

The Rapture - Part 4

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INTRODUCTION

My previous articles commenced a series on the rapture of the church. We began with the question, "**What is the Rapture?**" This question can best be answered by noting ten truths about the rapture from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. In previous articles, we saw that the rapture is an important doctrine and not something that can be marginalized or explained away as a secondary doctrine. We also noted that the rapture is an event that is distinct from the Second Advent of Christ. We further observed that the rapture will involve the catching up of every believer to meet the Lord in the air. We now move to our fourth point.

A REUNION

Fourth, the rapture will be a reunion. The concern of Paul's Thessalonian converts that initiated his discussion on the rapture is recorded in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. This verse says, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope." Apparently, upon planting the church in Thessalonica, Paul had taught the new converts about the rapture. However, his sudden departure from Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9) left him no opportunity to explain the full ramifications and implications of this doctrine. Thus, when some of the Thessalonian Christians began to die, either due to natural causes or persecution, the question that likely remained in the minds of the living Thessalonian believers was whether those who had died before the Lord's return in the clouds would miss the rapture?

Paul explains the reason that the Thessalonians made this inquiry was that they were "uninformed" (1 Thess. 4:13). The Greek word translated "uninformed" is *agnoeō*. Because "a" is a negation and "*gnōsis*" means "knowledge," *agnoeō* literally means "without knowledge." From this Greek word *agnoeō*, we get the English words "agnostic," "ignorant," or "ignoramus." Calling someone ignorant is not necessarily an insult. Ignorance does not mean stupidity, or the inability to grasp truth. Rather, it simply refers to someone who is not yet fully informed. The reason that the Thessalonians were asking the question is because they did not have all of the facts. Paul, as the revealer of new doctrine for the Church-Age, had thus far no opportunity to explain to them how the rapture doctrine related or applied to Christians who had already died. The Thessalonians could not consult the New Testament to discover this reality, since the New Testament itself was just being initially formulated.

Paul answers the question that was on the minds of the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. He notes, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and

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remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord."

Here and elsewhere, Paul explains what happens to the souls or spirits of deceased Church-Age believers. Church-Age believers are those saints who have lived and died anytime in between the church's founding on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and its earthly termination at the point of the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:50-58). Paul typically refers to Church-Age believers as those who are "in Christ" (1 Thess. 4:16) or "in Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:14). At death, deceased Church-Age believers' souls or spirits leave the body and go immediately into the presence of God (Acts 7:59; 2 Cor. 5:8; Philip. 1:21-23) to remain there until the rapture.

At the point of the rapture, deceased Church-Age believers, whose spirits or souls are currently in the presence of the Lord, will then descend from heaven with the Lord and be resurrected or raised (1 Thess. 4:16) "first" (*prōton*). Then those believers who living on the earth at the time of the rapture will be caught up to be with the Lord and be resurrected second (1 Thess. 4:15, 17). Thus, the believers caught up from the earth at the time of the rapture will meet the resurrected Church-Age saints who are descending with the Lord. The two groups will meet together in the clouds to be forever with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:17).

Paul's point in explaining how the rapture event relates to the dead in Christ is that the Thessalonians should not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). They will see their deceased loved ones again at the moment of the rapture. In fact, the rapture event will begin with the descent of the Lord along with these deceased Church-Age believers. Because the rapture will involve a reunion between deceased Church-Age believers and living Church-Age believers, there is no need to grieve over their deaths to the extent that the unsaved world would grieve over such a loss. Paul comforts the Thessalonians by teaching them that they will see their dead, believing loved ones again at the point of the rapture!

Interestingly, Paul never tells the Thessalonians not to grieve over the loss of their deceased, believing loved ones. Grief over such a loss is normal and natural and should never be artificially stifled or suppressed. Paul instead says to them and to us to "not grieve as do the rest who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). In other words, do not grieve as if you do not have the hope of ever seeing your deceased loved ones in Christ again. Do not grieve like an unbeliever does who has no hope of ever seeing a deceased loved one again after death. Do not grieve as the world does. Such a perspective explains why Paul concludes his discussion on the rapture to the Thessalonian believers with the phrase, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18).

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Deceased Church-Age believers are looking forward to the rapture as much as those of us who have trusted in Christ who are presently living on the earth. As explained previously, deceased believers currently in the presence of God will receive their resurrected bodies at the point of the rapture along with believing earth dwellers, whose bodies will be changed. The prospect of a glorified body is just as inviting to a deceased believer as it is to an earth-dwelling believer. Either way, all Church-Age believers will participate in the rapture. Should we die before this momentous event, we will participate as we are resurrected first after our spirits or souls are brought down with Christ. Should we happen to experience this event before death, we will participate in the rapture by being caught up to Christ and changed second. At any rate, all Church-Age Christians will participate in the rapture, either on the way down or on the way up.

In sum, not only is the rapture an important doctrine, an event that is distinct from the Second Advent of Christ, and an event that will involve the catching up of every believer to meet the Lord in the air, but the rapture will also be a reunion between living and deceased believers. Therefore, this reunion element of the rapture doctrine furnishes a tremendous comfort to those living believers who have lost a loved one in Christ through death.

(To Be Continued...)

