

First Thessalonians and The Rapture

The Thessalonian Epistles

In 1 Thess. 1:3 we find the theme of these letters. It is three-fold: **faith, love, and hope**. The same three words are listed in 1 Cor. 13:13, where *love* is listed last because it is the theme of the chapter. Here *hope* is put last since it is Paul's main topic in First and Second Thessalonians.

These concepts occur again and again (always in the same order) in both Thessalonian epistles. Notice 1 Thess. 1:9, 10 as illustrating verse three. "Ye turned to God from idols" -- the work of **faith**; "to serve the living and true God" -- the labor of **love**; and "to wait for His Son from heaven ... who delivered us from the wrath to come" -- the patience of **HOPE**.

The tragic antithesis of this trilogy of truth, as it related to unbelieving Israel, is found in 1 Thess. 2:15, 16. They " ... killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us." This is *the work of unbelief*; "They please not God, and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway." Here is *the labor of hate*. Then, "the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost," which is the resulting *prospect of despair*.

Again, the three are embodied in Paul's prayer in 1 Thess. 3:10, 12, 13. "Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your **faith**. ... And the Lord make you to increase and abound in **love** one toward another, and toward all men ... to the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints" (**HOPE**).

In this first epistle there is much said about their **faith** and their **love**, but from 4:13 through 5:11, and again in 5:23, it is their **HOPE** that takes center stage.

Paul opens his second epistle by thanking God because their "**faith** groweth exceedingly" and "the **love** of every one of them toward each other aboundeth" (1:3). However he does not commend their **HOPE**, for they have a problem in connection with their hope. It needs some corrective teaching. Someone has been telling them they are already in the "Day of the Lord." This does not fit with what Paul had taught when he was with them (2 Thess. 2:5), therefore they were shaken in mind and troubled. The central part of the second letter is taken up with answering this false teaching.

With their **HOPE** as the very topic of these two books, we may expect to find the answer to the Rapture question here. The doctrine of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture of the church largely stands or falls upon a close perusal of these eight short chapters.

FIRST THESSALONIANS

1:10. "-- To wait for his Son from heaven, ... which delivered us from the wrath to

come."

The nature of the deliverance will be discussed later, but here consider the attitude which characterized these young believers regarding their hope. They were not waiting for antichrist, but for Christ: not for tribulation and wrath, but for deliverance. They had an eager anticipation such as that indicated by the disciples when they stood looking up into heaven at the ascension of Christ. Those present on that occasion were gently rebuked by the question, "Why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" (Act 1:11). They had already been told when to gaze into heaven -- when to look for the return of Christ -- in Luke 21:28. "And when these things [events of the Tribulation] begin to come to pass THEN look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth near."

Yet Paul commended the Thessalonians for their expectant attitude. He also tells us in Phil. 3:20 (NASB), "Our citizenship is in heaven, from where also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Since none of the things Paul mentioned in Luke twenty one had begun to come to pass at the time Paul wrote this verse, we can draw the conclusion that our hope is something different from the coming in glory set forth in Luke 21:28 and in Acts 1:11.

2:19, 20. "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy."

If the Rapture takes place in the air (Greek *aira*, the atmosphere) as Christ is on His way down from heaven (Greek *ouranou*) to earth to fight against the Beast and the armies gathered at Armageddon, these verses seem strange indeed. They describe the coming of Christ as a time of joy and rejoicing due to seeing and recognizing those we have won to Him. Would there be time, or inclination, for this kind of fellowship if we were on our way to battle?

3:13. "- at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."

This is not a description of the believers of this age accompanying Christ as He comes in glory. Rev. 19:14 says, "And the armies which were in heaven [*ouranou* not *aira*] followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean." This may refer to the Old Testament saints, and those described in Rev. 7:9 as being in heaven (having been killed during the Tribulation and then clothed with white robes) -- IF the description "fine linen, white and clean" necessarily indicates PEOPLE rather than angels (Rev. 19:8). However 2 Thess. 1:7 specifies that those coming with Christ are "His mighty angels," and Rev. 15:6 speaks of "angels ... clothed in pure and white linen."

