

What Happens to Christians Who Die? Part 2

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

Code: 52-18

Please open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. And I want to draw your attention again to verses 13 through 18. We've titled this message "What happens to Christians who die before Jesus comes?" By the way, the details of where Christians go after they die and what happens to their spirits and what happens to their bodies is often a troubling issue to people who don't understand and it certainly troubled the young Christians in the church at Thessalonica. They were only a few months old in the Lord. They had no Jewish background to speak of, for the most part, having been converted out of abject paganism. It was all brand new to them. And in the few months that Paul was there in Thessalonica and the few months since he had been gone, they had grown in Christ significantly but there were still some troubling things that they did not understand. And one of them was regarding the return of Jesus Christ.

Paul had made sure that they understood that Jesus was coming back to take His people to be with Him. In fact, in chapter 1 you will notice in verses 9 and 10 that it says of the Thessalonian Christians that they turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven. They were living in anticipation that Jesus would come. It seems rather reasonable in this context that they actually thought He would come very soon in their life time. And that's what posed their query because some of them died. Periodically, continually from time to time, one of the believers in the Thessalonian church would die. And because they were so eager about the coming of Jesus Christ, they had difficulty understanding what happens to that person when Jesus comes if they're no longer here, do they miss the great event? Do they miss the gathering together, as they called it, as Paul noted in 2 Thessalonians 2:1? Do they miss the Rapture? And they were very concerned about that.

Since they lived in such excitement and such expectation and such anticipation of the great moment when Jesus came for His people, and also since according to chapter 4 verses 9 and 10 they loved each other so much that everybody knew about their love, they were grieving over their loved ones who had died, not so much that they were dead because they believed their spirits were with the Lord, but because they thought they might miss the great event. And so the Apostle Paul writes this section to help them.

And I said last week and I say it again, it is more pastoral than it is theological. The intent of the Apostle Paul is not to give a front to back, top to bottom reasoned detail eschatological explanation of the Rapture, but to comfort troubled grieving sorrowing hearts. It is not a pedantic question, what happens to Christians who die before the Lord returns, it's a painful question on their hearts because

they're suffering grief for fear that their loved ones who have died are going to miss that great event. Was their death, perhaps they wondered, a kind of judgment where the Lord chastened them, took their life and they therefore forfeited experiencing the Rapture? Was there some secret sin in their life and that's why they died? Would they somehow not participate at all in the gathering together and the wonderful trip to heaven? Would they remain bodyless spirits, never knowing the transformation of body into the likeness of Christ? Would they somehow be considered lesser saints? Are they not as loved as the rest who would live to the Rapture?

The whole matter led them to grief. So the Apostle Paul writes to alleviate their grief. Look at verse 13 of chapter 4. "We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as do the rest who have no hope." He says we don't want you to grieve, grieving out of ignorance is needless. I don't want you to be uninformed in such a way that you grieve and that you grieve like people who have no hope of reunion, the lost, the pagans, the people outside the Kingdom of God who see death as the final, permanent parting. I don't want you to grieve like the hopeless who have no anticipation of a reunion. Your ignorance has led you to the grief so I want to salve your grief by turning your ignorance into knowledge.

The main group that he concerns himself with here are those who are asleep. In fact, he mentions them in verse 13. He mentions them in verse 14. He mentions them in verse 15. That is his concern because that was their concern. What happens to Christians who die before Jesus gets here? And by the way, it's an awfully important question because they were asking it way back then. We're 2,000 years later and a whole lot of Christians have fallen into that category and continue to.

As I pointed out last week, those who are asleep means Christians who have died. And Christians who die do not experience death in its fearful reality because of their life in Christ death has been transformed into sleep. The difference between sleep and death is that sleep is a temporary repose and that is a fitting term for Christians. When they die their spirit goes to be with the Lord immediately, "Absent from the body, present with the Lord." "Far better to depart and be with Christ." Their body goes into the grave not permanently but only to sleep until it is awakened some day. But they didn't know how or when or where or what. And so were grieving for their loved ones.

Paul then explains to them some of the features of the Rapture. The term in verse 17 "shall be caught up together" is the term from which we get the concept of Rapture. It is caught up, snatched up, raptured. And it has to do with the catching away of the church, the taking up of the church. It's by the way a violent word. And I pointed out to you last time that out of the Latin derivative comes the word rape, a violent act in which the church is snatched away. It's a rescue of the first order, sudden, instantaneous. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, "In the twinkling of an eye," that's not how fast it is to blink, that's how fast it is to see light flash on the pupil. That fast and faster.

