

The Rapture – 1 Thessalonians 4

Somebody tell me where you would go if you could go anywhere on Earth for vacation all expenses paid. Let's say you want to go to Hawaii. If you were going on a trip to Hawaii, you would get there either by plane or by boat, most likely. Well, similarly, if you are going to Heaven, did you know that there are two ways to get there?

The first way is to be a really good person, right? Nope. Really good doesn't cut it. Perfection is the only thing that earns you a ticket to Heaven. If you aren't perfect then you have to rely on Jesus paying the price for the ticket. But once you have the ticket there are two ways to get to Heaven.

Now, these two ways are only for those who have a ticket and our ticket is by grace and through faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. But once you have that ticket, there are two ways to get there. Paul tells us about it in a beautiful passage in **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**. This passage makes me happy. It gets me excited so if I get a little loud or do a little happy dance, don't be surprised.

1 Thessalonians is in between **Colossians** and, believe it or not, **2 Thessalonians** in the New Testament. The church in Thessalonica had written Paul because they had some questions for him and he is writing this letter to answer some of those questions. One of their concerns was about their loved ones who had died. Paul had taught them that Jesus was going to come back and get them soon and so they expected it to be while they were all still alive but now some of them had died and they were worried that they had somehow missed the rapture that Paul had taught them about.

So, let's read Paul's response to them as he describes the rapture in **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**. *Brothers, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who fall asleep, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵According 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. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷After 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.

All over the Northeast, half a million **Adventists** -- disciples of New York evangelist William Miller -- awaited the rapture on April 3, 1843. Journalists had a field day. Reportedly some disciples were on mountaintops, hoping for a head start to heaven. Others were in graveyards, planning to ascend in union with their departed loved ones. Some high society ladies clustered together outside town to avoid entering God's holy kingdom amid the common herd.

It was to happen on April 3rd, but what do you think happened? Nothing happened, of course. April 4th came and has come and gone many times since. It's foolish to try to guess the date when **Matthew 24:36** says, ³⁶*"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* We don't know when and we don't need to know when. All we need to do is be expecting it.

Paul tells us there are two ways to get to Heaven; either through death or through the rapture. Now, when I say the word "rapture" you may notice that this is not a word that Paul used. We get the word "rapture" from the Greek word "harpazo" which means to snatch away.

Some of you may remember playing jacks as a kid. I remember you rolled the dice and bounced a ball and before the ball hit the ground you had to pick up a certain number of playing pieces and so you snatched those pieces off the ground really quick. That's "harpazo". That also makes me sound ancient, talking about playing jacks. "Harpazo" is the same word used to describe a wolf snatching a sheep in **John 10:12**. In **Acts 8:39** it speaks of Philip's being snatched away from the Ethiopian eunuch. It is a strong, almost violent act that is irresistible.

In **verse 13**, Paul says, *"We don't want you to be uninformed"* and I think he is speaking for himself but also for God. God doesn't want us to be uninformed so He revealed some things to Paul so he could tell us. In **verse 15**, it says, *"According to the Lord's word..."* and I believe Paul has been given this directly from God in some way or another. The Lord has given this to Paul to share with us. He wants us to know and doesn't want us to grieve. So, Paul is saying it but he has the authority of God Himself.

Now, I want to get to the really good stuff. This passage is used to comfort people at funerals all the time and it is perfect for that but that's not our focus this morning. There is

a lot of prophecy that will not affect us as Christians. In fact, most of the book of Revelation is not written to us nor will it affect us because I believe that the Bible clearly teaches that the rapture will happen before the Great Tribulation that is so prevalently talked about in Revelation. We can argue about that later if you want to – and you can be wrong later if you want to - but this message is not meant to deal with all that. This is meant to help us prepare for the trip. So, if we are going to be prepared for the trip, we want to know how we're going to get there.

Paul says in **verse 16**, *“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven.”* At the rapture, Jesus is coming for us who are still alive. He is not sending His angels or drawing a map and hoping we get there. He's coming to get us. Now, don't mistake the rapture for the Second Coming of Jesus. That comes later. You can tell the difference because at the rapture, Jesus meets us in the sky and at His Second Coming, He actually comes all the way back to earth with us behind Him but we will talk about that a little later.

Since His ascension back into Heaven after His death, burial and resurrection, Jesus has been sitting at the right hand of God (Heb. 1:3) but when the Father says it is time, Jesus will leave Heaven with a loud shout; a command like He gave to Lazarus when Jesus stood at the tomb (John 11:43) and called Lazarus out. When Jesus gives the command it will be like a military commander calling his troops to fall in.

Now, I wish I could see this. Can you imagine the scene? The King of all kings, the Creator of the universe, God the Father is sitting on His throne and one day He is going to look to His right at His beloved Son, Jesus, and say, *“It's time!”* Then Jesus will stand up from His throne and say, *“Michael! Let's go get my bride!”* Then the archangel will shout the command and a trumpet will echo over all the planets in the universe and at the sound of that trumpet, graves all over the world will burst open and the bodies of Christians that have already died will rise first with their glorified bodies joining with their glorified spirits to make them into the image of Christ. (John MacArthur, Jr. commentary)

1 John 3:2 says, *“²Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”* **Romans 8:38** says that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death. So, those that have died will go first.

