

## STANDING FIRM VII. “The Rapture”

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I Thess. 4:13-18

### INTRODUCTION

We live in times of great uncertainty. A few months ago at presbytery someone commented that in the Othello aquifer they are drilling three times as deep for irrigation water as they were a decade ago. And, I think that’s the picture throughout much of the Midwest where they are using groundwater for irrigation. We’re running out of water. The timber we need is being consumed by fire. The threat of terrorism hangs over all of us. And realistically, I think we all know it is only a matter of time before some terrorist group gets a hold of a nuclear bomb. Is there any hope for us in the long-run?

You probably read or saw news reports a couple of months ago of the world famous physicist, Stephen Hawking’s, flight to experience weightlessness. Hawking is almost completely paralyzed with Lou Gehrig’s disease– yet his brilliant mind continues to churn out theoretical physics that keep contributing greatly to a scientific understanding of the foundational principles of our universe. He boarded a specially modified aircraft to accommodate his physical limitations and in one of those arcing swoops that produces weightlessness used by NASA to train astronauts, experienced a ½ minute of weightlessness. Certainly most of us would like to have such an experience, and especially so with a body as limited as Hawking’s. (Though Polly told me she definitely would not be interested in doing this). But Hawking expressed the purpose of his flight as a way to “encourage public interest in space” because of his belief that “life on Earth is at an ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers.” Thus, escaping to another planet, colonizing other worlds may be our only chance of survival as a human race.

Well, that is a pretty thin hope. And, of course, as Christians we realize it is an utterly false hope, for we would take our basic human problem with us, our sinful human natures– what C. S. Lewis refers to as our “bentness.” In spite of our best intentions, we end up taking selfish actions that end up destroying ourselves. All of the problems we face as a human race stem from the fall. And most of the trouble we’re in can be traced back to sin in the human heart. If we were all perfectly loving and totally unselfish, what a different world we would have!

As Christians, we have a much better answer, one which really and forever solves the problem we face. We have a Redeemer who will not just save our souls, but also ultimately our human race. And that is where Paul takes us this morning in 1 Thess. Every chapter of 1 Thess. ends with a reference to the second coming of Christ. Here, in the section we’re reading this morning, he gives the most detailed treatment of Christ’s return and introduces us to the only place in the Bible where the rapture is specifically mentioned.

READ: I Thess. 4:13-18

### **GRIEVING WITH HOPE**

*Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 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. (4:13-14)*

Paul is here using “sleep” as a metaphor for death. It is a common and appropriate image for believers in the Bible. For the Christian, death is not something to fear, because we have the assurance of eternal life in Christ Jesus. So, just as you go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning, so our passing into heaven will likewise be effortless— a simple letting go of this life and then we are in heaven.

Now, in Scripture, “hope” is never wishful thinking as in “I hope it will rain tomorrow.” It is a confident assurance, a looking forward to fulfillment of the certain promises of God. So, while those who have made Christ their Lord and Savior still grieve for believers who have died, their sorrow and grief has beneath it a quiet assurance that this is only a temporary parting. We will join them for all of eternity in heaven. Without that hope, grief becomes a far different thing, lacking any solid confidence of salvation. It is left with only vague desire or wish that he or she is in “a better place.” So it is, Paul assures us that grief for the believer is different— we don’t *grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.*

Do *you* at this moment have the assurance of eternal life? Do you know beyond the shadow of a doubt that if you died right now, you would be with the Lord for all of eternity? “I think so” or “I hope so” are not adequate responses. There is no uncertainty as to our eternal salvation when we belong to Christ. Jesus uses the metaphor of being “born again” to describe the fact that He imparts new life, His Spirit within us that assures us that we belong to Him. This life we receive is eternal life that begins right now and continues on forever. Jesus tells us about it in John 3:16:

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

In his first letter, John gives a succinct summary of this assurance we have:

*And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:11-13)*

I like the simplicity of that. If you have received the Son of God into your life as Lord and Savior, you have eternal life. If you haven’t, you do not have eternal life. And the way we receive Him is believing in him as Jn. 3:16 says. And, as I often say, “believe” in Scripture is not just intellectual assent, but a total commitment of your whole self to Him. It is total trust in Christ alone for your life and salvation, committed to obedience to Him as your Master. It is akin to the trust you display when you walk across a foot bridge over a huge chasm. Once you take a few steps where you can no longer reach back to the edge, you are committed.