Now as Paul then unfolds to them the Rapture, remember his purpose is not to cover everything that could be said about this event, his purpose is to cover a specific issue to bring comfort to their troubled hearts. Four features sum up his teaching in this text on the Rapture...the pillars of the Rapture, the participants of the Rapture, the plan of the Rapture and the profit of the Rapture...p-r-o-f-i-t, the benefit.

Now last time we began to look at the pillars of the Rapture. And we noted for you in verse 14, the first pillar upon which Rapture truth is built is the death of Christ. For if we believe that Jesus died...and I pointed out to you that the reason, first of all, that we can even leave this world and be gathered to Jesus Christ and taken to heaven is because Jesus died for our sins. And having been forgiven of our sins and covered, as it were, by the blood of Christ and clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we are made acceptable to God, we are made joint heirs with Christ, brothers Jesus is not ashamed to call us, and He will gather us to Himself and take us to heaven where God awaits us because our sins have been dealt with. So the Rapture is built, first of all, not on philosophical speculation, not on theological whimsy, but on the death of Jesus Christ which was a perfect satisfaction to God for sin. Since He fulfilled all the conditions for the forgiveness of sin, He transformed death into sleep for us. To borrow the words of Paul, He took the sting out of death.

The second pillar on which the Rapture is built is the resurrection of Christ. Verse 14, For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again...and here is the necessary corollary to the first. Not only did He die, but the satisfaction of His work was indicated by the fact that God raised Him from the dead. And He conquered death. He conquered sin, as it were, in His dying, He conquered, as it were, in His rising. Sin was dealt with, death was dealt with, not only for Himself but notice back at verse 14, "Even so, God will bring with Him...that is with Christ...at His return those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." As He raised Jesus, He'll raise the rest who are in Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 15:23 says, "Christ the firstfruits, afterwards those that are Christ's at His coming." Jesus said in John 14:19, "Because I live you shall live also." And I said last week, and I repeat this statement again, God will treat dead believers the same way He treated Jesus by raising them from the dead. That's His promise, bodily resurrection. And when God comes, when God comes in the great glorious return of Christ, God will bring with Him those who have died in Christ, just as He brought back Jesus from the dead.

The picture is a marvelous one. It's first painted for us in John 14 verses 1 to 3, the only place in the gospel record where the Rapture is discussed. And all it says is, "Let not your heart be troubled," again it's a comforting passage, it's intended to comfort the troubled disciples, "you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places, if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself that where I am there you may be also." Jesus there promised I'm going, but I'm going to get a place ready, I'm coming, I'm coming to take you where I am in that place. And the promise here is that in the same way that God brought Jesus out of the dead and took Him to glory,

God will bring us out of the graves who are dead and take us to glory.

Now remember, the spirits are already with the Lord, but the body will be resurrected, joined to that already in the presence of God spirit, and the combination of that is the glorified saint in the image of Christ who abides in God's presence forever and ever. This is the resurrection, by the way, described in 1 Corinthians 15:35 and following.

So, those are just review points. The pillars of the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ hold up the doctrine of the Rapture. The third one is the revelation of Christ...the revelation of Christ. Paul says in verse 15, "For this we say to you, this teaching about the Rapture, by the Word of the Lord." What he is saying is not only is the Rapture built on the death and resurrection of Christ, but on direct revelation from Christ. "This we say to you" has the tone of an inspired writer who has revealed what God has disclosed to him. That phrase "by the Word of the Lord" means a divine utterance. Paul was literally giving to the Thessalonians what came from the Lord. This is divine revelation.

Now what does he mean specifically? It's interesting to note this, when he says "we say this to you" and then goes on to explain about the Rapture, "by the Word of the Lord," what does he mean by that? Some commentators suggest that he means that he is referring to something Jesus said that's recorded in the gospels, that he's talking about something that Jesus already said already written down. However, that doesn't seem to be a valid option at all since there are no exact or even close passages in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Nothing is recorded that Jesus said in His life on earth that even comes close to what Paul says here. As I said, the only mention of the Rapture specifically is just a very simple statement that Jesus said "I'm coming back" and He said it and again a pastoral way rather than trying to cover all the eschatological theology of it. But beyond that there are no specifics about the Rapture in the gospels to which Paul could be alluding.