The saints coming with the Lord in 1 Thess. 3:13 are mentioned again in the next chapter, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God *bring with him*" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Their souls and spirits will be brought from heaven to be united with their resurrected bodies at the Rapture. "All" the saints of this age who have died will be included, in contrast to the few from among the kingdom saints who were raised at Christ's resurrection (Matt. 27:52, 53).

4:13 -- 5:11.

Both chapter four and chapter five have the Rapture basically in view:

- * In chapter four it is related to the problem of believers who have died, and we are assured they will NOT miss the Rapture. In chapter five it is linked to the problem of those who will live until that day, and the assurance is that they WILL miss the Tribulation (5:9).
- * There is comfort both for those who have lost loved ones (4:18) and for those who will be living during the troubled days of this age of grace (5:11).
- * In both passages there is reference to the dead and the living saints. This is clear in 4:16, 17 and echoed in 5:10 in the words, "whether we wake or sleep."
- * The recovery from death and the deliverance from the wrath are both based upon Christ's death and resurrection, not upon our godliness or worthiness (4:14 and 5:10).
- * The unbelievers who have died have "no hope" (4:13) and the unbelievers who are alive at the Rapture "shall not escape" the Tribulation (5:3).
- * It is not to be a partial Rapture, for ALL of the members of the Body of Christ have an appointment to meet the Lord in the air, and NONE of us are appointed to wrath (5:9).
- * Concerning the dead, we are to *sorrow not*, even as others (4:13), and we who are alive in the last days are to *sleep not*, as do others (5:6).
- * The Thessalonians needed revelation concerning the Rapture (4:13) and instruction concerning its relationship to the well known truths of the Old Testament about the Day of the Lord (5:1, 11).

4:13. "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."

Why were they so concerned about those who had died? Surely not because of the agony of dying itself, for that was already behind them. They must not have feared that death was the end of everything for them, for they knew about resurrection. This truth was a very necessary part of the very message they had believed to be saved (1 Cor. 15:1 - 5).

If they had been taught that the Rapture follows the Great Tribulation, the greatest time of trouble earth will ever see, they would surely have considered those who had died the "lucky" ones. *They* would have died before the time of trouble came and would be raised after it was all over. Their concern should have been for those still living, who would have to endure the entire seven years of agony before relief came.

However, if they had been taught there was no danger of experiencing the horrors of the Tribulation, to live on until the Rapture took place would be a distinct blessing they would not want their loved ones to miss.

Also it seems they had expected the Rapture before any of the believers died. They could never have come to this conclusion if they had been taught they were to go through seven years of intense, and usually fatal, tribulation and persecution before it could happen!

4:15, 17. "Who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord ... shall be caught up."

While there are strong indications that the Jewish *remnant* in Israel will be protected

during the Tribulation,¹ the great majority, if not all, of the Gentile believers will be slain for their testimony. A great slaughter takes place during the second half of the Tribulation. John cries out, "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? ... And it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, *that should be killed as they were*, should be fulfilled." (Revelation 6:9 - 11). That these are, at least largely, Gentiles is seen from Rev. 7:9, 14.

How, then, could these Gentile believers in Thessalonica be expecting not to die if the church is to go through the Tribulation? Of course the Thessalonians could not read the referenced verses recorded much later in the book of Revelation, but the Holy Spirit who inspired Paul in his oral (1 Thess. 2:13) and written (1 Cor. 14:37) ministry knew the truths contained in the passages penned later. Surely He would not have had Paul give them the assurance "we shall not all sleep" (1 Cor. 15:51 -- the same is implied in 1 Thess. 4:15, 17) if all members of the Body of Christ alive at the time will go into the Great Tribulation and most, if not all, be martyred.

4:17. "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

The word translated "caught up" (arpagasometha) means, "to rescue from danger of destruction ... to carry off by force."² As Wuest suggests, this implies that Satan, the prince of the power of the air, will contest the passage of the church through his domain. This is one good reason why Christ comes to meet us in the air, rather than to just catch us up to meet Him in heaven. He comes to protect us and give us safe passage home. It is no surprise that Satan should rally all his forces against the Body of Christ as it passes through his very headquarters!

