

An Exegetical Study of I Thessalonians 4:13-18 with Reference to the Rapture

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I.

Historical Background of the Letter

The Apostle Paul traveled to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, about the year 51 AD. Thessalonica was an ideal place for mission work, since it was the capital of Macedonia; a commercially active harbor town which had attracted many Jewish people; and it was located on the highway that connected Rome with the East. The presence of a synagogue in this Greek city no doubt had an influence on some of the pagan citizens. Luke gives the following outline of Paul's work in Thessalonica:

“Now when they had passed through ... they came to Thessalonica, where was a *synagogue of the Jews*; and Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and *three sabbath days* reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opining and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. And *some of them*, believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the *devout Greeks* a great multitude, and of the chief *women* not a few.” (Acts 17:1-4)

According to Luke, Paul worked in the synagogue of Thessalonica for just “three sabbath days.” Since that is the only reference Luke gives to the length of time Paul was able to spend in that city, one might conclude that the Thessalonian church received only a month or less of instruction from the Apostle. But most commentators draw a different conclusion, namely that Luke is merely indicating the amount of time Paul taught in the local synagogue before the unbelieving Jews closed the door to him. After that occurred, they feel that Paul continued to work in the area for perhaps several months. They note that the congregation grew to include ‘a great number of Greeks who were former idol worshippers (cf. I Thessalonians 1:9, “... ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;”). The congregation began with a nucleus of a few Jewish Christians, but it soon became predominantly Gentile.

The sudden triumph of the work in Thessalonica was not due to the persuasiveness or magnetism of men, but to the power of the Gospel. This does not mean that Paul and his co-workers were listless or lazy. As a matter of fact they worked “night and day” in order to distinguish themselves from the array of traveling philosophers who passed through the city seeking only fame and fortune, and in order to set an example for the members of the congregation who were inclined to quit working, sit back and watch the sky for Christ's return (I Thessalonians 2:9, II Thessalonians 3:8). Yet in spite of his own “labor and travail” Paul gave all the credit for the success of the work to the Holy Ghost and the power of the Gospel:

“For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost ... ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven ... even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.” (I Thessalonians 1:5-6, 9-10)

As we read those lines, two other things come to our attention. First, Paul's reference to “*much affliction*” and second, his emphasis on the *return of Christ*.

“Affliction” in the form of Jewish pressure against the Gospel message had begun already while Paul was there. Most of the city's Jews had refused to listen to Paul's instruction. The situation was volatile. They were not like the Jews of Berea who “received the word with all readiness of mind” (Acts 17:11). Luke reports that the Jews of Thessalonica developed such a furiously jealous attitude toward the work of Paul and Silas that they threatened the church with hired muscle and legal pressure:

“But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city in an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; Whom Jason hath received; and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go. And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea ... ” (Acts 17:5-10)

Nor did these opponents of the Gospel give up easily. After Paul had slipped out of the city they followed him to Berea, 50 miles away, and forced him to leave there also (Acts 17:13-14). Therefore we can understand Paul’s deep concern about the affliction the Thessalonians still might be receiving from these unbelieving Jews. Would the church stand fast? Timothy was sent to find out (I Thessalonians 3:1-5). The report that he brought back guided Paul in writing this first letter. It was to be a letter of encouragement and instruction.

One of the main elements of instruction in the letter is the doctrine of Christ’s return. Eleven of its 89 verses are devoted to it. Why did Paul stress this doctrine? One purpose might have been to encourage the Thessalonians in their affliction. Like Christians elsewhere, and like Christ before them, they were experiencing some of the wrath of man now; but because of Christ, their returning Savior, the real wrath to come would not touch them (I Thessalonians 1:10; 2:14-16).

