has assured the Thessalonian believers that "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" but he did not explain the details. Since the Christ who comes will be the Christ who died and rose again, so those who have died in Him will rise with Him. The returning Christ is the resurrected Christ and He will be accompanied by His resurrected people. "First" means that the dead believers will be resurrected before the living saints are caught up.

The resurrection in 4:16 is *not* the resurrection of the wicked stated in Rev.20:1-10. Paul is not at all speaking of a general resurrection. He writes here only of the resurrection of "the dead in Christ." **"In Christ"** ("*en Christo*")<sup>25</sup> is a favorite expression of Paul. He uses it extensively in his writings to refer to believers in the church age. This phrase signifies the spiritual union and identity believers have with Christ. It is key element of Paul's teaching on salvation and Christian living. *It may be considered as a technical expression that states the relation of saints in union with Christ in the present age (church age), i.e.*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid;194.

<sup>25</sup>Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" over 170 times in his writings to refer to church - age believers. Speaking of himself in the third person, while explaining the privilege of God's grace and calling toward him, Paul said, "I know a man in Christ." It is of interest to me to note that James Stewart titled his book on Paul, *A Man in Christ – The Vital Elements of St. Paul's Religion*.

believers since the Day of Pentecost. **Paul never says, “in Jesus.” It is always “in Christ” or “in Christ Jesus,” “in the Lord” or “in Him.” He had the risen Lord in mind.**

*Since the rapture is the conclusion of God’s program of the church, the resurrection here must also be of the church.* Although physically dead, they are still “in Christ.” Death did not sever them from Christ. Paul does *not* mention the resurrection of the Tribulation saints or the Old Testament saints which will happen at the close of the Tribulation period (Rev.20:4-5; Dan.12:2; Isa.26:19).

The order of resurrection is as follows:

1. The resurrection of **Christ** as the first fruit of resurrection. This is the beginning of the resurrection program (1 Cor.15:23)<sup>26</sup>.
2. The resurrection of the **church-age saints** at the rapture (1 Thess.4:16).
3. The resurrection of the **Tribulation saints along with the Old Testament saints** at the end of the Tribulation period<sup>27</sup> (Rev.20:4-5; Dan.12:2; Isa.26:19).
4. The resurrection of the **unsaved dead** at the end of the millennium (Rev.20:5, 11-15).

### **A Rapture and a Reunion**

Having dealt with the “dead in Christ” group, Paul now focuses His attention on the living saints who will be changed (“we who are alive and remain”). We who are still alive and are left shall be caught up together with the resurrected saints to meet the Lord in the air (4:17).

The English word “rapture” is derived from the Latin word *rapere*, meaning “to seize or snatch.” It corresponds to the Greek word *harpazo* which Paul uses here<sup>28</sup>. This word expresses force, violence and suddenness. So, it can be translated as “caught up,” “swept up,” “snatched up” etc. Seize and carry off by force is the basic idea. “The suddenness, the swiftness, and the divine character of the power which is operative in this being snatched up are here emphasized.”<sup>29</sup>

The purpose of this snatching up (rapture) will be not only to unite the Christian living with the Christian dead (“together with them”), but also to unite them with the Lord. This

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<sup>26</sup> “But each in his own order.” The word “order” (*tagma*) is a military metaphor and denotes a ‘company,’ ‘troop,’ ‘band’ or ‘rank.’ The picture is that of troops taking their proper position and order.

<sup>27</sup> Some early dispensationalists taught that the resurrection associated with the rapture included the OT saints as well as the church age saints. This view is not widely held today.

<sup>28</sup> Paul uses the word also in 2 Cor.12:2, 4: “...such a man was caught up to third heaven”; “was caught up into paradise.”

<sup>29</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of 1 and II Thessalonians*, 118.

glorious reunion and meeting take place in the air. The saints are carried up in the clouds (4:17). In Acts 1:9 clouds are associated with Christ's ascension, and here with the ascension of His saints, Clouds are a vehicle for God in Psa.104:3; Isa.19:1 and for the Son of Man in Dan.7:13; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; M k.13:26. In Matt.24:30 it is noted that the Son of Man is coming **on** (*epi*) the clouds and here in the rapture it is **in** ("*en*") the clouds<sup>30</sup>. One explicitly states visibility and the other implies invisibility. In Matt.24 we have a description about the glorious appearance of Christ to establish His Kingdom. But in 1 Thess.4 the context is the rapture in the air for the saints<sup>31</sup>.

