The Rapture
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction

The theme of Paul’s epistle to the Thessalonians is the coming of Christ for the Church. Paul began the letter with a note on how the church was born (chapter 1); how the church was nurtured (chapter 2); and how the church was established (chapter 3). Paul has exhorted the believers to walk in holiness (chapter 4:1-8); harmony (4:9-10); in honesty (4:11-12) and now hope (4:13-5:11).

Since Paul has left the band of believers have faced hardship, accusation, opposition, persecution. Some have died. Loved ones were gone. What about them? The people who were left had questions, pain, sorrow, grief. They needed to know the truth about what happens when you die.

We live in a world where death comes frequently and is no respecter of persons. With sorrow and grief come questions. The questions may come from parents who in their worst nightmare have placed their child in a crib for baby’s night-night; only to discover the normal cry does not come at the normal time. Baby is life-less and blue. The paramedics use an unfamiliar term; SID’S; Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. I have prayed with families from Columbine; in New York I spent 10 days at ground zero; two of those in the family center; and two more at the morgue. I have lost count of the tearful nights; the hospital visits; and the funerals. Paul must have heard all the same questions; “would their deceased loved ones be somehow handicapped by the second coming of Christ? What would Jesus do about them? Will those who are alive have any advantage over those who have died? What is the truth about what happens when you die? Paul answers those questions and gives comfort, consolation, encouragement and hope; he does this based on five facts:

**Revelation : Jesus Is The Source Of Truth (vv.13, 15a)**
**Return: The Truth About Jesus’ Second Coming (vv.14-15)**
**Resurrection: The Truth About The Dead (vv.15-16)**
**Rapture: The Truth About Christians Living In The Last Generation (v.17)**
**Reunion: The Truth About Our Eternal Destiny With Christ (v.18)**

**Revelation : Jesus Is The Source Of Truth (vv.13, 15a)**

*1 Thessalonians 4:13 (NKJV) But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.*

**What happens when you die?** Paul does not want the believers to be “ignorant”. The pagan world in which Paul lived, for the most part, had little hope for life after death. A typical inscription on a pagan grave reads: “I was not; I became; I am not; I care not.” The philosophy is very old. It is a philosophy of despair and hopelessness. This is the belief that we came from no where, we are going no where and our current pain is a point of reference in a journey of meaninglessness. There are still people who believe this lie. Atheistic existentialists believe
life is meaningless, pointless, worthless, useless. Several years ago two gunmen, students shot and killed 13 people and injured 21 more in what was at that time the worst school shooting in the history of our country. One of the gunmen (Eric Harris) wrote on his website; “My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, if you don’t like it, you die. If I don’t like you or I don’t like what you want me to do, you die. Dead people can’t do many things, like argue, whine, *$@ch; complain, narc, rat out, criticize or even. . .talk. So that the only way to solve arguments with all of you. . .out there, I just kill. God, I can’t wait till I can kill you people. I don’t care if I live or die in the shootout. All I want to do is kill and injure as many of you as I can”.

The Roman philosopher Seneca said, “Anyone can stop a man’s life, but no one his death; a thousand doors open to it”. In other words, anyone can kill anyone, but no one can make certain he or she will never die. So what are we to believe about death? How can mortal human beings penetrate beyond the grave and find peace and assurance? Can people die and come back and tell us about their experiences?

Bogus charlatans like John Edwards in his program “Crossing Over” claim to be able to do just that. Edwards claims to hear the voices of the dead who want to contact loves one here on the earth. Scientists have investigated near death phenomena. Occultists have sought to channel spirit beings from other dimensions (I call this cosmic inter-dimensional channel surfing). People claim encounters with the dead. People are hurting and grieving and open and vulnerable and gullible. They are willing to believe almost anything!

Several years ago a book was published, entitled Beyond Death's Door by Dr. Maurice Rawlings. Dr. Rawlings, a specialist in Internal Medicine and Cardiovascular Disease, resuscitated many people who had been clinically dead. Dr. Rawlings, a devout atheist, "considered all religion "hocus-pocus" and death nothing more than a painless extinction". But something happened in 1977 that brought a dramatic change in the life of Dr. Rawlings! He was resuscitating a man, terrified and screaming — descending down into the flames of hell:
"Each time he regained heartbeat and respiration, the patient screamed, "I am in hell!" He was terrified and pleaded with me to help him. I was scared to death. . . Then I noticed a genuinely alarmed look on his face. He had a terrified look worse than the expression seen in death! This patient had a grotesque grimace expressing sheer horror! His pupils were dilated, and he was perspiring and trembling — he looked as if his hair was "on end." Then still another strange thing happened. He said, "Don't you understand? I am in hell. . . Don't let me go back to hell!"
The man was serious, and it finally occurred to me that he was indeed in trouble. He was in a panic like I had never seen before." (Maurice Rawlings, Beyond Death's Door, (Thomas Nelson Inc., 1979) p. 3).