Wuest also says this verse means "to claim for one's self eagerly."³ He relates this to the eagerness of the Bridegroom taking His Bride. But Christ would just as eagerly claim His Body, a concept more in keeping with the church as one new *man* (Eph. 2:15), bearing the name "the Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12 -- Greek). It is the word used to describe the catching away of Philip

¹ See Deut. 4:30, 31; Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1. Notice also the protection provided for God's people in Ezek. 9:6; Daniel chapters three (compare Isa. 43:2) and six; Matt. 24:15 - 18; Luke 21:20, 21; Rev. 7:3; 12:14 - 16; 18:4.

Of course the two Jewish witnesses of Rev. 11:3 - 12 will be slain, and Rev. 12:11 *may* indicate the death of other Jewish witnesses. However consider Daniel chapter three. The three youths there faced death willingly. They were even tied up and cast into the furnace. According to the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar they "yielded their bodies [to die]" (Dan. 3:28) -- but *they did not die*. It could have been said of them, as it is said of the witnesses during the Tribulation, "They did not love and cling to life even when faced with death -- holding their lives cheap until they had to die [for witnessing]" (Rev. 12:11 - Amplified Bible).

It is not specified in Rev. 20:4 whether those beheaded for the witness of Jesus are Jews, Gentiles or both.

² "The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament" by Kenneth S. Wuest, page 96.

³ Ibid. Page 98.

(Acts 8:39), Paul being caught up into the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2, 4) and the catching away of the "man child" to God (Rev. 12:5). This concept indicates the meeting in the air is the very purpose of His expedition from heaven, not merely an incidental interruption on His way to Armageddon.

4:17. -- " Caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

Nowhere else is this heavenly meeting revealed specifically as taking place in the air. Outside of Paul's epistles the picture is one of believers awaiting Him and meeting Him on earth. The Mount of Olives is scarcely the same as "the air." It is not said in this verse where believers will be after the Rapture except that they are to be with Christ. If He, at that time, is on His way to the greatest battle of all ages, it seems strange such information is completely missing here.

5:1, 2. "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night."

There is a change in these verses from something which does not have a time schedule, to "times and seasons." Israel's program runs on a time schedule. The entire Tribulation is part of a time prophecy in Daniel nine. The Thessalonians evidently knew perfectly about the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy, but wouldn't have known about the Rapture unless Paul had told them.

5:2, 3. " For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

As we have seen previously, the "Day of the Lord" could not refer to only the last few days of the Tribulation. As soon as that last "week" begins -- and there is a very clear time marker for its beginning in Dan. 9:27 (the seven year covenant with the "Prince that shall come") -- anyone with knowledge of Daniel and Revelation will be able to count off the very days until the period closes. Also, there is to be no "Peace and safety" during that time, particularly during the closing three and a half years.

True, it says that *sudden* destruction will come on them, but it does not indicate the destruction will come all at once or that it will be quickly concluded. (The same Greek word is translated "unawares" in Luke 21:34). It is to come "as travail upon a woman with child." Such travail comes suddenly and irrevocably -- but waxes and wanes over a prolonged period. It becomes progressively more severe until it culminates in the birth of the child, which is the inescapable climax of the travail. How well this describes the entire seven years of the Tribulation! The message is to unbelievers in the last days of the age of Grace that, without warning, the seventieth week of Daniel nine will be upon them.

5:4 - 10. It will help to have the Bible open to these verses as the following remarks are studied.

What should our attitude be in view of this approaching time of trouble? The unbelievers are of the night. They will feel secure, asleep to the danger, not expecting the

Tribulation to come upon them -- and they shall not escape it (v. 3).

We believers, on the other hand, are not to be asleep, unaware of its nearness, for we are not of the night (v. 4). We are to bring into play the very trilogy of truths that we noted previously. In wakeful soberness we are to "Put on the breastplate of *faith* and *love* and, for a helmet the *HOPE* of salvation (v. 8).

We are not appointed to wrath, but to obtain "salvation" (v. 9). The "wrath" here (and in 1:10) does not refer to God's wrath against the lost in hell, but to the sudden destruction of verse three, His fiery vengeance poured out on the earth (2 Thess. 1:8). The salvation (deliverance) is from the entire Tribulation.

We will escape this time of wrath because He died for us that, whether we will have died before that day comes, or are still alive (5:10-a), we will live together with Him! Our deliverance is not to be protection on earth during the Tribulation (as will be the case with the remnant of Israel), but safety because we will not even be here -- we will be in heaven together with Christ and with those who have died (5:10-b).