Some interpret "clouds" as symbolic, signifying the presence of God. "Clouds" are seen as a regular feature of biblical theophanies. But as Best rightly observes, "Here clouds are related to men and not to God and therefore are not regarded as supplying a veil for his majesty, they are the vehicle by which men are raptured."<sup>32</sup> The context here demands literal clouds rather than a symbolic presence of God.

**"In the air"** means between heaven and earth. The word "air" (*aera*) means atmosphere in its New Testament usage. The Lord chooses to meet His saints in the air which is the demons' realm of activity (Eph.2:2). This shows Christ's complete victory and mastery over them. A celebration of victory may be implied here.

**"To meet the Lord"** is literally *into a meeting with the Lord*. Many consider the term "meeting" (*apantesis*) to be a technical term. Bruce writes: "When a dignitary paid an official visit ("*parousia*") to a city in Hellenistic times, the actions of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escort him back on the final stage of his journey was called the "*apantesis*."<sup>33</sup> But this term need not be seen always in its technical nuance. Bruce further observes that "These analogies (especially in association with the term *parousia*) suggests the possibility that the Lord is pictured here as escorted on the remainder of his journey to earth by his people – both those raised from the dead and those who have remained alive. But there is nothing in the word *apantesis* or in this context which *demands* this

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<sup>30</sup> Lightfoot compares the clouds to a chariot on which the saints will be borne aloft. See J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> Even though there are similarities between Christ's coming in Matt.24 and in 1 Thess.4 the difference with the very things that are similar is striking:

1. Angels" (Matt.24:13); "Archangel" (1 Thess.4:16).
2. "On the clouds" (Matt.24:30); "in the clouds" (1 Thess.4:17).
3. "A great trumpet" (Matt.24:31); "trumpet of God" (1 Thess.4:16).
4. "They shall gather the elect" (Matt.24:31); "we shall be caught up" (1 Thess.4:17).

Other differences also are noted by Hiebert. See D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 200.

<sup>32</sup> Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, 198.

<sup>33</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary 45, 102.

interpretation; it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with his people) continues his journey to earth or returns to heaven.”<sup>34</sup>

Moo tries to support a post-tribulational rapture from the use of *apantesis*. “The saints, after meeting the Lord in the air, accompany Him back to earth instead of going with Him to heaven.”<sup>35</sup> But he also understands the weakness of his argument and further adds, “However, this argument can be given little weight. The word does not have to bear this technical meaning, nor is it certain that the return to the point of origin must be immediate.”<sup>36</sup>

After thoroughly investigating the field of the meaning of *apantesis* in the LXX (Greek translation of the Old Testament), Wallace has conclusively proven that *apantesis* is not always a technical term supporting a post-tribulational rapture.<sup>37</sup> He sums up his observation thus: “I am not suggesting that we have absolute or necessary designed parallels to a pre-tribulational rapture in all of these passages! Rather I am simply stating that (1) *eis apantesis* is not always a technical term (or phrase), and (2) even when it is, it supports a pre-tribulational ‘meeting’ equally as well (if not better) as a post - tribulational one.”<sup>38</sup>

Hiebert comments that “it is precarious to assert that those who have been caught up will immediately return to earth with Him. A post-tribulational rapture cannot be demonstrated on the basis of this expression.”<sup>39</sup> Paul does not specify here whether those who caught up to meet the Lord return to heaven with Him or come back to earth with Him. But in His farewell discourse in the upper room, Jesus made it clear that, His personal return will be to take His own unto Himself for the express purpose of taking them to the heavenly mansions in His Father’s house (John 14:1-3). *A coming home takes place at the rapture*. When we compare 1 Thess.4:13-18 with John 14:1-3 this truth becomes clear and evident.

The rapture presented in 1 Thess.4 is an imminent<sup>40</sup> event with no preceding signs or order of events that had to be enacted. Paul classifies himself among the living (“we who are alive and remain...”) because of his hope in the imminent appearing of Christ. He taught his converts to be “waiting for His Son from heaven” (1 Thess.1:10). Some scholars claim that

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid; 103.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Rapture: Pre, - Mid, - Post-Tribulational?* 181.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, “A Critiques of the Post-tribulational understanding of 1 Thess.4:13-18” (A paper given at Grace Theological Seminary, March 17, 1982), 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>39</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 202.

<sup>40</sup> The doctrine of imminency suggests that the Rapture may take place at any moment, and without delay. While it may not be immediate nor necessarily soon, it is next on the prophetic program and may take place at any time. The rapture is signless, unannounced, and largely unexpected.

Paul was mistaken in believing that he would live on until the return of the Lord<sup>41</sup>. On the contrary, Paul is not reaching that conclusion. He is instead classifying himself as among the living who look for the coming of the Lord, being watchful and ready.