The other day, Polly and I went to visit someone whom we hadn't visited before. In getting the directions from the man, he said we had to cross a bridge on his lane. He warned us that it didn't look like it would hold us, but it would. Indeed, his description was accurate. But, we drove right across, without hesitation, based upon his assurance. I believed him, and once my front wheels were on that bridge, I was committed. That is what saving faith is like— putting our full weight upon Jesus Christ and Him alone for our eternal salvation.

With that commitment comes a wonderful gift, the assurance, the knowing that we have eternal life. This comes from the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, or Spirit of Jesus that has come to live within us and it bears witness to us that we now belong to God forever (Rom. 8:16). Do you have that? Please do not leave here this morning without that certain knowledge.

Apparently these new Christians at Thessalonica had some questions and misgivings that Paul is responding to. Paul had taught them well about Christ's promised return to earth to put an end to evil, bring about perfect justice and set right all that is wrong in our world. But, while they were eagerly awaiting Christ's return, which will certainly be a glorious event beyond all imagining, some had died and were dying without getting in on this glorious event. Remember they were under intense persecution. Their question was apparently something like, "Will those who die before Christ's return get cheated out of this glorious return in power and glory?" Here, Paul lays out for us the doctrine of the rapture.

### THE RAPTURE

There are **three things** here in vs. 14-17 I want to highlight here. **First**, those who die who belong to the Lord will come with Jesus at His return. The moment believers die, they enter into heaven to be with the Lord. As Jesus promised the repentant thief on the cross, *today you will be with me in paradise* (Lk 23:43) . In 2 Cor. 5:8, Paul assures us that *to be absent from the body* means *we are present with the Lord*. So, all those who are Christians and who have gone before us are enjoying heaven, but also waiting in anticipation for That Day. They'll be a part of that great moment of Jesus' descent through the rending of the heavens. Jesus describes it in Matt 24:30-31,

*"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.*

This is the event Paul is referring to in vs. 15-16 here,

*According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

*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.*

Paul is telling us this additional information he has for us comes directly from the Lord— *According to the Lord's own word*. We would assume it came through a special revelation.

This brings us to the **second** thing I want to comment on— *the dead in Christ will rise first*. Here

we have the resurrection of the bodies. In a nanosecond, as those who have died in Christ are descending from heaven, they will be united to their resurrection bodies. Up to this point, they have not had bodies, but their spirits have been enjoying the glorious riches of heaven. At this moment, in a miracle beyond comprehension, the decayed bodies of the dead are transformed into perfect resurrection bodies. I love those thrilling words with which Paul concludes his great chapter on Christ's resurrection and the assurance it gives us of our resurrection:

*I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Cor 15:50-55)*

Throughout Scripture, the resurrection of the body is an essential tenet of our doctrine of salvation. It is important because God is at work redeeming all of creation. Adam and Eve were at the apex of God's creation. They were in charge of it all. With their fall, their sin, everything under them was corrupted as well. Death came, and all creation fell under a curse under which it is groaning until the day of Christ's return and final victory (Rom 8:22-23). Our bodies, recreated into resurrection bodies are part of this redemption. Right now, we enjoy salvation for our spirits. But then, it will include our physical bodies as well.

These resurrection bodies will be perfect, yet still be the unique you God created. Even like Christ's body after resurrection, it will be capable of instant transport, going through walls, etc. And, there will be nothing imperfect about that body. The skeptic may think, "How about those dead hundreds of years with their bodies completely decomposed? Their bodies are now a part of grass, trees, even animals that have eaten the grass." To that I say, God doesn't need any physical remains to recreate a perfect body for you. Every cell of your body contains a strand of DNA that has the complete genetic code that makes you uniquely you encoded in it. I don't find it hard to imagine God keeping a perfected, purified strand of DNA on file for each of us.

And now, the **third** thing— the rapture.

