

LESSONS FROM THE END OF THE AGE

WHAT'S UP WITH THE RAPTURE

I THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

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

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.

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.

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.

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Several years ago, quite a media stir was created by Doomsday Prophet, Harold Camping, when he predicted Jesus would return for His Church on May 21, 2011, and those left behind would be plunged into Great Tribulation. Camping's organization spent \$100 million on billboards - warning people to sell their belongings and to prepare for the coming Apocalypse.

Of course, May 21, 2011 came and went... Jesus didn't return, and His Church remained earthbound.

But that didn't deter Harold Camping. His reaction was to *recalibrate*. Camping claimed his math was off. The real date was October 21st.... But on October 22nd, once again Camping had been proven wrong!

Actually, over the course of his ministry Camping set a date for the rapture on thirteen separate occasions.

He was an incurable date-setter.

As they say, "[Even a broken clock is right twice a day](#)" - but Harold Camping was 0 for 13. If the man proved anything it was that he was **a false prophet**.

Of course, what Camping did succeed in was to provide fodder for skeptics and Late Night talk show hosts. They mocked him, and the idea of a rapture.

Days after October 21st came and went, David Letterman had his Top 10 Harold Camping excuses...

Time Magazine named Camping one of its Top 10 most popular costumes for Halloween... One blogger wrote, "[October 21 - day for Jokes not Judgment...](#)"

Sadly, all Christians end up with a black eye whenever a knucklehead sets a date for the rapture.

Any biblically literate person should've known that Harold Camping was off his rocker... In Mark 13:32, none other than Jesus, speaking of His coming, told His disciples, "[Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.](#)" Not even Jesus Himself, while on Earth, knew the exact day of His return.

Evidently, all the date-setters presume to know more than Jesus...

I like the billboard that appeared right after the Camping debacle. It read, “[That was awkward.](#)” Before you talk about Jesus’ return, why not listen to Jesus?

The date Camping should’ve been concerned about was **December 15, 2013**. That’s the day the man died and met Jesus face to face to answer for the deception that he’d orchestrated. *That was quite a meeting...*

And yet Harold Camping wasn’t the first person to predict a date for the Rapture and the coming Judgment. Church history is full of similar culprits...

Tragically, you can go all the way back to the early church, the second century AD, to find *ignorant people* making the same kind of *arrogant assumptions*.

It’s interesting how our text begins, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, “**But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren...**”

Throughout Paul’s letters there are four subjects in which he encourages us not to be ignorant... **Romans 11:25** tells us that Paul doesn’t want us to be ignorant of God’s plan for the Jews... **1 Corinthians 12:1** reads, “**Now concerning spiritual gifts... I do not want you to be ignorant...**” **2 Corinthians 1:8** exhorts us not to be ignorant of the role of suffering in the believer’s life...

And **here**, don’t be ignorant of the rapture...

Don’t be ill-informed about God’s plan for Israel, spiritual gifts, the redeeming role of suffering, and the rapture - yet

2000 years later there's *more* ignorance over those four doctrines than any others in the NT.

That's why I've entitled this study, **“What's Up With The Rapture?”** Despite the bad PR - and the media's sacrilegious scoffing - and all the other ridicule that's been heaped on this doctrine down through the centuries... it is still a real event, spoken of in Scripture.

One day Jesus is coming back to airlift His Church from planet Earth. The key passages that deal with the rapture include: [1 Corinthians 15](#), and [Revelation 3-4](#), and [Luke 17](#), and [John 14](#), and even [Isaiah 26:20-21](#).

But the most direct teaching is in [1 Thessalonians 4](#).

When you study 1 Thessalonians you'll notice each of the chapters ends with a reference to the end of the age and the coming of Jesus. Even in the first century - at the time of its writing - this was a hot topic.

Yet today, I talk to Christians who consider *rapture watching* a distraction. It's seen as a peripheral issue at best - at worst, an embarrassing hobbyhorse.

