

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE RAPTURE AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE
PHILIPPIANS 4:13-18

SUBMITTED TO: PROFESSOR JULIANNE M. COX

NT 615 BIBLICAL EXEGESIS (OA)

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APRIL 18, 2023

13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 NIV

MAIN IDEA AND OUTLINE

Paul wants the Thessalonian believers to know that those who have died in Christ didn't miss the Parousia or the second coming of Christ. Death is a part of the curse and as long as we live in these bodies, we will die one day or be raptured. Grieving is part of the human experience and it does not matter if you're an unbeliever or believer because everyone will experience it. But as believers, we don't grieve like a world without hope. For the world when a person dies, no one really knows what happens after death but for the Christian, we shall live again! Why? Because Jesus Christ rose from the dead and conquered death. As Christians, we don't have to fear death. Christians are assured of this because the Lord has said it (I Thess. 4:15, Acts 1:11). So, those

who have died first will be raised by the trumpet call of God and then those who are still alive will meet them in the air and so, we will ever be with the Lord. What's also important is that 4:17 uses the pronoun "we". This suggests that even Paul himself believed that he would be a part of the Parousia. So, Paul begins with hope and ends with encouragement.

INTRODUCTION

What exactly is the rapture? The rapture is the snatching away of God's people from the impending judgment upon the earth. An example similar to this is in the Old Testament when God decided to destroy every living thing because man's wickedness filled the earth. "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" and God saved Noah and his family from the flood (Gen. 6:8, 17-22). There are also seven raptures of specific people in the bible according to Hindson and Hitchcock: Enoch, Elijah, Jesus, Philip, Paul, and the two witnesses of revelation.¹The aim of this paper will seek to examine "the rapture" and why it's theologically important. To the surprise of many Christians, the word rapture does not appear in the bible. The Greek word for this term rapture (*harpazō*) is translated as *caught up* in I Thess. 4:17.² The Latin translation of this word is *rapturo*.³ The eschatological beliefs on this subject are varied and the

¹ Ed Hindson and Mark Hitchcock. "Can We Still Believe in the Rapture" (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2017), p.43.

² Strong's Concordance, Blue-letter Bible <https://www.blueletterbible.org/tools/MultiVerse.cfm?s=0000mi>

³ Strong's Concordance, Blue-letter Bible <https://www.blueletterbible.org/tools/MultiVerse.cfm?s=0000mi>

subcategories are many, so I will sum up the three most popular views concerning the rapture and explain them briefly. First, the rapture is a precursor to the ‘end times’ or ‘the day of the Lord’. “The three views are pre-tribulation (the rapture occurs before the tribulation), mid-tribulation (the rapture occurs at or near the mid-point of the tribulation), and post-tribulation (the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation).”⁴ Through the influence of John Darby, William Blackstone, D.L. Moody, and many other proponents of dispensationalism, or pretribulation this view became widely embraced by evangelicals.⁵

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I Thessalonians was written by the apostle Paul and was one of the earliest letters that have been preserved for us. According to Philippians 3:5, he was a Pharisee. According to Noel S Rabinowitz, “the Pharisees had become the authoritative interpreters of the Torah and their halakhic decisions were accepted by most people within Israel. Some scholars speak of the Pharisees as a scholar class, with all members learned in the Law.” Much of what we know about Paul and the Thessalonians can be found in Acts 17. “Thessalonica was founded by Cassander, Alexander’s officer in 322 BC. It dominated the northern trade route which later became the Via Egnatia. It later became the capital city of Macedonia. It had a large Roman element and a Jewish colony.”⁶ According to Powell: “This predominately Gentile

⁴ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI 2011), p. 699-700

⁵ Greg R. Allison p. 698

⁶ *Compact Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids, MI Zondervan 1993)

church was repudiated by the gentile society; They did not join in festivities associated with the city's temples and shrines; they did not honor the emperor with worshipful tributes or accolades: they did not participate in banquets and parties and other amusements. As a result, while the Jews of Thessalonica would have viewed the Thessalonian Christians as heretics, the Gentile population probably styled them as irreligious, unpatriotic, and antisocial. Becoming a Christian certainly meant a loss of esteem and social prestige.”⁷

Paul's letter fits right into the occasion of this letter and in the passage, we will focus on.

