

Living In The Light Of His Return • 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *One Day*

1. I'm a big science fiction fan
 - a. I love Star Wars and Star Trek
 - b. anything about time travel fascinates me
 - c. I've even read all of the Dune series by Frank Herbert
2. They're showing ads on TV right now for a new movie about a man who disappears
 - a. some lab discovers a way to make people invisible
 - b. they inject one of the team members and disappears
3. As far-fetched as that is, the bible tells us that one day something completely unique in all of history will take place
4. In the barest fraction of a second, millions of people all over the earth will disappear
5. In 1 Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul says that it will take place in the *twinkling of an eye*
 - a. the candidates for this mass disappearance are believers in Jesus Christ
 - b. in a flash, they will be changed from this mortal flesh to immortality
 - c. in a single instant of time they will go from bodies which are susceptible to corruption and decay to incorruptible, glorious new bodies that are perfectly fit to enjoy all the abundance and pleasure of heaven
6. Far-fetched? You bet!
7. Sound like some out-there Twilight Zone episode? Sure!
8. Will it really happen? YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
9. One day, and I believe one day *soon*, all those who believe in Jesus Christ will be instantly caught up to meet the Lord.

B. *The Rapture*

1. This event is called the Rapture – the instantaneous transformation of believers from these mortal bodies into immortal ones
2. You see, Christians believe that God created the entire universe just as it says in Genesis 1:1
3. We believe there's a purpose and direction to history
 - a. that God created the universe and the earth as a stage upon which to unfold a great love story
 - b. it's the greatest story ever told; with a sinister villain, love rejected, tragedy, promise, high drama, a virtuous hero, a mighty struggle, love renewed, and eventually complete victory of the hero over the villain
4. Yes, we believe history is just that → His-Story!
5. I'm of the firm conviction we live in the days that will see the story wrapped up

- a. just as there was a *creation* –
- b. there will be a *conclusion*
- 6. And as the story winds up to it's great climax, events on earth will take on a new intensity and scope the world has never seen before
- 7. It all begins with a sudden and dramatic disappearance of millions of Christians in the Rapture
- 8. The Rapture is not to be confused with the Second Coming
 - a. in the Rapture, as we'll see today, Jesus comes in the air,
 - b. He comes in the *clouds for* believers
 - c. in the Second Coming, Jesus returns visibly to *earth with* believers
- 9. Let's see what Paul says about this in our passage this morning . . .

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 13-14 – *The Problem*

- 13 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.**
- 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.**
- 1. Paul wrote this letter to *both encourage* the Thessalonians, who were being persecuted for their faith in Christ, *and* to address a couple doctrinal questions that had risen among them
- 2. One of them had to do with what happens to believers who die before Jesus comes back
- 3. As we'll see a bit later, when Paul had been in Thessalonica, he had taught them about the end times and the coming of the Kingdom of God to earth
- 4. But a question had risen after Paul's departure – What about believers who die *before* Christ comes?
- 5. It seems some were saying that you had to be alive when Christ came or you would miss out on the Rapture.
- 6. Paul writes to correct this and give them the knowledge they were lacking
- 7. The Rapture is the Blessed Hope of the Church, and here he writes to renew that hope.
- 8. He says . . .

I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

- a. Paul classifies people into two groups in this passage
 - 1) those who sorrow and have no hope
 - 2) and those who have hope because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- b. which group are you a part of this morning?
- c. the Christian has hope because Jesus has conquered death, not just for Himself, but for all those who put their trust in Him
- d. Christians never really die, we just, as it says here, *sleep*
 - 1) in the NT, the death of believer is called *sleep* because we shall be

- wakened from it
- 2) death is a momentary repose in the bed of the grave
- 3) Jesus will come, and we will rise
- e. but what hope does the non-Christian have?
 - 1) the best they have to hope in is that when this life is over, nothing but annihilation awaits
 - 2) the only other option is that there is an afterlife, and all they have to look forward to for all eternity is the reward of having *rejected* Christ and the salvation He offers
 - 3) there's no hope, no comfort in either of these options
- 9. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they are a people of *hope*, not sorrow
- 10. So, *what about those* who've died before Christ comes? Paul tells them . . .