Dr. Rawlings said, no one, who could have heard his screams and saw the look of terror on his face could doubt for a single minute that he was actually in a place called hell! The Doctor went on to make the statement; “Until you know were you are going, it is not safe to die!” No kidding.
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Death is a certainty and a mystery. But someone has the facts about Death!

1 Thessalonians 4:15 (NKJV) For this we say to you by the word of the Lord..."

Why should we substitute mere human speculation for divine revelation? The Lord Jesus Christ has taken out all the guesswork. Look carefully at verse 15; “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord...” Where did Paul get his information? Was it ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, FOX news, or Oprah? Did Paul get it from local Judean journalists looking for a big news story? Paul claims his information comes directly from the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul did not make up the story, or steal the story from some unnamed source. Paul received his information from God. Jesus Christ has given us the only reliable record of information about what happens when we die. How many people do you know who died, came back to life, never to die again? Pretty short list. Paul has already told the Thessalonian believers (I Thess. 1:10) “...and to wait for His Son from Heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come”. Since Jesus has conquered death—we need not fear death or the future! Jesus is the only accurate source of information about what happens when you die! Why? Because He is the only person who ever lived and died and rose from the dead and lives forever!

Return: The Truth About Jesus’ Second Coming (vv.14-15)

1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NKJV) For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

Paul reminds the readers what they believe. They believed that Jesus died and rose again and would be coming soon! This is exactly what we believe. The New Testament repeatedly teaches that Jesus will return (318 times in 260 chapters). Jesus comes back for several reasons; (1) He comes back to save us (1 Thess. 1:9-10); (2) He comes back to serve us (1 Thess. 2:19-20; in a joyous reunion, which I will address later); (3) He comes back to provide stability or assurance for our existence (1 Thess. 3:11-13). (4) But Jesus comes back for another reason; so that we can have hope in times of sorrow and sadness and despair. For some of you that time is now.

Death has been called the great leveler. Everyone dies. Death makes us equal. But there is no comfort in the fact death makes us equal. Equal loss, equal sorrow, equal separation. Therein lies its power to create the deepest and most abiding pain our hearts can experience. When you love someone; and they die; you want comfort and you want hope. Paul is reminding the Thessalonians they have every reason to believe they will see their loved ones again! They would be coming back with Jesus! They are alive! Because Jesus is alive!

The Thessalonians were people like us. When their child died, when their parents died, when their loved ones died; they cried, just like you, their hearts ached, just like you. I have seen scores of parents, teachers, police officers, fire fighters weeping tears of joy in discovering their children were alive.
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(15b) “...that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.”

In verse 15b the word “precede” means “to so order or control circumstances that a certain proposed act will not take place”. Our presence on the earth; our life in this world; will not prevent our loved ones from being with Jesus. They will go to heaven.

Resurrection: The Truth About The Dead (vv.15-16)

1 Thessalonians 4:16 (NKJV) For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

“. . .and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Different denominations tease each other with these words! But the truth about the dead is they will be resurrected not reconstructed or reincarnated! When Paul preached the resurrection of the dead to the Athenian philosophers, they mocked him. To the Greeks—the great goal of life was a perfect body! The spent their whole life to get a perfect body, then grow old and get rid of the tattered old thing! Their idea was—when the body is old and useless—get rid of it! The Greeks thought; “Even if the resurrection were true, if you are old, wrinkled, crippled, injured, bent, useless, who wants to resurrect a beat up old body? The Greeks like many modern skeptics speculated; “what happens when your molecules are spread across the land? You die. You are buried. The grass grows. The cows eat the grass. The cows give milk. People drink the milk. Where’s the body? How can anyone, even God reassemble our atoms and recreate us? To the Greeks the teaching or the doctrine of the resurrection was foolish and impossible!

1 Thessalonians 4:17 (NKJV) Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Paul speaks of three unique sounds; (1) The Lord shouts “the Lord descends with a shout (v.16); (2) The sound of a trumpet “and with the trumpet of God” (3) and the voice of an archangel. I am come from a family where we shout when we get home. Kind of like Desi Arnaz on the old “I Love Lucy” reruns. “Oh Lucy, I’m home! I believe the shout is in part--God’s way of saying, “It’s time!” Trumpets were sounded to declare war, announce special times, gather people for a journey, or to herald the arrival of an important person!

Why an archangel? Perhaps angels are the only ones with a big enough voice to raise the dead! The shout is a victory shout. Jesus believed in the resurrection. The Bible teaches that death is not the end of life. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, even if he were dead, yet shall he live”. The grave is not the end.