Acts 17 tells us that Paul and Silas had to leave the city because of persecution. Separated from these new believers his worried about how they will stand in the midst of persecution (2:14, 3:3-4). He tries to come to them but is unable. Finally, he sends Timothy to them (3:2-3) and Timothy has good news. He then exhorts them to live holy lives (4:3-7) unlike the Gentiles who do not have God's Spirit. Paul now addresses one of the other occasions for the Letter. What happens to believers who die before the return of Christ (4:13-18)? Will they miss out on the kingdom of God? Paul's answer is no! Just like the Lord Jesus was resurrected from the dead, those who died in Christ will be raised first and then those believers who are still alive will be caught up and meet them in the air. Some believers thought Christ's return was imminent and so they stopped working (4:9-12). But Paul explains how they should conduct themselves in the light of Christ's return and admonishes

⁷ Mark A Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, (Baker Publishing Grand Rapids, MI 2018), p. 395

them to comfort and edify one another (5:1-11). Finally, he exhorts them to be holy, faithful, and obedient and charges them to read the letter to everyone. (5:12-28).

DON'T GRIEVE LIKE THE WORLD 4:13

Someone has said death is a great equalizer. No one living in these physical bodies will escape it.

It doesn't matter how good your diet is, how much you exercise, or where you may live. We all have an appointment with death (Heb.9:27). The Thessalonians were confronted with this. But why did the question even arise? One of the things that the early church faced was false teaching. Many of the letters written in the New Testament were to correct false teaching (1:9,2:14-16).

Had Gnostics infiltrated the church causing confusion about the spiritual world and the natural world? Is it possible that the Christians believed the return of Christ was imminent and the dead in Christ missed the second coming? Two thoughts come to mind. According to Powell, "Was Paul's theology on the second coming so primitive that he assumes he will still be alive at Christ's return (4:17) or was it a question about the chronology of events in the end times?"⁸ Even the disciples didn't have a full understanding of the kingdom of God or the end times. Before Jesus was taken up in the clouds the disciples ask the question; 'Lord. Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? (Acts. 1:6) Either way, Paul says even though we grieve we don't grieve like mankind because we have hope in Jesus.

THE CHRISTIAN'S HOPE IS THE RESURRECTION 4:14-15

⁸ Mark A Powell p. 399

What gives the believer hope? “We believe”. We believe what? We believe Jesus died and rose again from the dead! Why is the rapture theologically important? Because without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, life is meaningless, and we have no hope. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead then we are men most miserable (I Cor. 15:19). The reason why the church is under persecution is because of the witness of Christ (1:6, 14-16, 2:3). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is foundational to the Christian faith. If there’s no judgment or resurrection of the dead, we should “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (I Cor. 15:32). When Paul made that statement, he could have been referring to the Greek philosopher Epicurus who promoted the philosophy of living life to its fullest extent. No, Paul says not only should we believe this but it’s also according to what the Lord has said. Jesus talked about his second coming in scripture (Acts. 1:9-11, Rev. 1:7, John. 14:3) but his conversation on his coming is extensive in Matthew 24 and 25.