You say, "Well now wait a minute. Doesn't it talk about a trumpet here? And doesn't it talk about a resurrection here?" Yes, but they're very different than those times. For example, in the Olivet Discourse where the Lord talked about a trumpet and where He talked about a gathering and very different from any references in John's gospel which obliquely some have referred to this, such as where he says to Martha in chapter 11, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Let me give you some of the differences. In Matthew the Son of Man comes on the clouds. In 1 Thessalonians believers ascend in the clouds. In Matthew the angels gather the elect from the four corners of the world. In 1 Thessalonians, Jesus Christ Himself gathers them to Himself. In the Olivet Discourse, particularly in Matthew, there is no record of the order of the ascent. That is the principle issue here in Thessalonians. And there are other distinctions as well.

And so, we can't say that Paul is referring to anything in the gospels because nothing states the things that he talks about here. Others have said, "Well, probably he's referring to a word of the Lord

that was said by the Lord but never written down, like the one recorded in Acts 20:35 where it says Jesus said it is more blessed to give than receive." Jesus did say that, we know He said it because the Spirit of God revealed to Luke when he wrote that He said it, but it's not recorded in the gospels. It's the only quote from Jesus outside the gospels. Some say what Paul is saying here then must be what Jesus said, we just don't have a record of it. But he doesn't say Jesus said it. He doesn't quote directly anything that Jesus said in the gospels, and he doesn't specifically say that Jesus said this, he just uses that rather general term, it was a word from the Lord.

Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 15, would you notice verse 51, or just listen to it? Paul beginning a discussion there about the Rapture says, "Behold, I tell you a mystery." Mystery means something hidden that is now revealed. Paul is saying I am now going to reveal something that has been hidden, which leads us to the conclusion that Jesus never did reveal the details of the Rapture. It was a mystery until Paul opened it up. He was the Apostle of that mystery. And here again, if Jesus had taught this and it had been common knowledge that He taught it whether recorded or not recorded, surely then Paul would have unfolded it to the Thessalonians. But here they are in complete confusion about this event called the Rapture and Paul again must give to them some new truth from the Word of the Lord. So we think there is no way to associate this with anything Jesus said.

If you'll notice chapter 5 verse 2 he says, "You yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Apparently they knew a lot about the day of the Lord. That's judgment. And they didn't need to be taught about the day of the Lord, but they did not know about the Rapture, the snatching, the catching away. And Paul then is revealing to them something that has heretofore been a secret and it's come to him by the Word of the Lord. Now that could mean it came through the mouth of a prophet that some prophet, New Testament prophet like Agabus mentioned in Acts 21 may have been the Lord's spokesman to Paul and uttered it. And Paul heard it. In fact, Agabus said when he talked to Paul in Acts 21, "This is what the Holy Spirit says," so it could have been a prophet like Agabus that was God's instrument to speak to Paul.

It could have been another means by which the Spirit of God communicated to Paul. It could have been direct like when he was on the ship in Acts 27 sailing across the sea and an angel came to him at night and told him exactly what the Lord wanted him to hear. But somehow in some way he got direct revelation which he now unfolds. So what is the Rapture built on? Not philosophy, not some whimsical theological speculation, built on the death of Christ, sin is paid for therefore we're acceptable to God. The resurrection of Christ in whose resurrection we rise, the revelation of Christ which unfolds its details.

Strong foundation, wouldn't you say? Strong pillars. Now let's turn to the Word of the Lord. What did the Lord say to Paul about this event? That takes us to the second point, the participants of the Rapture...the participants of the Rapture. Verse 15, he says, "For this we say to you by the Word of the Lord," and here are the two participants, "that we who are alive and remain," and then the end of

the verse, "those who have fallen asleep." They're the two participants. There are only two kinds of people at the Rapture...the people who are alive and remain and the people who are dead. That is a very simple contrast. And that's all he's talking about. People who live and people who have died. You see, that was their burning concern, what happens to Christians who die?