1 Thess.4:13-18 along with 1 Cor.15:51-58 give no support to the **partial rapture view**<sup>42</sup> which holds that only spiritually committed believers, prepared and ready, will be taken in the rapture. Carnal Christians will be left to go through at least enough of the Tribulation so that they will be made ready to meet the Lord. But Paul includes **all** believers in Christ in the rapture event. They will participate in the rapture described here. Paul does not make any classification of spiritual or carnal believers in this context. No special qualification for rapture is mentioned in these passages.

### **A Reassurance (4:18)**

In the light of the eschatological program outlined in 1 Thess.4:13-18, Thessalonians are to find comfort. This message has a consoling impact on those who are sorrowing the loss of their loved ones. They are to comfort one another or encourage one another with these words. The same note of encouragement is repeated in 5:11 in the context of Christian service and duty. But in 4:18 the sense of comfort is uppermost. The truth of rapture both comforts and encourages.

If the Thessalonian Christians were to go through the Tribulation period, how can Paul comfort them with these words? It is true that comfort has to do with the fact that all believers will participate in the glorious event of the rapture and always be with the Lord. But to make the statement in verse 18 sound more comforting, the post-tribulationists have to downplay the tribulation. Gundry struggles with the issue of how a post-tribulation rapture could be comfort<sup>43</sup>. Hibert rightly observes that, "But if they had been taught that the church must go through the great tribulation the logical reaction for them would have been to rejoice that these loved ones had escaped that great period of suffering which they felt was about to occur."<sup>44</sup> The threefold promise of resurrection, glorification, and rapture to heaven is indeed words of hope, encouragement and consolation to the fearful who wonder if Christ may have forgotten the dearly departed.

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<sup>41</sup> Bailey & Clarke, *The First and Second Epistles To The Thessalonians*, Interpreters Bible, Vol. II, 301.

<sup>42</sup> An exponent of this view explains: "...the purpose of the tribulation is also to be the testing of lukewarm, shallow, Laodicean Christians who will be left behind at the coming of Christ.....The tribulation then is for the purpose of trying the faith of these who profess to be Christians but who really never repented or are .living in disobedience to the will of God" (Ray Bubraker, "The Purpose of the Tribulation", *Radar News*, Dec., 1968, 6).

<sup>43</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and The Tribulation*, 101-102.

<sup>44</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 205.

Paul affirms that these words (“with these words,” 4:18) are communicated with the authority of the Lord and it is a solid ground for comfort, encouragement and hope. Paul’s words of comfort are relevant only in the context of the expectation of a pre-tribulation rapture.

## **Conclusion**

1 Thess.4:13-18 is the most important passage in the New Testament dealing with the doctrine of the Rapture. Most pre-tribulationists base their conclusions on rapture on this passage. Paul’s primary purpose in writing these words was to comfort the Thessalonian believers in their bereavement and to impart a solid ground for their hope. **Hence Paul is not answering academic questions about eschatology.** The prophetic revelation given in this passage contains everything that is necessary for hope and comfort. In all what Paul wrote here he was an inspired apostle of Jesus Christ referring to real events which belong to history, time and space.

The passage under discussion does not explicitly state the chronological relationship of the Rapture to the Great Tribulation. But the pre-tribulation rapture view defended in this paper is determined largely by theological and exegetical considerations which can be well supported from 1 Thess.4:13-18.

The rapture presented in 1 Thess.4 is an imminent event with no preceding order of events that had to be enacted. It is also very important to note in this passage that the resurrection of the saints will occur at the same time as the translation of the living. The timing of these two events is quite a new revelation to the Thessalonian Christians. Even though the doctrine of the resurrection is a familiar truth found both in the Old and New Testaments, **the idea of a translation of living saints is a new revelation.** Paul calls it a “mystery” in 1 Cor.15:51.

Rev.20:4 speaks of resurrection after Christ’s coming to earth. At that time Christ establishes His kingdom. But it does not happen during the descent from heaven and the rapture of the saints. In 1 Thess.,4 there is no mention of a time of tribulation intervening the events of Rapture and Resurrection. **The hope of the rapture is presented as a comfort to the Thessalonian Christians sorrowing for their loved ones who have died.** Comfort comes from the alleviation of fear of the unknown plus the understanding of God’s program that is in store for His people. The comfort is directed to the believer facing death as well as the loved ones of a person who has fallen asleep in Jesus. Paul brings the rapture program to a climax in the believer’s eternal bliss, “thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess.4:17).