But the believers in Thessalonica - and in all the early church - lived their lives on the edge of their seats. They lived in anticipation of the coming of Jesus.

The NT speaks of the return of Jesus more than it does *creation*, or *the Triune nature of God*, or even *the resurrection*. We're given far more detail in Scripture on Jesus' second coming, than on His first coming.

The Christians of the early church lived as if they would not taste death. In John 14 Jesus says He is the Groom. The Church is His Bride. Jesus left to prepare her a place, and when He's finished, He's obligated to return for His Bride, and escort her into His chambers.

NT believers rightly understood that **they weren't looking for an undertaker, but for the Upper-taker!**

And that's how God wants every generation of Christians to live. **As if we could be the last.** A part of following Jesus is being ready for His return.

Paul writes in verse 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."**

Realize, Paul had spent just a few weeks in Thessalonica, before his enemies ran him out of town.

He must've taught them a cram course in Christianity. But there's only so much a new believer can digest in a short period time. There were vital, strategic beliefs and doctrines Paul had not developed.

Thus, when he sends Timothy back to Thessalonica, he inquires about the church's spiritual welfare.

And Timothy brings a report. He'd detected some holes in their understanding of certain Bible doctrines.

According to 3:10, Paul's goal was to fill up what was lacking in their faith. And one of the deficiencies in their knowledge involved Jesus' return. Particularly, what happens to believers who die before He comes back?

Notice two important truths from verse 13...

First, Paul speaks of the unbelieving, pagan world of the first century as those *“who have no hope.”* The Roman belief in the afterlife was vague at best...

The best scenario in the minds of the heathen masses was that death was a transport into a murky, shadowy, uncertain netherworld. Often a coin was placed in a deceased man's mouth to supply ferry passage over the River Styx. The poet wrote, *“Hopes are among the living, the dead are without hope.”*

But the missing ingredient in Greco-Roman religion became the linchpin of Christianity. Jesus' own resurrection spawned the belief that all who follow Him will also be resurrected. This idea of the resurrection from the dead was foreign to the pagan mindset.

For starters, the Greeks had a flawed view of the human body. They considered it evil - *a prison for the soul*. Eternal bliss was the spirit's escape from the body... Whereas, Jesus dignified human anatomy.

When He came to earth, God took for Himself a human body... While among us Jesus *healed fevers, caused crippled legs to walk, fed hungry stomachs*. He cared not only for people's souls, but for their bodies.

For the Greeks salvation was an escape from the body, but for Christians salvation involved the resurrection of the body. Jesus defeated mankind's archenemy, death. The power of our living Lord Jesus eventually redeems everything sin has spoiled - *including our worn-out, broken-down bodies*.

The Greek philosophers were willing to concede the existence of a spirit world - but to overcome death in the real world was a miracle they refused to believe.

In Acts 17, when Paul was on Mars Hill in Athens the Greek philosophers tracked with his sermon, until he mentioned the resurrection. That was too much for Greco-Roman pragmatism. Yet this is Christianity's central claim - a bold miracle called **the resurrection**.

Notice a second significant truth from verse 13...

Dead believers were said to have "*fallen asleep*." Their flesh and blood body will one day rise again. But for the moment the body is taking a nap...

This is how Jesus spoke of his friend, Lazarus. In John 11:11, He said, "*Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up*." At the time Lazarus had been dead for four days. The NT uses the idiom of *sleep* for deceased believers. Their physiological consciousness is suspended temporarily... as if they were asleep.

Did you know the Latin word "*cemetery*" means "*dormitory or sleeping place*." This is why bodies of Christian believers are buried to await the day when Jesus will resurrect us. The Christian tradition of burial highlights the dignity Jesus bestowed on the human body, and affirms our hope in the resurrection.

This is why I want to be buried when I die. Kathy though has made it clear she's having me cremated so she can save the money. Says I want have anything to say about it anyway. And I suppose she's right.