Simply he says then, let me tell you about each of the two participants. First of all, then, we who are alive and remain. Christians living at the time when the Lord comes. We who live who do not die to see the parousia. Would you please notice the word "we," does Paul think he'll be alive then? Does Paul think that it could happen in his life time? Surely he does...surely he does. He certainly demonstrates what is a proper anticipation and a proper expectation for his Lord's return without laying out a specific time for it. I'm sure he would never do that, certainly under the inspiration of the Spirit of God he wouldn't do it, and he wouldn't do it on his own because he can read. He could read Matthew 24:36, he could read Acts 1:7, those Scriptures say, "No man knows the day nor the hour and the Father knows only what He's going to do in His own time." Those things say it's not for...those passages say it's not for you to know the times and the seasons the Father has put in His power. So he would never have set a time when even Christ said that you couldn't know. And I don't think that he would...he would think of some time way in the distance because you remember, Jesus told some parables about some virgins who thought they had a lot of time and they delayed and delayed and delayed and delayed and when it happened they weren't ready. And he knew that. So he knew he was in no position to set a time and he was in no position to delay the thing far off in to some nebulous future. And like all early Christians, I believe he saw the event as very near. That's why he uses the word "we," we who are alive and remain. We is sort of a generic term, we meaning the believers who are alive at that time. But he doesn't say "they" as if he's necessarily pushing it off to a future generation, he can say we and be comfortable about it because it might be in his life time.

There are other indications that he believed that. In Romans 13:11, "And this do knowing the time that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, the day is at hand." Boy, there's an urgency there, isn't there? Our salvation is nearer. What do you mean our deliverance? We've already had our soul salvation but our bodily salvation, the redemption of the body that he talks about in Romans 8, it's nearer than it's ever been. The day is at hand, at hand means next. The night is almost over. It will be soon.

In 1 Corinthians would you notice chapter 6 verse 14 for the same kind of expression? He says, "Now God has not only raised the Lord but will also raise us up through His power." Did he believe he'd be in that resurrection? Did he believe that he would be in that future resurrection? It seems on the one hand at one point he believes it's going to come in his life time. On another hand on the other point he believes he may be in the grave. Look at chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians, verse 26, he says, "I think then this is good in view of the present distress, that is good if you're single, stay single." He says it's good for the present distress for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Don't get a divorce. Are you released from a wife? Don't seek a wife. Just kind of stay where you are because of the time

in which we live. Verse 29, "I say this, brethren, the time has been shortened so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none." There's a lot of anticipation in that, a lot of feeling that time is short, we're moving toward the coming of Christ.

Chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians verse 11, "Now these things happened to us as an example, they were written for our instruction. Our instruction...listen to this...upon whom the end of the ages have come." He believed he was living in the ends of the ages, the Messianic times. And I'm sure he had no idea they would be as long as they have been already.

Look at 1 Corinthians 16:22, "If anyone doesn't love the Lord, let him be accursed, Maranatha," you know what that means? "O Lord come...O Lord come."

And look at our letter, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, they were waiting for His Son from heaven. Chapter 3 verse 13, he says that he wants their hearts established unblameable in holiness before God and our Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. Again, the anticipation of the coming of Christ and they being blameless when He gets here. Well if they had already been glorified they would be blameless when He got here. He's assuming that they may be alive when He comes and they're to be unblameable when that happens.

Chapter 5 verse 23, "May the God of peace sanctify you entirely, may your spirit, soul and body be preserved complete without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now the only way your body could be without blame and complete at His coming would be to be alive when He got here. And again I say he anticipated that Jesus could come in his life time. To Titus he said he was looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was looking for Christ, he believed that it could happen in his life time. And yet, follow this, on the other hand, he also believed that he could die before Christ came. Chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians verse 10, he says, "He died for us that whether we are awake or asleep we may live for Him." And he uses "we" there. He might be awake, He might be asleep when Jesus comes. But either way we'll live together with Him...either way.

In 1 Corinthians 15:52 he says at the Rapture we shall be changed. And he puts himself at the scene. And yet in Philippians 1 he says Christ shall be exalted in my body, whether it be life or death, to me to live is Christ, to die is gain, having a desire to depart and be with Christ. And in 2 Timothy 4 he says I have finished the course, I've kept the faith, I've fought the good fight. The time of my departure is at hand. And he sensed his own death.

Why all of that? What I'm saying to you is, he believed it could happen in his life time. He lived in that anticipation. And you hear the hope in his heart as he talks about we and us at that great event. But on the other hand, he knew it might not and that he might die before it happened. So he really associates himself with both possibilities. And that's the way the church has always lived...with

expectation and anticipation that it could come in my life time. And he's using the we because at the time he was one of the ones alive and remaining. And if Jesus had come he would have been in that group.

