

The Coming of the Lord or The Rapture of the Church

1 Thessalonians 4.13-18

Introduction

As indicated in the title the subject can be looked at from the perspective of Christ or the Church. He is coming; the Church will be raptured. His coming is stated explicitly in verse 15; the Church's rapture is in verse 17. The word "rapture" itself is not in the passage and in fact has changed its meaning with time. The dictionary definition is "ecstasy, bliss, euphoria, elation" and the like. However, interestingly the dictionary also gives "the transporting of believers to heaven at the second coming of Christ". It is of course in this sense that we use and understand the word. It comes from Medieval Latin *raptura* meaning seizure or kidnapping and parallels the phrase "caught up" (*harpazo*) in verse 17 with the idea of being snatched away by force.

The word *harpazo* occurs 13 times in our NT. Examples of its use are found in 2Cor 12.2 where Paul says "I knew a man in Christ...*caught up* to the third heaven", or in Ac 8.39 where "the Spirit of the Lord *caught away* Philip" after the baptism of the eunuch, or in Jude 23 where we are exhorted to "save [others] with fear *pulling* them out of the fire". The emphasis on the requirement for force is seen particularly in John 6.15 where we read "Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and *take Him by force*, to make Him a king". It therefore indicates the sudden transportation of a person from one place to another by the expending of energy. Force is necessary in 1 Thessalonians 4 case because of the sphere (air) through which we're passing (Eph 2.2) and is given expression to by the "shout" of the "Lord Himself".

Outline

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- The precedence of the "asleep" 15
- The details of the coming explained 16a-c
- The effect of the shout 16d-17

The practical result 18 – comfort

Background

In Acts 17 Paul had preached that "Jesus... is Christ" (verse 3), thereby affirming "that there is another King, One Jesus" (7). Kingdom truth was thus communicated to them with the prospect of their sharing in it (see also 5.1-2 and 2Thess 2.2, 5). Since then some had died – would they miss being "with Him" (14) and sharing in the glory of the appearing and the coming Kingdom?

The immediate context

There is a definite change of tone at this point in the chapter and indeed in the epistle. In 3.10 the writers aver that they are “Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith”. Evidently Timothy had brought a report of several areas where the Thessalonians were needing some instruction in “the [their] faith”. They had evidently become concerned about some detailed aspects of future events. Paul deals with some of these in chapters 4 and 5. In particular, in this paragraph (4.13-18) he is dealing with those who have fallen asleep – “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep”. In chapter 5 the subject is about affirmation that believers will not pass through “The great Tribulation”.

The communication in 4.13-18 is a new revelation from the Lord; “for this we say unto you by the word of the Lord” (15). The fundamental point being made is that, far from missing out in the coming kingdom, believers who have fallen “asleep” will have precedence over the living at the time of the Rapture.

Introductory considerations 13-14

- Appeal for spiritual intelligence 13a – “I would not have you... ignorant”; cf as to the past 1Cor 10.1; present 1Cor 12.1; future Rom 11.25 (of Israel), 2Pet 3.8-10 (of the universe); 1Thess 4.13 (of sleeping saints)
- The condition of departed saints 13b – “them which are asleep” cf Jn 11.11 and the meaning of “cemetery” = sleeping place; not of the soul but the body (Matt 27.52); there is an awakening (resurrection) in view
- The appropriate attitude to be adopted to sleeping saints 13c – “sorrow not, even as others which have no hope”; there is sorrow (Phil 2.27; Jo 11.33) but there is hope – He 7.19 (better); 1Pet 1.3 (living JND); Titus 2.13 (blessed); 2Thess 2.16 (good))
- The basis of our hope 14a – “if [since] we believe that Jesus died (cst “sleep” (twice) for believers) and rose again”; the death and resurrection of Christ are fundamental and incontrovertible doctrines on which the apostle builds his argument; see 1Cor 15.3-4
- The statement of the facts 14b – “even so them also which sleep in (*dia* through) Jesus will God bring with Him”; the question arises as to what the bringing “with Him” refers?
 - ✓ Does it refer to the bringing the departed spirits of sleeping believers to be united to their bodies? No – see Hogg and Vine; “bring (*ago*)... without exception in the NT is used of persons and implying cooperation on their part” see eg Mk 13.11; Lk 4.1; Heb 1.6