B. Vs. 15-18

- 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.**
- 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.**
- 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.**
- 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.**
- 1. Paul begins by reminding them that this isn't merely science fiction he's revealing
- 2. This isn't some yarn he spun, some far-fetched fantasy – This is something that comes from God – this is the Word of the Lord Himself
- 3. And it says this . . .
 - a. one day, Jesus will descend from heaven
 - b. notice it doesn't say that this return is *to the earth*; it's in the *air*, the word refers to the *atmosphere*; we meet Christ in the *clouds*
 - c. those who have died in faith in Christ will rise first
 - d. this rising speaks of the *resurrection*; their mortal bodies which have been laid in the grave, or buried at sea, or cremated and scattered on the waves – it doesn't matter how or where their mortal tents have been interred in the earth – will be and raised up
 - e. then, believers who are alive at that time, shall also be caught up to join them
 - f. together we will rise to meet Jesus in the clouds, and in those new resurrection bodies we will remain always with Christ in glory
 - g. v. 15 says that those who are alive when Christ comes will not *precede* those who sleep.
 - 1) the word means to have an advantage over
 - 2) that's what the Thessalonians had come to think
 - 3) that living believers had an advantage over the dead
 - 4) Paul corrects that – whether alive or asleep, when Jesus comes for the Church, we all go!
- 4. The dead in Christ rise first; because they've been buried in the earth, they are

caught up first, then when they reach the level of the living, they are transformed as well so that we can all arrive simultaneously before Christ

5. Notice what Paul writes in v. 14 . . .

If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

6. Where does the believer's spirit go when he or she dies today? To the Lord

7. But disembodied spirit's are not what God intended humans to be – to be human means to have a body.

8. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee that we will get new bodies, ones no longer subject to the curse and forever free of the effects of the Fall

9. When Christ comes in the Rapture, the spirits of all the saints who have died will return with Him; their bodies will be changed, and will rise to be reunited with their spirit

10. This is the resurrection!

D. The Word "Rapture"

1. We get the word rapture, which is what we call the event Paul describes here, from v. 17 where Paul says,

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds

2. The Greek word "caught up" is *harpazo*

a. it means to snatch something up with suddenness and irresistible force

b. Paul couldn't have picked a more appropriate word

3. When the Bible was being translated into Latin, the translators settled on the word "*rpto*" to translate the Greek word *harpazo*

a. the Latin word means "to seize, to carry off";

b. from it we get our English word "rapture"

4. There are some wonderful and enlightening flavors to the Greek word *harpazo* that give us comforting insight into this word and why Paul used it.

a. it pictures something being taken away *speedily*, as when it's used in Acts 8:39, when the Spirit "caught away Philip" after he had led the Ethiopian to Christ.

b. it carries the idea of *seizing something by force that cannot be resisted*; so no matter how strongly the devil may try to resist the departure of the saints, he won't be able to stop it

c. *harpazo* also carries the idea that the *reason* why someone takes something with such decisive force and quickness is because he has a right to it – it belongs to Him. From our Lord's point of view, the Rapture is his claim to take His long betrothed bride, the Church.

d. the word also means *to move to a new place*. Paul used this word when he described his visit to heaven in 2 Cor. 12:1-4. Jesus Christ has gone to prepare a home for us (John 14:1-6), and when He comes, He will take us to there.

e. finally, *harpazo* means *to rescue from danger*. It's used in Acts 23:10 of when the Romans rescued Paul from the mob that was beating him to death. This suggests that the church will be taken home *before* the time of

- Tribulation.
5. V. 16 tells us that three things will accompany the Rapture; a shout, a trumpet, and a voice
 - a. the *shout* is a loud command
 - b. *trumpets* were used to announce and summons
 - c. and the *voice of the archangel* signals the attendance of the angelic host at Christ's side when He comes
 - d. the point is that at the Rapture, there's a lot of *joyous noise*, just as there should be
 - e. this is Jesus coming to *apply* His victory; this is Christ coming to take possession of that which rightly belongs to Him
 - f. this last Monday evening there was a party to celebrate Jeff & Cindy Brown's 25 Anniversary
 - 1) their eldest daughter put it together and it was a surprise to the Browns
 - 2) we met at a restaurant at 6:30, Jeff & Cindy were to arrive about 7
 - 3) finally, word came they were driving in to the parking lot, so we all scrunched up toward the back of the room
 - 4) and when they entered the room, we all shouted and whistled and whooped and hollered.
 6. That's the picture here – the hosts of heaven have waited for this for a long time, and now they let lose with rejoicing as Jesus shouts the command for His own to rise to Him
 7. A trumpet sounds, announcing Him and summoning His own to gather to Him in the clouds