Another reason for stressing the doctrine of Christ’s return apparently is to instruct them further. The information on eschatology that Paul had given them while he was there (II Thessalonians 2:5) needed some repetition and elaboration. This is understandable since most of the Thessalonians were recent converts from a heathen Greek background. They had been accustomed to dismal pagan funerals and hopeless heathen thoughts about death and the future. When Timothy returned from Thessalonica with his report he undoubtedly mentioned that the church was having difficulty discarding some of these old heathen concepts. The members of the church dearly hoped to see the return of Christ and when instead they saw their loved ones dying before that return, they were deeply disturbed. So Paul writes to instruct them again about Christ’s return and to assure them that their Christian relatives and friends who had fallen asleep in Jesus not only would be raised from death, but raised at the very instant of Christ’s coming. Thus all believers, regardless of their present condition, will see, hear and even participate in the joy and glory of that unparalleled, triumphant event.

All Christians have found this paragraph of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians particularly valuable and reassuring. It is frequently read at funerals and the ancient church made it the historic Epistle for the 25th Sunday after Trinity.

II.

Translation of I Thessalonians 4:13-18

13 Οὐ θέλομεν δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί, περὶ τῶν κοιμημένων, ἵνα μὴ λυπήσθε καθὼς καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ οἱ μὴ ἔχοντες ἐλπίδα.

14 εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη, οὕτως καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἄξει σὺν αὐτῷ.

15 Τοῦτο γὰρ ὑμῖν λέγομεν ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου, ὅτι ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου οὐ μὴ φθάσωμεν τοὺς κοιμηθέντας.

13) We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are sleeping, lest you should be grieved as also the others (are) who do not have hope.

14) For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again thus also God will bring those who fell asleep in Jesus with him.

15) For this we tell you as a message from the Lord, that we who are living who are left behind until the arrival of the Lord certainly shall not (begin to) precede those who fell asleep;

16 ὅτι αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ἐν κελεύσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ, καταβήσεται ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον,

17 ἔπειτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς ἀρπαγησόμεθα ἐν νεφέλαις εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἀέρα· καὶ οὕτως πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἐσόμεθα.

18 Ὡστε παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις.

16) because the Lord himself with a cry of command, with (the) voice of (the) archangel and with (the) trumpet of God, shall come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first,

17) then we who are living who are left behind simultaneously together with them shall be caught up in the clouds to a meeting with the Lord in (the) air; and accordingly we will be forever with (the) Lord.

18) And so comfort one another with these words.

III. Comments

v. 13) We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are sleeping, lest you should be grieved as also the others (are) who do not have hope.

The opening phrase of this verse is a favorite expression with Paul. He uses it a total of six times in four different letters (Romans, I & II Corinthians, and I Thessalonians). Here it is his way of saying, "Listen, I want to teach you something."

The instruction that follows is meant for the entire congregation – both for those who were recently bereaved and for those who would experience the loss of a Christian friend or relative in the future.

The word "sleep" is being used figuratively, because as verse 16 shows, the subject is the death of Christians. Luke and Peter also refer to the death of believers as "sleep." In so doing they are following the lead of Jesus, who not only called death "sleep," but who demonstrated its temporary nature by raising Jairus' daughter, his friend Lazarus, and himself from death. The classical Greek authors also like to compare death with sleep, but since they did not know the Savior or his power, they wrote the word without any real hope. Without the true God they could have no hope (Ephesians 2:12).

Death naturally causes grief. If death is coupled with hopelessness in the mind of the bereaved, it causes a grief that knows no comfort. Paul does not want the Thessalonians to experience any such pagan grief, – a hopeless grief. There is a difference between the grief of a Christian and that of a pagan, and the heart of the difference is hope. Christians have hope – a tear-stopping, comforting hope based on God's promises concerning those who "sleep." The next verses show what that hope is.

v.14) For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, thus also God will bring those who fell asleep in Jesus with Him.

The Christian's hope has a solid foundation; it is based upon the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christian's hope is far-reaching; it goes beyond this world to the next, beyond the day of the Church Militant to that of the Church Triumphant. I Corinthians 15:19-20 makes a similar point about our Christian hope, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept."