- ✓ Does it refer to resurrection alone? – the “even so” implies that it certainly includes it; “Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep” will be raised – this satisfies the first part of the verse but doesn’t answer the fundamental argument the apostle is making that believers who have fallen asleep will not miss out reigning in the coming Kingdom (see Addendum 3).
- ✓ Does it refer to resurrected believers being brought with Christ in the manifested glory of His Kingdom? Matt 25.31; Col 3.4; 1Thesss 3.13; 2Thess 1.10; Rev 19.14; Heb 1.6. This is the best explanation – the resurrection is the necessary prelude to sleeping believers being brought “with Christ”. The means to accomplish this resurrection is explained in detail in the balance of the paragraph – verses 15-17.

The new revelation from the Lord 15-17

Paul had an “abundance of...revelations” (2Cor 12.7) – eg as to the Lord’s supper in 1Cor 11.23-34; the gospel in 1Cor 15.1-4. Here the revelation is to assert that believers who have fallen “asleep” will not miss out in the coming Kingdom of Christ and indeed will have a precedent place at the Rapture.

The precedence of the “asleep” 15

- The uncertainty of its timing of the Rapture 15a – “we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord”; Paul anticipated the possibility of being alive when the Lord came; thus, no prophecy to be fulfilled first; “listening for sounds not looking for signs”; could be “at any moment”!
- The precedence of the “asleep” 15b – “shall not prevent [precede] them which are asleep”; the living “shall in no wise precede [go before] them that are fallen asleep” RV

The details of the coming explained 16a-c – “For...”

- The Person Who’s coming 16a – “the Lord Himself”; not an angel – nor any intermediate emissary; He promised “if *I* go... *I* will come again” Jn 14.3 (note emphatic *I*’s) – the fact of His going is the promise of His coming!
- The place from which He’s coming 16b – “shall descend from heaven” = “Father’s house” of Jn 14.2 ie the place to which He went “*I* go...”; the place to which He went must be the place from which He comes!
- The manner in which He’s coming 16c – “the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with [*en* = *in*] a [an enabling] shout”; note that “speaking is the method divine Persons use to expresses their energy” – it was the case at creation Ps 33.6, 9 (“the breath of His mouth” was sufficient!); it will be equally sufficient here at the Rapture (16) and at the Manifestation in Rev 19.15 (to abolish every enemy at Armageddon) – here the shout characterised with two features

- ✓ **In** (*en* = characterised by) archangelic voice – the Archangel (only one) is associated with the bodies of believers (Jude 9) and war in heaven, resulting in power over the dragon Rev 12.7-9 – here the sphere of the air (of which Satan is the prince Eph 2.2) being cleared and controlled for the rendezvous of believers with the Saviour
- ✓ **In** (*en*) trump of God – last trump of 1Cor 15.52 (1st take down tent, 2nd fall into line, 3rd and last, up and go – signal to march); note there is no connection with the trumpets of book of Revelation

Note that there is only one shout. It is characterised by a voice and a trump (no definite articles) indicating that all the background necessary for the implantation of the divine programme, is fully in place.

The effect of the shout 16d-17

- “The dead in Christ shall rise first” 16d – this rising is the “mystery” of the change for the “corruptible” detailed in 1Cor 15.51-55 which will take place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump”. The “dead in Christ” (who have precedence here) is a technical term for believers of this dispensation (Church age) in contrast to “they that are Christ’s” in 1Cor 15.23 which includes believers of all dispensations.
- The inclusion “then [of] we which are alive and remain” 17 – the living believers won’t miss out with the overall result:
 - ✓ The united “Rapture” 17a – “caught up together with them” – reunion; meet each other (for some time?) before meeting the Lord
 - ✓ The variety of companies 17b – “in ~~the~~ clouds” (note definite article omitted) from varying localities cf use of “cloud” in Heb 12.1
 - ✓ The meeting with the Lord 17c – “to meet the Lord” Jn 14.3
 - ✓ The sphere of the rendezvous 17d – “in the air” cf Eph 2.2 – reason for force being needed; Satan is “prince of the power(s) of the air... the spirit(s)...”; the air saturated with demons!
 - ✓ The permanent bliss 17e – “ever be with the Lord”; eternal blessedness