Now, that's another picture. Can you imagine what that's going to look like? Some gardener is going to be weed eating around the graveyard and all the sudden every casket

holding a Christian is going to blast apart and the dirt and headstones will go flying leaving those graves empty with just the word of the Father.

Now, let me throw this in really quick. I know some people are concerned because their loved one has been cremated or they were lost at sea or dismembered in an accident of some kind. They worry that God won't be able to put them all back together again at the rapture and I have to say that's almost funny. You mean to tell me that you don't have a problem believing that God can restore to a glorious new body somebody that died 200 years ago and whose body is now dust but since Aunt Becky lost her foot in a car crash, she's gonna limp for all eternity? C'mon.

I don't know how but if God can speak the universe into existence, I'm pretty sure He has this little problem figured out as well. **Philippians 3:21** says, "*God will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*" and **1 Corinthians 15:52** says we will be changed "*in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.*"

We will be rescued from Satan and sin and temptation. We will be snatched up out of this nasty old world and away from all the greedy and corrupt politicians, the impure and cowardly leaders, the hurt and the pain that so many live with every day physically, mentally and more. Our lowly, weak and impure bodies will be transformed into glorious bodies in an instant.

Now, let me ask you a question. How many of you have computers? Now, on these computers, does there ever come up on the screen a notification that an app or a program or a system of some sort needs to be updated or upgraded? Sure, those things happen all the time, right? Now, do you ever wonder while you are downloading that update what the new system is going to look like? Are you ever afraid that it might not be recognizable or that you aren't going to be able to use it?

No, not usually. Most of the time those programs are updated and the changes are nice. It may have some new features but the overall system is very familiar and easy to use. Our glorified bodies will be very similar to getting a much-needed upgrade. When we get our glorified and resurrected bodies, we will, no doubt, have some unexpected surprises but we will certainly recognize our new bodies as being ours. (Randy Alcorn, Heaven, p. 116)

Do you know how I know this? We're told in scripture that our bodies will be like the glorified body of Jesus. I read that verse in **1 John 3** that says, "*But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him.*" We are also told in several places in scripture what

His body was like. After Jesus was resurrected, it says He appeared to hundreds of people and they all recognized Him. Mary had a hard time at the tomb for a few minutes but even through her tears she finally took a good look and knew right then.

The disciples saw His scars. They touched Him and He ate with them. He called to them and they recognized His voice. Yes, He walked through a closed and locked door in the upper room and that will be pretty cool if we are able to do that, I guess, but we don't know for sure. We aren't told explicitly that we will be able to walk through walls but if so, I bet after a few thousand years we will get used to even that.

1 Corinthians 15:49 says, *“And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man”,* (speaking of Adam) *“so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.”* (Speaking of Jesus) My point is that, while we don't know everything about these cool and glorified new bodies we are going to get, they will be familiar to us and to others.

Now, with all that being said, “glorified bodies” is not the main focus of this passage. The rapture, with all its power and glory is going to be great and awesome but bodies flying up and around is not the main point of this word from God through Paul. Paul tells us at the end that these words should be encouraging and what does he say just before that? The words at the end of **verse 17** are the encouragement. Look at them again with me, if you would.

“And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Now, there's your encouragement! I don't know about you but that makes a lot of people say “Amen!” I don't know everything about our glorified bodies or everything about what Heaven is going to be like. We have some ideas and that's good but this is the best news of all. We will be with Jesus. We will share as co-heirs with Him to all the good things Heaven has to offer.

I was driving around the other day sort of in the middle of nowhere when I saw something on the side of the road in the tall grass. I couldn't tell at first what it was but it was moving around and so I kept my eyes on it as I passed that spot. When I got up to it, I saw that it was a young dog laying on his back scratching his back in the grass and just enjoying life to the fullest.

He jumped up about the time I got to him and tried to race me for a second, gave up on that and found something obviously incredible to sniff in the weeds. It made me laugh at first how much this dog was obviously enjoying himself there on the side of the road with no plan and nobody else around him like only a puppy could do.

Now, being a preacher, everything I see is filed into my “Future Illustrations” file in the back of my mind and so that puppy illustrates so perfectly the typical unbeliever. They are having fun, running free and wild with no plan for the future and no care about anything but right now and the fun they can have in this field of so-called dreams.

Music

I’ve been there. I’ve had fun running free and living easy. The problem is that this is a mean and nasty world and it’s full of problems that hit all of us. How much is peace and joy worth to you in this world, plus the assurance of eternal life in Heaven if we get hit by a car and die today?

Do you know for sure that if you died that you would go to Heaven? The Bible, God’s Word, tells us plainly that all we have to do is believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that no man comes to the Father but through Him. (John 14:6) That belief will be proven in our lives by changed lives that every day look more and more like Jesus.

Repent of your sins today. Turn away from that lifestyle and ask Jesus to be Lord and Savior of your life today and to forgive you of all your sins and He will. Today is the day of salvation. Don’t wait. We aren’t guaranteed another day. Let’s pray right now as the music plays.