So, he conveys to the Thessalonians his own heart of anticipation. And I believe that's why they were waiting for His Son from heaven, chapter 1 verse 10, that's why the grief. They were so excited about the return of Christ because of what Paul had told them, so sure it could happen in their life time that that's why they grieved and if that wasn't the case, if that's not what drove them, then the whole context of the passage is pointless. If they thought it was going to be 2,000 or 3,000 years away, then they wouldn't have been grieving because they would have known not to expect it. But Paul had anticipation of it and so did they.

And what does he say then? We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, the parousia, when He comes for His own, shall not precede. What does that mean? Go before. Gain an advantage over. Those who have fallen asleep. Now that's what they wanted to hear. The people who are alive on the earth when Jesus comes aren't going to have any advantage over the ones who have died, that's his simple point. The living will not go before the dead, they will not gain an advantage. And that sums up all their questions. Would they be lesser saints? Would they be eternally disembodied spirits? Would they miss the Rapture? Would they be tag ons? No. All Christians alive and dead when Jesus comes will be at the Rapture, nobody will be left out...nobody.

That takes us to his third point, the plan of the Rapture. Verse 16, here he goes through the details, follow them quickly. First thing that happens detail by detail, "For the Lord Himself," now I want to stop at that point. Not an angel, not a lot of angels, not a substitute, the Lord emphatically in the Greek Himself. He is coming for His bride. He is the bridegroom coming to take His bride. This again in contrast to Mark 13:26 and 27 where the gathering of the elect saints is done by the angels. This is Christ Himself coming for His bride...the church. And it's Himself emphatically.

And notice the second element, "He will descend from heaven." Why? Because that's where He's been. When He ascended He went to the right hand of the Father. In Hebrews chapter 1 it's very very clear in verse 3 that He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. And the writer of Hebrews says He's seated on the right hand of God from which point He advocates for us, intercedes for our sins, functions as a high priest. And He's in heaven. Back to 1:10 again, it says "To wait for His Son from heaven." He's there, He's waiting to descend. And that's precisely what He will do. Notice how He does it, verse 16, "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a keleusma, a shout." It's a word of command, it's a military term. It's as if the troops are all at ease and the command is "Fall in." Luther translated the word "feldgrashray(?) which means stand up, a call to the church to stand up. The church has been in repose, the bodies of the saints have been in the graves. And there's coming a time when Jesus comes descending out of heaven and He shouts for those bodies to stand up. And they fall in to rank, they fall in to line, they fall in to order from being at ease and repose to filling up

the ranks, taking their stand.

At the time of the millennial kingdom which is later, it says in Psalm 47:5, "God goes up with a shout, the Lord with a sound of a trumpet," but here He comes down with a shout and the trumpet. And so, this is the fulfillment of John 5:25, just a general prophecy regarding resurrection. But listen to what John 5:25 said, the words of Jesus, "Truly truly I say to you, an hour is coming and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear shall live." And the first group that are going to hear are the redeemed with their bodies in the grave, the voice cries, the bodies are composed again into glorious form, rise out of the graves to meet the spirits coming back with God and Christ to that meeting place.

Notice what he says then, "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout with a voice of an archangel, or the archangel." There's no definite article there so technically it's the voice of an archangel. This is really a unique statement, the only mention of an archangel is here and in Jude 9. In Jude 9 the archangel is designated as Michael and it could well be that he's the only archangel. The Jews used to believe there were seven archangels. They all...their names all ended with "el" which is the term for God in Hebrew. But we don't know that for sure, that was their tradition, Gabriel, Michael, Ariel and others. But all we know is there is an archangel here, it could well be Michael because in Daniel 12 when it's time for the resurrection there that Daniel speaks of spoken to Israel, Michael is there and Michael is there with his great voice at the resurrection of Israel. So it well could be that Michael the archangel is associated somehow with this great event. And as Jesus comes down and makes this command for resurrection, Michael is there as well with his voice echoing, as it were, behind the Lord's command. Whoever it is and for whatever purpose His voice cries, it is also attended by the trumpet of God.

What does this mean? Trumpets are all over the Bible, they have all different kinds of meanings. But we know there's a trumpet at the Rapture. First Corinthians 15:52 says "The trump of God and the dead in Christ shall rise." The trump of God. So there is a trumpet at the Rapture. Trumpets were used in Israel for all kinds of things. They were used for festivals, celebrations, convocations, judgments. They were used for triumphs. They were used any time anybody wanted to get a crowd together to say anything to them for public announcements, proclamations.