The practical result 18 – comfort (cf with others)

- A comforting hope for mourning saints 18; Jo 14.1-3 – see Addendum 1
- A purifying hope for pressurised saints 1John 3.3 – see 2.15-17
- A transforming hope for scoffed saints 2Pet 3.11 – see 3.4-8
- A blessed hope for serving saints Titus 2.13 – see 2.1-12; “aged”, “young”
- A living hope for sovereignly “begotten” and kept saints 1Pet 1.3-5
- A better hope for mature (dispensationally) saints Heb 7.19 – “draw nigh unto God”; contrast old economy

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Addendum 1

Contrasts in books dealing with the Lord's coming

Scripture Ref	Main Subject	Sphere Involved	Person(s) Affected	Lesson
1Cor 15.50-58	Resurrection and change	Earth	Living not missing out	Challenge (58)
1Thess 4.13-18	Rapture and reunion	Air	Dead not missing out	Comfort (18)
John 14. 1-3	Reception and intimacy	Father's House (= Heaven 1Thess 4.16)	Lord's heart satisfied	Confidence "...where I am ... ye also"

Addendum 2

Additional confirmation that the phrase "will God bring with Him" reefs to the Appearing (SWB)

The Appearing is also taught in Heb 1:6. This is seen in the reference "when He [God] bringeth in the first-begotten into the world". The word for "bring" (*ago*) is the same as in 1Thess 4.14. It is not the "only begotten" to Whom reference is made in Heb 1.6 because God will on this second occasion bring many with Him, among and over whom He is pre-eminent; therefore, not the only begotten (He came alone the first time) but the first-begotten (He is pre-eminent among many when He comes the second time – see Rom 8.29).

Addendum 3 (William Macdonald in BBC)
EXCURSUS ON THE RAPTURE AND REVELATION

<i>The Rapture</i>	<i>The Revelation</i>
1. Christ comes to the air (1Th 4.17)	1. He comes to the <i>earth</i> (Zech 14.4)
2. He comes <i>for</i> His saints (1Th 4.6-17)	2. He comes <i>with</i> His saints (1Th 3.13; Jude 1.14)
3. The Rapture is a mystery, i. e. , a truth unknown in OT times (1Co 15.51)	3. The Revelation is not a mystery; it is the subject of many OT prophecies (Ps 72; Isa 11; Zech 14)
4. Christ's coming <i>for</i> His saints is never said to be preceded by celestial portents.	4. His coming <i>with</i> His saints will be heralded by signs in the heavens (Mat 24.29-30)
5. The Rapture is identified with the day of Christ (1Cor 1.8; 2Cor 1.14; Phil 1.6, 10)	5. The Revelation is identified with the Day of the Lord (2Th 2:1-12, NU Text)
6. The Rapture is presented as a time of blessing (1Th 4.18)	6. The main emphasis of the Revelation is on judgment (2Th 2.8-12)
7. The Rapture takes place in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (1Co 15.52). This strongly implies that it will not be witnessed by the world.	7. The Revelation will be visible world-wide (Mat 24.27; Rev 17)
8. The rapture seems to involve the church primarily (Joh 14.1-4; 1Co 15.51-58; 1Th 4.13-18)	8. The Revelation involves Israel primarily, then also the Gentile nations (Mat 24.1-25, 46)
9. Christ comes as the Bright and Morning Star (Rev 22.16)	9. He comes as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings (Mal 4.2)
10. The Rapture is not mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels, but is alluded to several times in John's Gospel	10. The Revelation is characteristic in the Synoptics but hardly mentioned in John's Gospel.
11. Those taken are taken for blessing (1Th 4.13-18). Those left are left for judgment (1Th 5.1-3)	11. Those taken are taken for judgment. Those left are left for blessing (Mat 24.37-41)
12. No dating system is given for events preceding the Rapture.	12. An elaborate dating system is given for the Revelation, such as 1260 days, 42 months, 3½ years (see Dan 7.25; 127, 12.11-12; Rev 11.2; 12.14; 13.5)
13. The title "Son of Man" is never used in any of the passages dealing with the Rapture.	13. The revelation is spoken of as the coming of the Son of Man (Mat 16.28; 24.27, 30, 39; 26:64; Mar 13.26; Luk 21.27)