E. When Is The Rapture?

1. Paul concludes this section with the simple exhortation in v. 18 that we are to *comfort* one another with these words, with this truth – the fact of the Rapture
2. Note that well my friends, the Rapture is to be something that brings comfort to us, it's our blessed hope and what we look forward to
3. Sad then that the Rapture seems to have become more of a doctrine to fight and argue about than rejoice in
4. It seems that the Rapture has become such a contentious issue in the church that many preachers and teachers avoid it lest they stir up controversy and polarize the people in their congregations
5. You now me – I'm not afraid of controversy, I regularly say things that get me in trouble
6. And I won't steer clear of such now
7. As I know many of you are aware, there's a huge debate over *when* the Rapture occurs
 - a. while a small group of people hold that there is *no* rapture as we've defined it today -
 - b. most Christians fall into one of three *other* camps
 - 1) those who believe the Rapture occurs *before the Tribulation*
 - 2) those who believe the Rapture occurs in the *middle of the Tribulation*
 - 3) and those who believe it takes place *after the Tribulation*

- c. these are called the Pre-Trib, Mid-Trib, and Post-Tribulation views of the Rapture
- 8. You need to know that I am an unabashed Pre-Tribber!
 - a. I come to this position after many hours of study on this subject
 - b. I've read the books and arguments stating each position
 - c. but more importantly, I've studied the passages of scripture which deal with it
 - d. and after a period of time trying to be as objective and open as possible, I've come to the firm belief that the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation
- 9. Now, having said that, it's not within the scope of our study this morning to do an exhaustive study on that part of the Rapture because it would require us looking at many other passages – we'll get into it a bit more on Wednesday as we dig in even deeper into these verse
- 10. There are some things however, right in this text which I believe give clear indication for a pre-tribulation position.
- 11. Notice first of all in v. 13 that the trouble in Thessalonica was the concern of the living believers that their departed brothers and sisters would miss out on the resurrection
 - a. there was an *expectation* on the part of these early Christians that the Rapture could take place at any moment – even in their lifetime!
 - b. where did they get this idea? From Paul!
 - c. yet Paul knew that they were *not* living in the Tribulation!
 - d. we see that clearly in the next letter he wrote to them
- 12. There's another very important proof for the Rapture coming prior to the Tribulation in the next section . . .

F. 5:1-5

- 1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.**
- 2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.**
 - 1. Paul deals with the whole issue of timing and the coming of the Lord
 - 2. He tells them that they have no need to be instructed on these things. Why? Because he had already taught them
 - 3. This amazes me – though Paul had only spent between 3 and 6 weeks in Thessalonica, he had taught them all about the Last Days and the Return of Christ, including the timing of the Rapture
 - a. Paul considered this a central, a core doctrine,
 - b. something they needed to know as the disciples and followers of Christ
 - c. he knew that the Rapture would both give them hope and help them to live holy lives
 - d. how would it help them to maintain holiness? Because he had taught them it could occur AT ANY MOMENT!
 - 4. Look again at what he says . . .
- 1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.**

2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

5. My beloved, in a day when so many pulpits steer clear of the Rapture and talking about the Return of Christ – we need to see it as a precious truth to be preached and treasured –
 - a. not some kind of weird science fiction or Christian escapism to apologize for
 - b. nor is it a doctrine to fight over; where we draw lines in the sand and then say that anyone who doesn't agree with us is less than intelligent
6. It's a core doctrine that needs to be boldly taught and wrangled WITH, not OVER
7. Look at v. 18 of Chapter 4 again –

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

8. Now look at v. 11 of ch. 5 . . .

Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.

9. The Rapture is a precious truth meant to bring comfort to those of us who live in a hostile world that denies and defies Christ
10. The Rapture reminds us that do what it will, the world cannot resist the Lord
11. He wins!
12. The Rapture reminds us that death has been defeated and that history is moving inexorably to a grand climax where Jesus is seen as the hero and victor
13. And if THAT doesn't bring comfort and hope to you – you're on the wrong team!

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14. Notice what Paul says in v. 2 . . .

You yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

15. The Day of the Lord is a term used often in the OT to refer to that point in history when God moves definitively to take possession of earth
 - a. it begins with a time of judgment -
 - b. when God pours out His wrath in *increasing intensity* on a Christ rejecting world
 - c. then it rises to a great crescendo of trouble that ends with the visible return of Christ, the binding of the devil, and Christ taking possession of the kingdoms of this world
16. The first judgment God will pour out on earth is the removal of His own
17. With the departure of millions of Christians, a huge restraint against evil will be removed from earth – as it says in 2 Thessalonians 2:7
 - a. in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that His followers were the salt and light of the world
 - b. with the departure of moral and spiritual light there will be nothing but darkness
 - c. and with the preserving influence of salt gone, evil will flourish
18. The first measure of God's wrath will be revealed simply in the removal of believers