But in Exodus 19 verses 16 to 19 a trumpet called the people out of the camp to meet God. It was a trumpet of assembly and it called them out of the camp to meet God. I believe this is a trumpet of assembly. In Zephaniah 1:16 and Zechariah 9:14 a trumpet was used as a signal of the Lord's coming to rescue His people from wicked oppression. It was a deliverance trumpet. And I believe the trumpet on that day is an assembly trumpet and a deliverance trumpet. I believe when the trumpet blows it is to assemble the saints who have been called out of the graves to life with the living saints and it is also to call them out, to rescue them out from among those who oppress them, men and demons. There are many other trumpets associated with the end times, they tend to be trumpets of

judgment, primarily as in Revelation 8 through 11.

Then it happens, back to our verse 16, at the sound of the voice of the Lord, the voice of the archangel, the trump of God, "The dead in Christ shall rise...not last but what?...first." Somebody said, "That's because they have six feet further to go." But I think that's a rather shallow perspective. The point that Paul is trying to make here is that they're not going to lag behind, they're not...they're not second-class citizens, not at all. In fact, you're dear loved ones who have died are going to go first. Boy, that's such a great truth, such an encouraging thing. The dead in Christ rise first. I love that phrase "the dead in Christ." If you're ever in Christ, you're always in Christ whether you're alive or dead. And when you die and that body goes into the grave, that body reposes in Christ. That belongs to Him. That is His personal and eternal possession and He will reclaim it from its decomposed dust. Paul says in Romans 8 that neither death nor life nor anything else shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Death can't do it. You live in Christ, you die in Christ, you're dead in Christ, you stay in Christ, you'll live again in Christ. First Corinthians 15:23 calls the resurrected, "Those who are Christ's." That's the key point in the passage.

And so, the dead Christians rise first. What good hope, good news that is. There will be a reunion. That beloved wife, that beloved husband, that beloved son, daughter, that beloved friend, that dear pastor, that neighbor who meant so much in my life who is gone, should I live for the Rapture...that great event...they'll not miss it. In fact, they'll rise first. There will be a reunion. And what rises out of that grave is a glorified body to meet an already glorified spirit to become that eternal person in the image of Christ, like Him because they see Him as He is.

Then the next sequence in verse 17, "Then we who are alive and remain," the ones who live, the ones who survived, the ones who are still alive, living Christians, and again he uses the word we because he believes he could be a part of that group, "We who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds." Snatched up by irresistible force, plucked out of this world. And that word "caught up" is used, for example, in Matthew 11:12 referring to the kingdom taken by force, it's used in John 10:12 of the wolf snatching the sheep, it's used in John 10:28 and 29 when Jesus says, "No man can snatch you of My Father's hand," a violent act. It's used in 2 Corinthians 12:2 and 4 of Paul being caught up into the third heaven. Acts 8:39, Philip caught up, remember when he was caught up and the eunuch saw him no more and the Spirit of God just transported him supernaturally, it's a snatching. It's at that moment that the transformation takes place. We who are alive and remain are here and all of a sudden we're snatched in the moment, in the twinkling of an eye. And having been snatched we're instantly transformed. Philippians 3 describes it, verse 21, "When He comes He will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory by the exertion of His power." In a moment we're transformed into a glorified body like the resurrected body of Christ. Snatched from the grasp of Satan. Snatched from the fallen world and the decaying and decayed flesh. Snatched out of the grave. Snatched away from the coming wrath of God. It's a rescue operation.

"Together with them." What does that mean? We'll all be there. Everybody will be there. We'll all have a part in the gathering together. The church triumphant joins the church militant to become the church glorified. And which way do we go when we're snatched? "We're caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." We've got to go through there quick because who is the prince of the power of the air? Satan. We're snatched out of graves. We're snatched out of this fallen world and we're literally rocketed through faster than the speed of light, rocketed through the air. And no doubt there will be effort made on the part of the adversary and his demons who control the air to stop what could never be stopped. And our movement is heavenward.