Actually, I don't believe there's anything wrong or unbiblical with cremating a loved one. It simply does in 20 minutes what nature accomplishes in 20 years.

We're still, "Dust to dust..." Even if you're cremated and your ashes are sprinkled over Stone Mountain, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead will locate your molecules and resurrect your body. The bodies of all believers, cremated or not, are merely asleep.

But what about our spirit? What happens to the spirit when the body dies? Does it sleep? Does it fall into a kind of suspended animation? Some denominations teach this sort of doctrine. They call it "soul sleep."

But verse 14 gives us the answer to this question, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus."

When Jesus returns Paul says He "brings with Him" those who's bodies "sleep in Jesus." When a believer dies their spirit leaves their body, and enters heaven.

In Philippians 1:23, when Paul spoke of his impending death, he said he would love to "depart and be with Christ..." This is what Paul calls death in 2 Corinthians 5:8, "to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord." When I die, my spirit immediately exits my body and goes to be with Jesus.

Instantly, my sorrow turns to joy! It's not my spirit that snoozes. It's my body. My spirit is alive with Christ.

This means when Jesus returns He's not coming **for** the spirits of those who died beforehand. They're in heaven.

When He returns He brings their spirit *“with Him”* - to rejoin the body He resurrects at that time.

Understand what the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the body meant to the early Christians.

This was their moment of vindication... They had walked by faith. They'd trusted a God Who is invisible. They turned down earthly pleasures for blessings that are intangible. They endured persecution for an eternal reward. They were strangers in their own hometowns, because they longed for a land that was spiritual...

And everybody thought they were crazy!

Realize, the return of Jesus was their opportunity to prove their sanity. When Jesus returns everyone will see that what they had believed in all along was true... It's the believer's moment of victory and vindication!

And this was the question on the mind of the Thessalonians - *If I die before the rapture will I miss my day to finally shine?* And Paul answers *absolutely not!*

Verse 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.”* In other words, those who are alive at the rapture have no advantage over those who've died.

“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.”

Those who died before the Lord's return - who's bodies are now asleep in the ground - they get a head start. They *“rise*

first!”... And why do the *“dead in Christ rise first?”* It’s simple, they’ve got six feet further to go!

Imagine, all over the world cemeteries vacated. Tombstones will topple over. Concrete vaults will open. Decomposed bodies will spring to life. Urns will empty.

Try to envision this, cremated ashes will rise up from the ground - the molecules will swirl together - and suddenly bodies will be reassemble in mid-air.

A metamorphosis will take place - *a miracle of resurrection for the world to see!* In that moment every believer from every age will celebrate our Victory Day!

And if this will be a thrill for *“the dead in Christ,”* imagine, what this will be like for those believers who are alive on the earth at the time. I hope you know, *there is a generation of Christians who will never die!*

When the Lord returns He’ll snatch away those who belong to Him. Notice, again verse 16 - it’s the rapture play-by-play... Paul tells us what will happen... *“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. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”*

First, *“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven..”*
It’s not a representative of Jesus, or an aide, or His chauffeur that gets us home. He’ll descend Himself.

According to John 14 Jesus left Earth to prepare our eternal digs. He's worked on it for 2000 years. What a place it must be! And He'll return to bring us home.

Second, Paul says Jesus descends *"with a shout..."*

The word translated *"shout"* is a military term. It means *"to bark an order."* Like a drill sergeant barking at the troops - or a quarterback on the line of scrimmage, *"8-98, Blue 45..."* Wow, that's going back in time. *You didn't think I could do that, did you?*

When the rapture occurs Jesus will bark out the snap count, and on hut every Christian's corpse will rise from its grave. And nobody will be off-sides!