19. This will leave the world virtually void of light and truth
20. And as Paul says in v. 2, the Day of the Lord comes, it begins, like a thief in the night; in other words, it is quick, and unexpected
21. What will it be like when the Day of the Lord comes? V. 3 . . .
- 3 For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.**
22. Just prior to the Day of the Lord, it will seem like a golden age is about to come to earth – it will appear to be a time of peace and safety
23. But it isn't – their slogan proves hollow as a nightmare time descends on them
 - a. destruction and ruin
 - b. like labor pains, things go from bad to worse; they get more frequent and more intense
 - c. and from this time, THERE IS NO ESCAPE
 - d. there is no Rapture at the end of this because the Rapture has already come – it was the very first judgment visited upon them
24. No, the people who live during this time will find no escape
25. In contrast to *them*, Paul compares the followers of Christ . . .
- 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.**
- 5 You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.**
26. In contrast to those who reject Christ and so live in spiritual darkness and are *destined* for an *age* of darkness, believers are people of the Light and aren't destined for the Day of the Lord
27. We will be taken out before it begins
28. That's why the Tribulation is referred to as the night and darkness; the Light has been removed!

G. Vs. 6-10

- 6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.**
- 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.**
- 8 But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.**
1. Paul ends with an exhortation that we're to *be* what we *are* – children of light!
2. Right now, while we wait for the Lord to come for us, the light and the dark exist *side by side*
3. And though we may live in the same neighborhoods, shop at the same stores, eat at the same restaurants and attend the same schools - the light and dark, the saved and lost, Christians and non-Christians are very different
4. We who are children of light are to be sober-minded and realize that we only have this life, right now to live for Christ
 - a. as Jesus said, now is the day, and so we work
 - b. but the night is coming when no one can work
5. So we need to put on the armor of God and realize we are locked in a spiritual

- battle for the eternal souls of the men, women, and children around us
6. And as we do, we need to do so with a sense of *holy urgency*, which is what the helmet of the hope of salvation speaks of
 7. We never know when our Captain will come and with the shout of command, call us home
- 9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,**
- 10 who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.**
8. Here is another strong indicator that the Rapture occurs *before* the Tribulation
 9. The entire Tribulation period, all seven years of it, is the time of God's wrath
 10. Yet Paul says we are *not appointed to wrath*.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *Mid-Trib?*

1. As we conclude, let me elaborate on that for a moment
2. Those who believe in a Mid-Tribulation Rapture say that while we are indeed not appointed to wrath and so will be raptured *prior* to God pouring out His wrath on earth that doesn't take place till the middle of the Tribulation
3. They make a valid point when they say that the first 3½ years of the Tribulation are marked by the *false* peace and prosperity the Antichrist manages to bring about
4. But what this fails to take note of is that this period of *false* peace and prosperity is in itself a *manifestation of God's wrath*
 - a. God's wrath isn't only fire from the sky and earthquakes and pestilence
 - b. His wrath is also revealed in that He let's rebel man go to experience the full-measure of his rebellion
 - c. and at first that means a short period of calm
 - d. but this false peace and it's attendant plenty only serve to harden rebel man even more to God
 - e. can you think of anything more terrible than that God's Spirit would stop striving with man – that God would let a man or woman go and no longer bring conviction of sin, would no longer resist through conscience and turn them over to their sin?
 - f. in Romans 1 & 2 we learn that this too is a manifestation of God's wrath, that He lets sinners go
5. Make no mistake, the Tribulation is 7 full years of God's wrath
6. You and I, as the followers of Christ, are *not appointed to God's wrath*

B. **V. 11**

1. Paul concludes . . .
- 11 Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.**
2. How could the doctrine of the Rapture be a comfort if it taught that we had to endure the Tribulation to get to it?
 3. No – the comfort the truth of the Rapture brings us is that it could happen at

any moment

- a. that it is a rescuing of God's people from danger
 - b. that as you and I go about our lives, living in a world that denies and defies Christ
 - c. there will come a day when we will be instantly transformed from these bodies into glorious new ones
 - d. and as we are ascending into the clouds, we'll look back down and say, "I told you so!"
4. It is the great vindication of what we have said all along but the world has only sneered at
 5. I love stories where the hero endures years of scorn and misunderstanding, but who is right and in the end is vindicated in the eyes of all his or her opponents
 6. I guess I love those stories because that's us – that's the life we live
 7. I want to comfort you with that this morning: We're on the winning team and pretty soon Jesus will come to give us our victory crowns

C. *Are You Ready?*