GOD IS FAITHFUL 4:16

What a promise from the scriptures! The Lord himself will come down from heaven. The Parousia of the New Testament church is like God’s promise that Israel would not be cast away (Romans. 11:1-2, 28-29). David Isaiah states: “The purpose of the Parousia is not to cause Christians to occupy themselves with working out the precise way in which these prophecies will be fulfilled. Rather, it is God’s assurance that He will allow nothing to stand in the way of the final fulfillment of His purpose. Christ will return. All evil will be put away as “the kingdom of

the world” becomes “the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:5).”⁹ Not only is the rapture theological important because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ but it’s also important because it’s one of the themes of God’s faithfulness. One of the reasons why God will snatch away his people is because his wrath will be poured upon the earth (I Thess. 1:10, 5:3). Paul also uses the phrase “trumpet call of God” in I Corinthians 15:52 (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.) Paul makes the point that the dead in Christ will rise first.

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND 4:17

The ‘Left Behind Series’ by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins is a fictional series about the rapture. In an instant, millions are left behind as the rapture occurs. These series have sold millions of copies of books as well as been adapted to the movie screen. What’s ironic is there is another movie where millions of people disappeared, but the Avengers eventually save the day. Paul says after that (4:17). After what? After the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ rise first, then those who are still alive *will be caught it*. Let’s focus on the phrase *will be caught up*. The Greek word for *will be caught up* is *harpazō*.¹⁰ It means to carry off by force or to snatch out or away. So, the question is what or who is being carried

⁹ David, Isaiah S. “Parousia” BTKS Insight, 16 no 2 (Oct 2019): 246-264.

¹⁰ Strong’s Concordance, Blue-letter Bible <https://www.blueletterbible.org/tools/MultiVerse.cfm?s=0000mi>

off by force or snatched away? The scripture is clear, they're the ones who are still alive.

Again, Paul uses the pronoun 'we' which means Paul himself believed he could be a part of the Parousia or the second coming of Christ.

APPLICATION

Jesus Christ is coming back again, so how should that change my life? The next question one should ask is; if he's coming back again, why did he come the first time? The answer is sin. Judy Siker makes the observation; "The earliest explanations for Jesus' death come from Origen, Irenaeus, and Gregory of Nyssa, who believed that Jesus' death was payment to the devil for human freedom."¹¹ The first Adam sinned and brought death and curse to humanity. The second Adam is Jesus Christ, who obeyed God and gave life and blessing to those who believe in him. Because we are of another kingdom how we live life is different from the world. Paul tells the church in I Thessalonians how they ought to live if they want to please God. He tells them to turn away from idols, abstain from fornication, not to defraud one another, to work, to not be unruly, and abstain from all appearances of evil (1:10, 2:10, 3:10, 4:3, 4:6, 4:11, 5:14, 5:22-23). To be a follower of Christ means we no longer walk in the fleshly desires of our hearts and minds. The scriptures tell us that we have a new mindset and reorientation of life (II Cor. 5:17). The apostle Peter tells us; "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness" (II Peter 3:11). Secondly, not only should we live

¹¹ Judy Yates Siker. "Why did Jesus have to Die" The Living Pulpit, 16 no 2 (Apr-Jun 2007): 10-11.

differently but we should also expect persecution. The apostle Paul encouraged them because of their stand for Jesus Christ (1:6-10, 2:14-20, 3:3-10). When we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ that offends the world because we're saying the only way to God is through Jesus Christ. No other religion or belief system can justify a person in the eyes of God. N.T. Wright states:

Acclaiming Jesus as Lord plants a flag that supersedes the flags of the nations, however so "free" or "democratic" they may be. It challenges both the tyrants who think they are, in effect, divine and the "secular democracies" that have effectively become, if not divine, at least ecclesial"¹²

When we live countercultural lives, it offends the world, and it invites persecution. The Apostle Peter says don't think it strange when persecution comes into our lives (I Peter 4:12). Again, Paul says "all that live godly in Christ *shall suffer persecution* (II Tim. 3:12). Finally, the rapture gives us hope. The world fears death and grieves but the Christian has hope because Christ has defeated death and the grave (3:13). The apostle Paul declares, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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¹² N.T. Wright, Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters, Christianity Today, 55 no 10 (Oct 2011): 76.

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