Recall in John 11:43 Jesus stood outside Lazarus' tomb and shouted, *"Lazarus come forth!"* It's been noted, if Jesus had not said *"Lazarus,"* every corpse in the graveyard would've sprang to its feet! Well, at the rapture Jesus will leave off *"Lazarus,"* and command the bodies of all the saints from all ages to arise!

Then third, we'll hear *"the voice of an archangel..."*

Angels announced Jesus' first coming in the fields outside Bethlehem, apparently their shouts will ring out around the world when Jesus returns for His Church!

And I believe these voices will be audible.

I'm expecting to know when the rapture occurs... I'll hear Jesus shout and the voice of an archangel...

Every year on the third Saturday in June, Spivey's Corner, NC hosts the [national hollering contest](#).

People come from all over to see who can holler the loudest. Promoters of the event say hollering is the world's oldest form of communication. Well, on the day Jesus returns for His Church He'll win hands down.

Suddenly He'll belt out a shout - like a marine, "Oorah" - or like a cowboy on a round-up, "yhee-haw." He'll holler loud enough for everyone on earth to hear.

I personally think this will be an emotional release for Jesus. All His pent-up feelings will be vented.

The Savior loved you enough to die for you - but He hasn't had a chance to tell you face-to-face. When He gets the order to fetch His bride... *He'll come hollering.*

Today, Christians are guided by the "still, small voice" of the Holy Spirit, but when we leave this world we'll go home to "*a shout, with the voice of an archangel...*"

And "*with the trumpet of God...*"

In ancient times trumpets were used *to rally the troops - and assemble the community - and begin special festivities.* A trumpet blast even announced *the arrival of a special dignitary.* All these functions will be in operation with the rapture trumpet sounds.

Every year Jews celebrated their New Year with the blast of a trumpet. The feast of Rosh Hashanah - or Feast of Trumpets - begins when the priest blows the ram's horn, or shofar. In ancient times it signaled to the workers in the fields it was time to lay down their tools, leave the harvest, and come to the Temple to worship.

And this is exactly what the rapture means to us.

When the trumpet of God sounds Christianity's great harvest of souls will have ended. The Church will enter the heavenly Temple to worship Jesus forever.

This morning I brought a ram's horn I got one year in Israel. When I teach on the rapture I like to give a blast.

Over the years I've perfected the shofar... **(blast)**

That was good, but God is a far better trumpeter than I am.
When we hear His blast, we'll blast off!

I'll never forget the night many years ago. We were meeting on Main Street in Stone Mountain. I'd just finished a study on Bible prophecy, and we were waiting on the Lord in prayer. In the distance I heard a whistle... I thought, "This is it! That's the trumpet!"

I literally, expected my feet to get light, or my hands to dematerialize. I was ready... That's when I heard the rumbling of a train on the tracks. What a *letdown!*

I was ready for *lift-off*, but I got *letdown*.

But this is the anticipation we need to always exhibit... *where every stray sound - every unidentifiable noise - causes us to think we're about to see Jesus!*

As Horatio Bonar once put it, "Each night as I draw the curtains, I look up at the night sky and say "Perhaps tonight, Lord." And each morning when I see the dawning of a new day, I look out the window, up at sky, and say "Perhaps today, Lord." *Perhaps tonight... perhaps today...* The Lord could come at anytime.

We should live in a state of constant expectancy!

And notice what the Lord *does* when He returns...

Notice, He doesn't descend to the Earth. The rapture is followed by Great Tribulation. The world is judged for its unbelief. It's at this end of the judgment that Jesus touches down on terra-firma to reign and rule...

At the rapture *He stops in the clouds!* And at that time Jesus performs perhaps His greatest miracle...

Verse 17 describes to us what happens, "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

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

Some skeptics like to point out the word "rapture" isn't even in the Bible. That's true, unless you read a Latin Bible. In Latin "harpazo" gets translated "raptus."

"Harpazo" means "to snatch away, or to seize violently." Jesus will come in the clouds and snatch us up. We'll be here one second and gone the next!

