

23. 1 Thessalonians

*1 Thessalonians 1; Rapture and rescue from the wrath to come (1:9-10)

- "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come" (1:9-10). These believers are waiting for "His Son" (Jesus) from heaven. This is a reference to the rapture (refer to 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13). The Christian's hope of the return of Christ is rooted in the fact that He was "raised from the dead" and promised to come again (John 14:2-3, 28-29). Notice that Jesus will rescue believers "from the wrath to come." This "wrath to come" is probably a reference to the Great Tribulation (Revelation 6:16-17, 11:18, 15:1). Believers who are alive when the rapture occurs will be "caught up" (1 Thessalonians 4:17) and rescued from God's wrath that will be poured out during the Great Tribulation.

*1 Thessalonians 2; Rapture (2:17-20)

- "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?" (2:19). "His coming" is a reference to the rapture (refer to 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13).

*1 Thessalonians 3; Rapture (3:11-13)

- "Now... may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another... so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints" (3:11-13). There are several reasons to conclude that this passage is describing the rapture rather than the second coming of Christ. First, the rapture is a recurring theme in 1 Thessalonians. Every chapter in 1 Thessalonians mentions the rapture (1:10, 2:19, 3:13, 4:14-17, 5:2-4). Second, the fact that Jesus will return "with all His saints" is clarified in the next chapter, when "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). These are the souls of believers who have died and gone to heaven before the rapture and return with Christ to receive their resurrected bodies during the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Third, the "coming of our Lord Jesus" of chapter 3 (3:13) is similar to the "coming of the Lord" of chapter 4 (4:15), which is one of the classic passages in the Bible concerning the rapture. The author, Paul, is addressing believers who are awaiting the coming of Jesus (1:10, 3:13). This can only apply to the rapture because at Christ's second coming (to earth), these believers would have already been resurrected and dwelling in heaven, and would not be waiting for Jesus to come. At His second coming (advent), Jesus will return to rescue new believers who have trusted in Christ after the rapture.

*1 Thessalonians 4; Rapture (4:13-18)

- "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose

again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (4:13-18).

- This is one of the great rapture passages in the Bible (refer also to 1 Corinthians 15:51-58). When a loved one dies who is a believer ("those who are asleep"), we still grieve, but not as the world, which has no hope (4:13). For we have the hope and the promise that we will see our loved ones again in heaven. The body (not soul or spirit) of the believer who dies is said to be "asleep" during the time between death and resurrection. Physical death is the separation of the soul and spirit from the body. The figure of sleep for death is common in the New Testament (John 11:11-15; 1 Corinthians 15:51; Matthew 27:52; Acts 7:60, 13:36; 2 Peter 3:4). This does not mean sleep of the soul or spirit. Beginning with the resurrection of Christ, when a believer dies, his soul and spirit go to be with the Lord. The apostle Paul said that it is preferred "to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8; see also Philippians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:10). "Those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" will return with God at the rapture to receive their resurrected bodies (4:14). The body that was asleep will be changed into a spiritual body (heavenly body, imperishable body, immortal body), and reunited with the soul and spirit (1 Corinthians 15:35-57; 2 Corinthians 5:1-9).

- Why are these believers described as being "in Jesus" (4:14) and the "dead in Christ" (4:16)? Is it simply to distinguish between believers and unbelievers? Some writers suggest that these believers only include Christians who have put their trust in Jesus Christ, and do not include Old Testament believers. There are several reasons to believe this is not the case and that these believers include Old Testament believers. First, all those who are "in Adam" (which includes everyone) will die, so also those who are "in Christ" (all believers) will be made alive. "For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22). This explains that all those who are "in Christ" have received the gift of eternal life and have been raised up with Him ("made alive", Ephesians 2:4-8; Colossians 2:12-13; 1 Peter 3:18). Therefore, those who are "in Christ" must include all believers (from the beginning of creation). Second, the Lord Jesus will come with "all His saints" (1 Thessalonians 3:13), not just some of them. Third, Jesus Christ "died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Christ's sacrifice was sufficient "for all". "In Christ" the blessing of Abraham came to the Gentiles and all who believe "receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14). "There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). In conclusion, all believers must be "in Christ" in order to go to heaven and receive "the Spirit through faith". Only the "dead in Christ" (dead believers) and living believers will be resurrected during the rapture. All unbelievers who have died will not be resurrected and judged until the end of the Millennium (Revelation 20: 11-15).

