

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

According to Walvoord, “1 Thessalonians, probably the first epistle Paul wrote, contributes more to the doctrine of the Rapture than any other book of the New Testament”; and “The Rapture is mentioned in one way or another in every chapter of this book (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:1-11, 23)”; and again, “most pretribulationists find basic proof for their positions in 1 Thessalonians”; and finally, “The problem for posttribulationists is that this book presents the Rapture uniformly as an imminent event, as if there were no Great Tribulation preceding it.”¹ Ladd agrees that 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 is speaking of the Rapture of the Church, but not prior to the Tribulation, since there is no mention of it in the text. Ladd adds, “We have now completed our survey of the passages which have to do with the Tribulation, the Rapture, and the Resurrection. Nowhere is the Rapture placed before the Tribulation . . . Pretribulationism is an inference in light of which Scripture is interpreted.”² Bell adds, based on the commentary of F. F. Bruce, “It is the view of the standard commentators that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians 4-5 against the backdrop of the Olivet discourse.”³ From these comments both Ladd and Bell mean that Jesus taught the Disciples about his Second Coming (*parousia* in their interpretation) in the Olivet or Apocalyptic Discourse (Matt 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) and mentioned no separate Rapture there. So, when Paul speaks about the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians, he is just amplifying what Jesus taught about his Second Coming in the Gospels and the Rapture will be in

¹John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1957; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 197-8.

²George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 88.

³Bell, 249.

conjunction with that event (all part of the *parousia*). With that as a backdrop, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 will now be explored.

Verse 13 starts with the focus on believers who are “asleep” or dead in Christ, coupled with Paul’s exhortation not to grieve for them “as those who have no hope.” Their hope (as is all Christians’) is in Jesus’ death, resurrection, and in the future resurrection of their bodies at the “coming of the Lord” (v. 14). In verse 15, Paul uses the phrase, “by the word of the Lord.” Vincent believes this may refer to a saying transmitted orally or to a direct revelation to Paul.⁴ Hicks contends that it was a direct revelation to Paul and probably occurred during his personal rapture experience described in 2 Corinthians 12.⁵ The Greek word used in this verse translated *coming*, is *parousia*. Paul goes on to specifically describe the events involved in this *parousia*. The Lord Jesus “will descend from heaven with a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God.” Vincent points out that this is the only place in Scripture that uses the phrase “descend from heaven” to speak of the Second Coming.⁶ This will be accomplished “in just the same way” as he was taken up/raptured at his ascension, per the prophecy of the two angels in Acts 1:11—alone, in the clouds, and in the sight and presence of his believers (body). This *parousia* should be compared to the separate and distinct Second Coming of Christ described by Rev 19:11-16—where Jesus returns to earth on a white horse, with righteousness to judge/wage war, with a sharp sword from his mouth (the Word of God) to smite and rule the nations, with the armies of heaven following on white horses, and is represented by the other Greek word for

⁴Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1946; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1991), 40.

⁵Hicks, 24-29.

⁶Vincent, 4:41.

coming, erchomenon (from *erchomai*), in Revelation 1:4, 7; 22:7, 12, 20. Continuing on in verse 16, and the dead in Christ (the Body of Christ, not the Old Testament saints) shall rise first (rise = resurrection). Then, we who are alive and remain shall be *caught up (harpazo/raptured)*, together with them (the Christians just resurrected in Christ) in the clouds to meet the Lord (still alone) in the air (not on the Earth) and thus we (the Body of Christ) shall always be with the Lord (eternally in his presence; which at this point in time will be in heaven)—v. 17. Paul then tells them to comfort, encourage and give hope to one another with these words (about the resurrection and Rapture of the Body of Christ/Church). This section of Scripture was paraphrased by Rea at the conclusion of his nine page exegetical study on it:

For this we say unto you by a revelation received from the Lord, that we that are alive, that are still surviving when the parousia of the Lord begins, shall in no way be ahead of them that are already dead. For the Lord Himself shall come down from heaven with a shouted command (to the dead in Christ)—in an archangel-like voice—and with God’s last trumpet-call (to Israel to deal with them again as a nation): and the dead in Christ shall stand up (be resurrected) first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be snatched away from the people on earth, rescued from the fiery judgements of the tribulation about to begin, and caught up in clouds, to meet the Lord at a glorious reception in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.⁷

⁷Rea, 90.