Some interpreters believe that the Thessalonians did not really have any doubt about the resurrection of the body. They say that the question bothering the church was whether the Christians who had died would rise soon enough to share in the joyful, glorious moment of Christ's return. That interpretation could explain Paul's desire to stress in these verses the promise of an immediate resurrection of believers (as he also does in I Corinthians 15:52) and the promise that they will actually participate in that event (cf. v. 17).

Note that like the KJV we are translating the phrase διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, “in Jesus,” rather than “through Jesus.” C. Moule suggests that διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ is an idiomatic expression which is no different from ἐν Χριστῷ in verse 16. Some other translators feel strongly that the διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ phrase should be connected with the verb “bring,” “God will *through Jesus bring* those who fell asleep with him.” Either way, the point is that the “sleeping” bodies of believers will not only be glorified, rejoined with their souls and raised, but this will happen at the very moment of Christ’s majestic return. They will not miss a thing.

W. Hendricksen has a somewhat different interpretation of “God will bring those who fell asleep ... with Him.” He says that it means, “he will bring their souls along from heaven ... ” (p. 113f.). The problem with this interpretation is that by making the phrase “those who fell asleep” apply to the *souls* of believers he gives the impression that the souls of believers fall asleep at death, whereas, only their bodies “sleep.” In another place he correctly rejects the idea of a soul-sleep (p. 109f.).

v.15) For this we tell you as a message from the Lord that we who are living who are left behind until the arrival of the Lord certainly shall not (begin to) precede those who fell asleep;

To emphasize the divine source of the promise he is now giving, Paul adds the expression ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου. The translation, “as a message from the Lord” is suggested by Moule (p. 79). Lenski prefers to translate the phrase, “in connection with the Lord’s word.” He also notes that what follows is not a direct quote of Scripture, but simply “a reference to all that the Lord said about his *Parousia*...” whether recorded in the Gospels or not.

The pronoun “we” in the phrase, “we who are living who are left behind” is understood by some to mean that Paul expected to be alive when Jesus would return. Paul could hardly rule out that possibility – any more than we can. Of course, the word “we” can apply to any Christians who will be alive when Christ returns. The main point of this new sentence is that those Christians who die are not going to be at any disadvantage on the last day. They too will greet the suddenly present and visible Savior. Παρουσία is the word that Scripture uses frequently to refer to Christ’s *visible* presence on the *last day* (Matthew 24:27, 37, 39; II Peter 3:12). The believers who are living on earth at that time will not at all (οὐ μὴ) even begin to precede the ‘sleeping’ believers in meeting Christ. Φθάσωμεν “we shall (not) precede” is an aorist subjunctive with μὴ – a construction which can be translated as an ingressive aorist, “begin to ... ” (cf. Robertson-Davis’ grammar, p. 296).

In this connection, Martin Luther writes, “ ... we who may still be living will not see the Lord Christ any sooner than those who have died, even though we shall be drawn upward with open eyes and still be living in the body, whereas the others have long since decayed and, to our minds, become nothing, and even though it would seem that we, who are still living, would be the first and would see the Lord much sooner than the dead. But he would have it that the dead would all rise with us in the same moment and have eyes as pure and fine as ours to see as well as we do. (Reason calls this ridiculous, but he tells me that he is speaking the Word of God.)” – from his sermon delivered at the death of Elector John of Saxony, *LW* 51, p. 252.

vv. 16-18) because the Lord himself with a cry of command, with (the) voice of (the) archangel and with (the) trumpet of God shall come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are living who are left behind, simultaneously together with them shall be caught up in the clouds to a meeting with the Lord in the air; and accordingly we will be forever with (the) Lord. And so comfort one another with these words.

