



The Last Days Beacon

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Equipping End-Time Saints

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The Next Big Thing: I Thessalonians 4:13-18

By Dr. Randy Faulkner



as historical fact.

I have been preaching on the second coming of Jesus Christ for over 40 years. In every generation, people have been concerned about troubles in our world, such as the over 200,000 people killed in the five-year civil war in Syria, bloodshed in central Africa, earthquakes in various places, devastating floods in many parts of the world, and Israel being hated by many nations in the world, particularly Iran and Russia, as prophesied in the Bible.

This has many people asking, “Are we living in the last days?” What about the persecution of Christians all over the world? One of the most convincing evidences of biblical inspiration is the staggering number of prophecies that have been fulfilled with pinpoint accuracy in the past. Dr. Tim LaHaye said,

No scholar of academic substance denies that Jesus lived almost 2,000 years ago, and we find three times as many prophecies in the Bible related to His second coming as to His first. Thus the second advent of our Lord is three times as certain as His first coming, which can be verified

That statement by Tim LaHaye brings us to I Thessalonians chapter four. Paul is writing to people who are being persecuted for their beliefs. In I Thessalonians chapter one, he writes to encourage them, that in the midst of their sufferings they should not lose hope. Paul said in verse six, “. . . having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.”

Then in I Thessalonians 2:13-14, Paul said, “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe. For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen . . .”

Paul was writing to people who were suffering, yet the church in Thessalonica was thriving! In I Thessalonians 1:8 Paul said, “For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.” The unsaved were aware of what God was doing in that community of faith we call the church at Thessalonica. But they were suffering; they were being persecuted for their beliefs. The city of Thessalonica was an important commercial center. It was the capital of the province of Macedonia. So it was a city of influence and Paul wants this church in the city of Thessalonica, amidst their persecutions and amidst their hardships, to have hope.

In every chapter of I Thessalonians, Paul says something about the second coming of Jesus Christ. He wants them to expect Christ to come. And so he writes in I Thessalonians 4:13-18, this great passage on the Rapture:

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe the Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

Paul writes to these suffering, persecuted believers in Thessalonica. In this great city, which was a city of influence, he says to them, "I want you to have hope and confidence and comfort." Now there's a word that theologians use to refer to the Rapture. It's the word "imminence." We believe in the imminency of our Lord's return, by which we mean that He could come back at any time. The tone and spirit of this passage indicates that Paul was writing to people who should be expecting and looking forward to the *any moment* return of Christ. The New Testament throughout uses terms that show the writers expected the return of Christ at any time, even within their own lifetimes. A normal interpretation or understanding leads to the conclusion that we should think of the Rapture as imminent, that it could happen at any time.

James 5:7-9 teaches that the coming of the Lord ". . . draweth nigh." I Thessalonians 1:10 tells us that we are to ". . . wait for his Son from heaven. . ." I Corinthians 1:7 says that we are to be ". . . waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Philippians 3:20 says that ". . . we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus told His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3).

In Acts 1:6, the disciples were asking about the kingdom, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" They weren't thinking about heaven, but in the following verses an angel appeared to them and said, ". . . this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Jesus is coming again, and His coming can be at any time! So when we think about the Rapture we are thinking about "the next big thing" on God's calendar. Jesus could come back at any moment! In I Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul teaches us to expect the appearing of Jesus Christ at any time. That's why Jesus told His disciples, when He spoke of His return, "Let not your heart be troubled. . ." (John 14:1). That's why, in Titus 2:13, the Rapture is referred to as a ". . . blessed hope. . ." That's why here in I Thessalonians 4:18 Paul says, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

Now I just want to mention that there are two means of leaving this world for those who are believers in Jesus Christ. The first means, of course, is physical death, followed by resurrection. Paul refers to physical death in I Thessalonians 4:13, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope." I do not want you to be ignorant or uninformed. This is why the New Testament was written, to give us information and knowledge upon which to base our faith.

The Christian faith is not unreasonable; it is not contrary to logic. In fact, I Corinthians 15, this great treatise that Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians on the theme of the resurrection, was written to show the logic of the resurrection. It is an intellectually satisfying way of believing.

Some of the believers in Thessalonica had died, perhaps as martyrs for the faith. Paul said that he didn't want the other believers to be uninformed regarding their destiny and their destination. They had fallen asleep in Jesus. Their

departure is like going to sleep at night. You who are parents know very well what it feels like to tuck a child into bed at night, perhaps with a prayer and a goodnight kiss, and with the full expectation that your child will awaken in the morning. Paul uses that beautiful imagery when he speaks of the believer dying. The body is placed in the grave. The soul or spirit goes immediately into the presence of God. The body goes to sleep with the sure and certain expectation of the resurrection, the awakening in the morning. Paul is writing to those who have lost loved ones by means of physical death.

I Thessalonians 4:13 speaks of their physical death; verse 14 speaks of their resurrection. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." They will be raised from the dead. I don't want you to be ignorant and uninformed about this. Your grief is real but it is not a permanent state of mind. It is not a hopeless grief. It is normal to sorrow when loved ones die, but it is not a desperate, hopeless sorrow. We do not sorrow as those who have no hope. The dark shadow of death reaches into every home.