*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. (1 Thess 4:17)*

The word, "rapture," doesn't appear in our English translations. It comes from the Latin Vulgate for "caught up." If we're alive at the Lord's return, we're "raptured," or "caught up" to meet the Lord in the air— bodies and all.

Jesus alludes to this in His teaching about His return when he says,

*Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left (Matt 24:40-41).*

Suddenly, without warning, at the moment of Christ's return, believers will disappear, body and

all, to meet the Lord in the air, on His way down to complete the redemption of planet earth.

What I've said so far is core, orthodox doctrine Christians agree upon. Those are the facts. And, we must remember, there are far more promises concerning Christ's second coming at the end of history than there are about his first coming. And we've already seen those prophecies regarding His first coming fulfilled in incredible detail. Jesus is coming back physically to rule, reign, and judge the earth, destroying all that is evil. There will be no more sickness, no more dying, no more sorrow, and everyone will live in the goodness that God first created the world to be. Everyone will follow the way of the Lord. The devil will be thrown into the bottomless pit to wreck havoc no more. We all hold to those essential truths regarding Jesus' second coming.

However, sincere believers have come to different conclusions on some of the in-between events surrounding the Lord's return and their timing. Regarding the rapture that Paul is talking about here, historically it has most often been seen as almost simultaneous, within seconds of Christ's return at the end of history. Prior to that return, Jesus warns of a time of great tribulation. Also, the Book of Revelation depicts this time of tribulation. In more recent years, the theory of the rapture taking place before this time of tribulation has been popular among evangelicals— a pre-tribulation rapture, thus separating the rapture of believers from the return of Christ to rule the earth by seven years. To add to the confusion, the tribulation is sometimes split into two parts, the last 3½ years being “the great tribulation” with the rapture in the middle. So, we have three views:

1. A pre-tribulation rapture;
2. A mid-tribulation rapture;
3. And, a post-tribulation rapture.

There are sincere Christians in each camp, finding Scriptural support for their positions. We don't have to sort it all out. My position is pro-rapture. I want to be in on it whenever it comes!

Here, of course, I must mention the phenomenal sales of the Left Behind series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins— a series of 16 novels that have sold over 63 million books.

Remember these are fiction and not theology. Their first book clearly teaches a secret rapture before the beginning of a time of tribulation, a pre-tribulation rapture, popularizing this view.

The main thrust of Scripture is for us to be ready. As Christians we may escape the horrors of the tribulation through being raptured. But, then again, we may be called to be faithful through that time of tribulation until the Lord returns. Either way, there is an urgency in being prepared.

## CONCLUSION

Gregory Fisher tells of an incident 15 years ago when he was teaching at a West African Bible College. In his time there, he'd found the students could ask some of the most penetrating questions about minute details in Scripture. They were studying this same passage we are working with this morning. One student raised his hand and asked, “What will he say when he shouts?” At first, Greg says, he couldn't figure out what was being asked. Then the student elaborated, “Reverend, 1 Thess. 4:16 says that Christ will descend from heaven with a loud command. I would like to know what that command will be.”

Greg said he wanted to leave the question unanswered, cautioning the students that they must not go beyond what the Scripture states. But, at that moment, he said his mind wandered to an encounter he had earlier in the day with a refugee from the Liberian civil war. The man, who was a high school principle, told him he had been apprehended by a two-man death squad. After several hours of terror, being told by them how they would torture and kill him, he managed to narrowly escape. After hiding in the bush for two days, he found his family and escaped to a neighboring country. But the escape had cost him dearly: two of his children lost their lives.

Then Greg said he saw flashbacks of the beggars he passed each morning on his way to the school. Every day he saw how poverty destroys dignity, and robs people of the best of what it means to be human. He was haunted by the vacant eyes of people who have lost all hope.

Then, he was jerked back to the classroom by this insistent student. “Reverend, you have not given me an answer. What will he say?” Greg responded with, “Enough. He will shout, Enough! when he returns.”

With a surprised look, the student asked, “What do you mean, enough?” Greg continued, “Enough suffering. Enough starvation. Enough terror. Enough death. Enough indignity. Enough lives trapped in hopelessness. Enough sickness and disease. Enough time. ENOUGH!”