- The heart of the gospel is "Jesus died and rose again" (4:14; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5). The fact that Jesus "rose again" proves that He conquered sin, death and the devil. They no longer have power over believers. His resurrection gives believers the hope and confidence that He will keep His promise and come again to rescue them (refer to 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Christ's resurrection also confirms the certainty of the future resurrection of believers. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the whole basis of the Christian faith; "and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17). The wording in this passage, such as, "we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord", indicates that Paul believed the rapture was imminent, that it could take place at any moment (4:15; Revelation 1:1, 1:3, 22:20). The truth of Jesus' imminent return brought comfort (4:18).

- It appears that Christ's return with all His saints will be announced forcefully and dramatically from heaven. The Bible does not indicate if unbelievers will be able to hear this announcement. Notice four things must happen before believers are "caught up". They will hear a shout, the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will be resurrected (4:15-17). This implies that alert and ready believers might have a few moments to react after they hear the "shout" and before they are actually "caught up". Refer also to the parable of the 10 virgins (Matthew 25:1-13). The word "rapture" is from the Latin for "caught up". In the parable of the 10 virgins, a "shout" is also heard at the moment of the rapture, announcing, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him" (Matthew 25:6). The "shout" will be followed by the "voice of the archangel" (perhaps Michael, Jude 1:9). The "trumpet of God" occurs next and is referred to as the "last trumpet" in 1 Corinthians 15:52. The "dead in Christ" will be resurrected first, followed by the resurrection of those "who are alive and remain". All resurrected believers will join together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. The events describing the rapture differ considerably from those that will accompany Christ's return to earth (Revelation 19:11-21). At His second coming, Jesus will be accompanied by an army of angels and His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:1-21). He will judge the wicked, rescue believers and set up His earthly kingdom. At the rapture, Jesus does not come down to earth, does not judge the wicked and is accompanied by "all His saints" (1 Thessalonians 3:13), rather than an army of angels. Believers will not just see the Lord in the air, but will actually "meet" Him (4:17). The same Greek word for "meet" is used in the announcement, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him" (Matthew 25:6). After believers "meet" Him, they will "always be with the Lord" (4:17). These words can be used to "comfort one another" (4:18). Great comfort is found in the fact that all believers will be resurrected when Jesus returns and they will be with Him forever. This is the blessed hope of all His saints (Titus 2:13).

*1 Thessalonians 5; The day of the Lord and the rapture (5:1-11, 23)

- "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape" (5:2-3). These verses show that most people will be taken totally by surprise by the rapture. Just as one does not expect a thief in the night, so the rapture will be unexpected. People will say, "Peace and safety!" just before the rapture, which is similar to the report given to the angel of the LORD,

"all the earth is peaceful and quiet" (Zechariah 1:11). The rapture will occur on a day when world conditions are relatively calm and peaceful. The fact that "destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains" implies that after the rapture, the Ezekiel 38 battle and Great Tribulation will follow quickly (refer also to Luke 17:26-30, 2 Thessalonians 2:6-9). The "day of the Lord" can represent different things in the Bible. In the context of this passage, the "day of the Lord" represents an extended period of time, beginning with the rapture (5:2-3; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2) and ending after the Millennium, when the old heaven and earth will be destroyed (2 Peter 3:10).

- However, alert Christians should not be surprised by the rapture (Luke 21:34-36; Revelation 3:3). "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober" (5:4-6). Although the day of the rapture is unpredictable, the signs of its coming are discernable. Saints should "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation" (5:8). Unbelievers will "not escape" judgment (5:3), but believers will be spared from God's wrath as a result of the rapture (because of God's mercy), just as Noah and Lot were spared from judgment in their day (Luke 17:26-30). "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him" (5:9-10). Believers are to encourage and build one another up because of their salvation in Christ and the promise that God will rescue them from the wrath to come.

- "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23). This verse is another reference to the rapture (refer to 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13). In addition to a "spirit and soul and body", people are also said to have a heart, mind and conscience (Mark 12:30; Romans 2:15; Deuteronomy 6:5).