Have you ever seen a hesitating yo-yo. One yank of the wrist and it pops up to your hand. Well, Jesus is going to return in the clouds, and yank up all us yo-yos!

Or perhaps you've played jacks. You bounce a rubber ball, and see how many jacks you can snatch up before the ball hits the ground. Jesus is also going to play jacks. He'll snatch up the Jacks and Jills - the Sues and Sals. It's the invasion of the Body Snatcher.

I use to think the rapture would be a slow lift-off. We'd rise a few inches off the ground - then sail past treetops, and birds, and airplanes - through the clouds.

But I no longer believe that's how it's going to happen. I Corinthians 15, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."

Notice, it all happens "*in the twinkling of an eye.*" We're transformed and snatched up in a nanosecond.

And how fast is a twinkle? Scientists compute the shutter speed of a human eye to be 1/50th of a second. *And that's a blink.* Jesus transforms us in a mere twinkle! The rapture will make the McDonald's drive-through feel like eternity! Star Trek may've had it right. Beam me up, Jesus. We'll dematerialize, then reappear in heaven inhabiting perfect, glorified bods.

It reminds me of the old, country feller who lived on the farm. One day he decided he and his family would visit the big city. The old farmer dropped his wife off at the mall, while he and his son went to the hotel.

In the lobby he saw a huge medal box. He had no idea it was the elevator, but he was impressed by its size and wondered what purpose it served. Soon, an older female walked through the door into the box.

The doors shut behind her. A minute or so later the door opened, and out walked a young, beautiful blonde. With a

gleam in his eye, the old man turned to his son, and shouted, "Boy, you wait right here! I'm going to get your mom and run her through that thing."

Well, at the rapture all our bodies will be changed. We'll be the envy of the most skilled plastic surgeons.

Our bodies will have an entirely new molecular structure. They'll be recognizable in appearance, but they'll be new, transformed, uncontaminated by sin.

No longer will our bodies be subject to disease, or limited by time and space. Our bodies will have the capabilities Jesus had after He rose from the dead!

These corruptible bodies will put on incorruptibility.

Think of the effect the rapture will have on the world at large. In Matthew 24:40-41 Jesus said, "Two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left." Imagine, Christians all over the world will vanish - a mass exodus of believers.

The saints will split... A secretary goes on a errand and never comes back... Four people get into an elevator and only three step off... Eleven football players break the huddle, and five never finish the play.

I heard of a youth group that staged a fake rapture to fool their unsuspecting leader. They were at camp, and the youth leader had gone to town to run errands.

When he returned the place was vacated.

Piles of clothes lay on the ground - as if the folks wearing them had passed through them... An empty motorboat was circling the lake... An unattended dinner was in the kitchen... That's when a well timed phone call added to the effect. The voice shouted, *"What's happening? Everybody's missing over here!"*

The director later admitted, *"Wow, it really shook me."* One day similar circumstances will be no joke.

Think of the disasters that will be caused by un-piloted cars, and trucks, and planes. I always chuckle when I see a car with the bumper sticker, *"Warning: in case of the rapture this car will be unmanned!"*

But it'll be no laughing matter when the world is reeling from panic, and mayhem, and disaster.

I'm sure the scoffers will come up with all kinds of interesting explanations for all the missing people - *"It was an alien abduction!"* Yet a lot of folks who've been warned will be forced to do some serious thinking!

Here's a poem that says it well... *"I think of times as the night draws near of an old house on a hill, of a yard all wide and grassy, where the children played at will.*

When deep night at last came down, hushing the merry din, Mother would look around and ask, "Are all the children in?" I wonder if, when those shadows fall on the last short earthly day, when we say good-bye to the world outside, all tired of our childish play, when we meet the Lover of our souls who died to save us from our sin, will we hear Him ask as our Mother did, "Are all the children in?"" I believe that's what our

Lord Jesus will ask as He returns for His Church. He'll turn to the Father, and ask Him, *"Are all the children in?"*

I love the last line in verse 17, *"Thus we shall always be with the Lord."* I can recall spending all day outside playing in the neighborhood. But there was something comforting about resting in my own house that night.