The pagan neighbors of these Thessalonian believers were horrified by death. You can read some of the inscriptions from ancient archaeology which reveal their fear of death. To them, death was the end of everything! Death was extinction, but not for Christians, who had the hope of the resurrection. Our resurrection hope is based upon the resurrection of Jesus Himself. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. So we have a certainty that those who sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. Our resurrection life is based on Jesus' resurrection. I Corinthians 15 tells us that Jesus' resurrection is the "first fruits," the first sampling of a great harvest of those who are raised from the dead. There will be an awakening from sleep!

I read somewhere that when Winston Churchill planned his own funeral, a trumpeter would be perched in the highest reaches of the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, and would play "Taps" at the beginning of his funeral to indicate sorrow over Churchill's death. As the last note faded, in another gallery sounded the stronger blaring of "Reveille." That call to sleep was followed by a greater call to awake, and the playing of "Reveille" by the trumpet in St. Paul's Cathedral indicated Churchill's own hope of the resurrection.

So there are two means of leaving this world for those who are in Christ. First is by physical death followed by resurrection. But the second means of leaving this world for the believer is the Rapture! Now this word is not found in our text of Scripture, but then again, neither is the word "trinity," or the word "millennium" or the word "inerrancy." There are many theological words which we gladly use which are not found in the text of Scripture



This word "rapture" is from the Latin translation of this text. Those who are alive at the time that Jesus comes again will be "caught up" (I Thess. 4:17). The word means "to snatch away speedily." "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be *caught up*. . ." (I Thess. 4:15-17). The word "rapture" comes from that phrase.

I Corinthians 15:52 says we will be changed "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. . ." In a split second the Lord will call all living believers to share in His glory. These who are alive when Jesus comes will be spared the trauma of death. Following the departure of these believers there will be all kinds of disasters on earth which we believe will follow the Rapture. This great evacuation of the Church will take place before the Tribulation, which follows.

I read an illustration of this by Dr. David Jeremiah. He said, "Some of us are familiar with massive evacuations which leave large areas empty and

desolate, as if their inhabitants had simply vanished. I pastor a church located in the fire zone of southern California. In October 2007, we witnessed the largest evacuation of homes in California history, and the largest evacuation for fire in United States history. Emergency personnel evacuated 350,000 homes, displacing one million Californians as 16 simultaneous fires swept through our community. Imagine a person who missed the call to evacuate, waking up after everyone was gone and stumbling through the acrid smoke and empty streets, confused and amazed, wondering why he had been left behind. That person's reaction would be nothing compared to the shock of those who witness the coming worldwide evacuation. The Bible tells us that on that day millions of people will disappear from the face of the earth in less than a millisecond. The purpose of that evacuation is similar to that evacuation of southern Californians, to avoid horrific devastation."

Some think it will be a stealth event or a secret departure. Frankly, I don't think so. There will be the sound of the trumpet, the Bible says. There will be the loud command. Imagine what will happen when millions of living people are suddenly removed from the earth. Our Lord is going to shout, giving the command to arise from the dead. He will also call living saints, believers in Jesus, members of the true, universal church. He is going to shout for them to come up and join Him in the air.

There are three recorded times in Scripture when the Lord shouts. The first was at the graveside of His friend, Lazarus. Jesus ". . . cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth. . ." (John 11:43-44). The second time Jesus shouted was from the cross, when He said, "It is finished." When He did this ". . . the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many" (Matthew 27:52-53).

The Rapture will be the third time when Jesus will shout. The Bible says that we will meet the Lord in the air, because of the loud command of the voice of our Lord. Millions of people will suddenly be caught up to meet the Lord! I Thessalonians 4:17 says they will meet the Lord in the air and will be with Him forever. Imagine the thrill of it. Rapture! That's a good word to use to describe the joy and ecstasy of the union and reunion with Christ and our loved ones.

There is a definite order of events here. The dead will be raised and their bodies and spirits will be reunited. The resurrected believers will be reunited with living believers. The living believers, with those who died before them, will all be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and to be with Him forever. So it's not surprising, is it, that Paul says to comfort, encourage one another with these words.

God has given us an illustration in nature that I found in a book by John Phillips. Suppose we take a mixture of metals: gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, and zinc. Imagine that we scatter those metals and that we pass a power magnet over that site. Immediately, one kind of metal will leap out of the earth to meet that magnet in the air. The magnet will leave behind the silver and the gold and the copper and the lead and the zinc. But it will draw to itself one kind of metal, the iron. Why does the magnet attract only the iron? It is because the iron has the same nature as the magnet.

Those who are in Christ are going to be caught up to meet Christ in the air. Those who are in Christ have the same nature as Christ. When Jesus comes at the Rapture, He is going to draw to Himself one kind of person and only one kind of person. This kind of person will not necessarily be the rich or the poor, the religious or the respectable. It's not going to matter what label you carry, what denomination you belong to, what your church looks like. It's not going to matter. The only thing that is going to matter is that you have the same nature as Jesus.

That fact is what gives point to what the Lord said to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again" (John 3:6-7). So the all-important question I need to ask is, have you been born again? The apostle Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). He said, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:9-10).

If you have trusted Jesus as your Savior, you can be sure that you will be among those who will be caught up to meet Him in the air when He comes. If you have never yet trusted Jesus, I invite you to do so today.

Editor's Note: Dr. Randy Faulkner has been the senior pastor at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma since 1990. He has previously pastored churches as a senior pastor and associate pastor. Dr. Faulkner received his B.A. from Tennessee Temple College in Chattanooga, Tennessee; a M.Div. from Temple Baptist Theological Seminary; and a D.Min. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL.

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