“Sleeping” believers will miss nothing that Paul mentions here: the cry of Jesus commanding them to come forth; the archangel’s signal on the trumpet; the visible coming down of Christ. Other passages of Scripture reinforce some of the details mentioned here. For example, Jesus says (John 5:28) “Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall *hear* his voice and shall come forth,” and (Matthew 24:31), “he shall send his angels with a great sound of a *trumpet*, and they shall gather together his

elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other,” and again the Apostle Paul writes (I Corinthians 15:51b-52), “... we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last *trump*: for the *trumpet* shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

The resurrection will take place in a moment. Then both groups of believers, the former “dead” and the living, “simultaneously” and “together” will be taken up to meet Christ in the air. *ἀμα σὺν*, according to Arndt & Gingrich, is used “to denote what belongs together in time and place” (p. 41). All the believers “form one joint host that is lifted in a divine *raptus* to meet their heavenly Lord as he descends” (Lenski, p. 336f.).

The verb *ἀρπάζω*, “caught up,” is used elsewhere in scripture to describe the catching away of Philip from the Ethiopian (Acts 8:39); of Paul into the third heaven (II Corinthians 12:2); and of Christ’s ascension into heaven (Revelation 12:5).

In this context the words “into the air” do not imply a disappearance, as teachers of The Rapture insist. Rather they refer to the visible saints with glorified bodies meeting Christ as he is visibly returning. Then at once the final judgment will take place.

This miraculous meeting with Christ and remaining with Christ forever is the blessed, glorious hope that the Lord himself gave the Thessalonians through the Apostle. This hope comforts all Christians, when living and when dying. It is with this hope in mind that Luther writes: “One must look upon a Christian death with different eyes, not the way a cow stares at a new gate ... (but) by learning to speak and think of it as the Scriptures do and not considering deceased Christians to be dead and buried people. To the five senses that is the way it appears. As far as they can lead us, it brings only woe. Therefore go beyond them and listen to what St. Paul says here, that they are sleeping in Christ and God will bring them with Christ ...” (*LW* 51, p. 239f.).

IV. The Rapture

This section of scripture is used by Millennialists to teach a doctrine they call The Rapture. The word “Rapture” which they use is derived from the Vulgate, in which the Latin word *rapiemur* is used to translate *ἀρπαγησόμεθα* in I Thessalonians 4:17.

As we have shown, I Thessalonians 4:13-18 does teach that both living and “sleeping” believers will be caught up visibly from the surface of the earth on the last day. Millennialists, however, claim that this will occur invisibly, 1,000 years before the last day. Depending on the school of Millennialism to which they belong, they say that this will take place, 1) before, 2) during, or 3) after the seven year period called the Great Tribulation, which they predict will come just prior to the Millennium. According to them The Rapture will cause a mysterious, instantaneous disappearance from the earth of believers who will go to meet the invisible Lord in the air. They say that the rest of humanity will remain behind to enter the Millennial Age (or the pre-millennial Tribulation). The Rapture is said by some to be “phase one” of the Lord’s second coming. And “phase two” is supposed to be his visible descent in order to get the Millennium under way.

This false doctrine naturally misleads many Millennialists into the further error of trying to set the date for Judgment Day. According to their calculations, the last day will come precisely 1,000 (or 1003.5, or 1,007) years after the date of The Rapture. Other errors connected with the Rapture doctrine include: 1) involving Christ in more than one Judgment Day, since the Rapture itself is a separating of believers from unbelievers, 2) involving Christ in an invisible second coming, even though scripture says he will come “in like manner” as he left the earth, and 3) promising unbelievers a second chance to repent and come to faith after the Rapture has taken place.

Examples of Rapture theories abound. A few samples are given below.

In the May 20, 1973, issue of the *Northwestern Lutheran* there was an article titled, “What About The Rapture?” It began by citing the example of a First Assembly of God church in North Hollywood, California, which had changed its bylaws to provide contingency leadership for the congregation in the event of The

Rapture. The article observed that at least the congregation was “living up to its creed” although its creed did not agree with the Scriptures.