This world can be a weary, fearful, painful place.

But always remember it's just temporary... Only our final destination is permanent, and Jesus called it *"Paradise."* I love the wonderful promise in Psalm 16:11, *"In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."* Verse 18 tells us, *"Therefore comfort one another with these words."*

Romans 11:25 speaks of *"the fullness of the Gentiles."* The terminology marks a turning point in God's prophetic plan. Apparently, there's a set number of Gentiles who'll come to Christ before God turns His attention again to Israel. And it's when the last Gentile enters into God's family - the Father will turn to His Son, and say, *"Go get'em! Let's get all the children in."*

It always excites me to think the last, lone hold-out could be here today. If that's you, *what are you waiting on? You're holding up the party!* What Jesus promises us is far better than anything this world can offer.

Let me close by recalling two phrases from Paul's wording here in verse 15. Notice first, he writes, *"For this we say to you by the word of the Lord..."*

When Paul wrote his letters I don't know how cognizant he always was that he was penning sacred Scripture. Remember he wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:13, "Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus in Troas..."

I would imagine that verse was more motivated by *the cold around him* than *the Spirit within him*.

It's reasonable that though Paul wrote under the inspiration of God's Spirit he wasn't always conscious of the fact - **except here!** When he wrote of the rapture he was adamant. He spoke by "*the word of the Lord.*"

My point is, *the return of Jesus* and *the rapture of the Church* are big deals to God. And this doctrine needs to be a big deal to us. Martin Luther said, "There are only two days on my calendar - today and that day."

Today will matter more if we live it in light of *that day*.

And notice the other statement Paul makes in verse 15. He fully expects to participate in the rapture, "*that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord...*" Writing in the first half of the first century Paul was fueled by the belief he was living in the last days.

Paul counted on being a person who avoided death.

Some folks might claim Paul was duped, or played the fool. That couldn't be further from the truth. It was God's intention for Paul to live as if he were in the last days, just as it was His desire for us to do the same.

Harold Camping wasn't a false prophet for believing in the rapture - or getting excited about it - or assuming he would

experience it... He was unbiblical because he claimed to know more than Jesus and he set a date.

To live a successful Christian life we need to live every minute of every day in anticipation of the Lord's return. For it's this expectation that breeds godliness.

I've met Christians who were apathetic and blasé about the rapture - as if they were afraid to get their hopes up! **We better get our hopes up! Hope helps!**

I John 3:3 speaks of seeing Jesus, and concludes, "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." **The rapture is a purifying hope!**

What if my mother-in-law told me she was going to drop by my house "sometime next Saturday." That would be awful. Call it cruel and unusual punishment.

I'd be thinking, "*Give me an exact time, so I can be ready for you!*" But to just say "sometime next Saturday" forces me to not only clean the house, but keep it spic-n-span all day. The mere possibility that my mother-in-law could arrive any minute keeps me on my toes all day... *And knowing Jesus might return at any moment should have the same cleansing effect on us!*

If I really believe Jesus is coming back I'll stay focused. I'll be ready. I'll avoid the short-cuts and say no to temptation. I believe living in light of the Lord's return is crucial to any Christian's spiritual growth.

Thirty years ago, whenever I signed off with my friends, I'd usually say, "See you, here, there, or in the air." It reflected the expectancy that we all possessed.

My treasure was in heaven. My hope was to see Jesus. My dream was His presence... Then I got a mortgage... had some kids... started paying college tuition... You get caught up in the here and now, and forget about the day you'll get caught up in the clouds.

Let's not lose our anticipation... *Has our love for Jesus grown cold? Have our friends been told?* The next time you and I meet, it might really be "in the air!"