"And so shall we ever be with the Lord." Clouds are often associated with divine appearances. The divine glory of God is often spoken of as a cloud of glory, the Shekinah brightness. God is often associated with clouds. When God came down on Sinai in Exodus 19 there were clouds. When God came into the tabernacle it was filled with a cloud. When He came into the temple it was filled with a cloud. At the transfiguration the Bible talks about clouds that were there and then Jesus Shekinah glory blazed out from within Him. The cloud of glory again mingling with clouds. At the ascension Jesus was taken up into heaven in clouds. No doubt the literal clouds mingling with the glory of the presence of Christ and the presence of glorified saints. And we meet the Lord in the air.

The word "meet" there is a beautiful word, a magnificent word. It's often used to suggest the meeting of a dignitary or king, a famous person, people rushing to meet him. Some commentators have pushed the point extremely far. They say that word was used when a king came back to his city, a ruler came back to his city as a conquering hero. When they'd see him coming down the road the city would run out to him and escort him the last part of the distance. At a wedding, the wedding party would run out and escort the bride or the bridegroom back to the wedding. A visitor coming to a city like in Acts 28, we see some people running out to escort that visitor into the city. And some have taken that and said, well what happens here is we go out to meet the Lord in the air and we come back to the earth for the Kingdom. And that defends a post-tribulational Rapture. We just go in the air, come right back, set up the Kingdom.

But such an analogy is arbitrary because that word is not restricted to just meaning that. All it means is to meet the Lord. It doesn't mean that we meet Him somewhere and come down here. In fact, what's the point of going up in the air if we're coming back here. We might as well wait here till He gets here. We're not just going up and down. We're going up and up. Why bother to meet in the air if we're coming back? And what in the world was Jesus saying in John 14? "And if I go I shall come again to receive you to Myself that where I am there you may be." If we're coming down, it's where you are I may be. He's not coming where we are, friend, He's rescuing us out to go where He is. That's the Father's house. He's been getting it ready for two thousand years, I imagine we're going to have some significant visit there. A better way to see the picture would be that King Jesus is coming but He's not coming to a welcoming Earth, He's coming to an Earth not ready to receive Him at all.

He's coming to a hostile Earth under the control of Satan, a rival ruler. And He's coming to snatch His people out, to rescue His people and take them to a safe place in the Father's house. And He'll come back later and take the Earth by force.

Once we reach heaven, verse 17 says, thus we shall always be with the Lord. Always, always, always, never again to be separated from Him, always in His presence. Why? Because He purified for Himself a people for His own possession, His eternal possession, Titus 2:14. With the pillars, the participants and the plan of the Rapture, finally the prophet. What's the benefit of this?

Verse 18, "Therefore do...what?...comfort one another with these words." He doesn't say...Therefore would you please write out a large eschatological chart. No. He just says comfort each other. This is a comfort passage, friend, exactly like John 14 was. The Rapture always appears shrouded in mystery because it is seen always from the pastoral viewpoint as the great comfort of the believer that Jesus is coming for His own. Don't worry about the ones that die, don't worry about the ones that are alive, we'll all be there when He comes. The God of all comfort will send Christ and we are thus comforted. No need to grieve. No need to sorrow.

What happens to Christians who die before Jesus gets here? They rise first and they'll be there at the gathering together when He snatches us out of this hostile world to take us to the place He spent 2,000 years already preparing for us. That's our great hope. And so as I said last time, Christians never say a final goodbye. Let's bow together in prayer.

Death is such a fearful thing, Father, when it is shrouded in ignorance. It is such a frightening thing when there is no faith, when there is no word from You. And we ache for those in our world who have no hope and who live with the frightening despair of final partings and hopelessness. And yet on the contrary, here we are as Christians filled with hope for a glorious reunion in that day when Jesus comes and all who make up His bride are gathered together to Him to meet Him in the air and be taken to the Father's house. Father, thank You for that great hope. May it burn in the hearts of everyone here. And should there be some dear one who has not that hope, who lives in the fear of death, is in bondage to that fear, may this day be the day they see Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, turn to Him for the forgiveness of sin and the hope of eternal life and the anticipation of His blessed coming. Father, we would cry with all our hearts as John did, "Even so, come Lord Jesus." As Paul did, "Maranatha, O Lord come." But there's a bitterness there because so many don't know our Christ. May this be a day when they embrace Him. And may this be a day when our hearts are comforted who have lost those we love temporarily as they sleep, as they are at ease until the commander calls them to ranks and may we hope for that glorious day and live in the light of such hope, with joy and thanksgiving. And all this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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