Rapture: The Truth About Christians Living In The Last Generation (v.17)
Why is there going to be a rapture? Remember the context of Paul’s writing—he is comforting them because their loved ones have died! The Thessalonians are in mourning! Why would God; “rapture” or “snatch” or forcibly remove His people just prior to His second coming? I believe the answer in part is to provide hope in this world. “Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). The world is dying. What do you think? Is the world getting better or worse? Human suffering takes place because of human sin, not because of divine apathy or indifference! God does care. Jesus really loves you.

“. . .caught up together with them in the clouds”

The words “caught up” in the original language comes from a single Greek word; “harpazo”. The word has several meanings and we will consider a few of those meanings. The Latin Father’s translated this word raptures; our English cognate is rapture. The word means to be “caught up” or “snatched away” or violently carried away (by force). (1) “to carry off by force” (see John 16:15). Some have speculated that Satan and demons may work overtime to try to keep us from leaving the earth. Warren Wiersbe commented; “I trust it does not suggest that some saints will be so attached to the world that they must literally be dragged away. Like Lot being delivered from Sodom, they will scarcely be saved” (Wiersbe p. 181). (2) To rescue from the danger of destruction (see Acts 23:10). The world will face many more moments of danger. “We’ve been told, God has warned us, Jesus is coming soon!” (3) To catch away in a speedy fashion. This is the translation in Acts 8:39 where Philip is caught away (raptured) by the Holy Spirit and transported to a curious Ethiopian government official. We who are alive and remain until the coming of Jesus will be raptured, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. This is the amount of time it takes for light to reflect off the surface of your cornea! (4) To claim for oneself. This is Jesus Christ’s perspective of His church. You belong to Christ. (5) To move to a new place. Paul used the term in relationship to his vision of heaven in 2 Cor. 12:1-4.

Reunion: The Truth About Our Eternal Destiny With Christ (v.18)

1 Thessalonians 4:18 (NKJV) Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The truth is Christians will forever be with the Lord! We will meet the Lord in the air (v.17). There were two Greek words for “air”. One was aither (ether) the other aer. A Greek standing on Mount Olympus (6,403 elev.) pointing downward would say “aer”. Pointing toward the sky they would say “aither”. How close will the Lord come in our inner atmosphere to “snatch” the saints? I don’t know.

Meet carries the idea of greeting a royal person, or an important dignitary. We have walked by faith on the earth with Jesus, but in the “air” we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:1-2). We will experience a glorious reunion. We will be given glorified bodies. We will be reunited, reconciled, and we will be with the Lord forever. It will also be a day of reckoning. This is called the judgment seat of Christ (Rom.14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10). The Greek word translated “bema” is judgment.
We will be reunited with saved loved ones. I am often asked; “Will we know each other in heaven? I like Spurgeon’s answer; “Do you think we are going to be less smart in heaven than here on the earth?” If we know each other here; we will know each other there. My guts tell me we will have all eternity to get used to each other. No wonder Jesus tells us to love one another. We are in training. For the Christian death is no accident, it is a divine appointment with eternity. “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

Gravestone in England reads: Pause, my friend as you walk by; as you are now so once was I. As I am now, so you will be. Prepare my friends to follow me. Someone added these lines underneath; To follow you is not my intent, until I know which way you went!

Conclusion

Catherine Marshall wrote a biography of her husband entitled “A Man Called Peter”. Peter Marshall was a Pastor and former Chaplain for the United States Congress. In the book she tells the touching story of a young terminally ill son. His name was Kenneth. Because Kenneth was so ill, he was forced to stay indoors for long periods of time. He could not run and play like the other children. His mother would read Kenneth stories of heroism and courage; of kings and castles; Kenneth was very fond of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. He loved bold adventure tales. Kenneth loved stories were heros took risk to right wrongs. He also knew that he was dying. One day Kenneth asked his mother the dreaded question; “Mother, what is like to die?” The woman struggled to maintain her composure. She excused herself for a moment and went into the kitchen, to pray and to compose her thoughts. She knew that what she said at that very moment was very important. She asked God to give her wisdom and to prevent her from crying. She said, “Kenneth, you remember when you were a tiny boy how you used to play so hard all day that when night came you would be too tired to undress, and you would tumble into mother’s bed and fall asleep?” Kenneth said, “Yes”. “That was not your bed--it was not where you belonged. And you would stay there a little while. In the morning, much too your surprise, you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. You were there because someone loved you and had taken care of you. Your father had come--and with big strong arms--carried you away. Kenneth, death is just like that. We just wake up some morning to find ourselves i the other room--our room where we belong--because the Lord Jesus loved us.” The lad’s shining trusting face looked up into hers told her that the point had gone home and that there would be no more fear--only love and trust in his little heart as he went to meet the Father in Heaven. He never questioned again. And several weeks later he fell asleep just as she had said.

The coming of Jesus brings with it--comfort and hope. For the unbeliever the coming of Jesus brings ridicule, or terror or dread. For the Christian the coming of Jesus serves as an incentive to pray carefully, serve faithfully, watch specifically, separate from sin and connect consciously to Jesus.

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18