Hal Lindsey in his extremely popular book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, suggested that the Rapture event will be “the real hope for the Christian,” since in this way, he said, Christians will be able to escape the Great Tribulation and receive an early immortality.

In November of 1973, when Israel was very much in the news, an article appeared in “Gospel Truth,” a monthly mailing of the Southwest Radio Church of the Air, based in Oklahoma City, which predicted, “... if there is a peace treaty consummated in which Israel is guaranteed the right to the land of Palestine, then the Tribulation period will begin (and) the church will be raptured.”

Writers for the “Radio Bible Class” booklets, which originate from Grand Rapids, Michigan, also support the idea of a pre-millennial, pre-tribulation Rapture. R. W. DeHaan, president of the “Radio Bible Class,” suggests that the raptured believers will spend the 1,000 years of the Millennium in the air. He writes in a booklet titled, “Our Eternal Home,” “If this theory is true, and the heavenly Jerusalem is a satellite city suspended above the earth, the resurrected and translated saints would have ready access to earth from their dwelling place above. This would facilitate their ruling with Christ as promised in the Word of God.” Mr. DeHaan is not one to consider the heavenly Jerusalem to be a figurative expression referring to believers, as Hebrews 12:22-23 and Psalm 46:4-5 teach. Rather he calls the heavenly Jerusalem a “satellite city from which certain believers commute to earth during the millennial age, and ... the settled city which will ultimately rest upon ‘the new heaven and the new earth.’”

This strange Rapture doctrine probably is not as old as the false concept of a millennium-like kingdom of God on the earth. The latter goes back to the Old Testament period following the return from the Babylonian Captivity (Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, p. 427). During the first centuries after Christ some Christians adopted and altered the Jewish notion of a millennial kingdom by predicting that the kingdom would begin at the second rather than at the first coming of Christ.

Our forefathers, the writers of the Lutheran Confessions, correctly rejected all of these false Jewish notions (Augsburg Confession, Article XVII). We will do well to speak clearly, as they also did, about the last things, without distorting the Scriptures as many do to their own harm.

There will be only one return of Christ. It will be visible. There will be only one sounding of the trumpet. It will be heard by all. There will be only one bodily resurrection and rising from the earth to meet Christ in the air. It will be on the last day.

Everyone will be aware of that event (Matthew 24:30-31; Revelation 1:7). Christ’s visible descent (Acts 1:11), the resurrection of all the dead (John 5:28-29), the glorification and ascent of all believers to meet and welcome him (I Corinthians 15:52; I Thessalonians 4:16) will be the sight which will cause the unbelievers to cry out with great dismay and fear (Revelation 6:16). Thus the elect will be separated from the unbelievers (Matthew 13:49; 24:40-41), and when all are gathered either on the right or on the left of the throne of Christ, the final judgment will be spoken (Matthew 25: 31ff.), the Church will be received into glory (Matthew 25:34) and the damned will be driven into hell (Matthew 25:41; Matthew 13:42).

“Great God, what do I see and hear? The end of things created; The Judge of mankind doth appear on clouds of glory seated. The trumpet sounds; the graves restore the dead which they contained before: Prepare, my soul, to meet Him.

“The dead in Christ shall first arise at that last trumpet’s sounding, caught up to meet Him in the skies, with joy their Lord surrounding. No gloomy fears their souls dismay; His presence sheds eternal day on those prepared to meet Him.

“But sinners, filled with guilty fears, behold His wrath prevailing, for they shall rise and find their tears and sighs are unavailing; the day of grace is past and gone; they trembling stand before His throne, all unprepared to meet Him.

“O Christ, who diedst and yet dost live, to me impart Thy merit; my pardon seal, my sins forgive, and cleanse me by Thy Spirit. Beneath Thy cross I view the day when heaven and earth shall pass away, and thus prepare to meet Thee.” (TLH 604)