

*** The Heights Baptist Church * Series: Doctrine ***
*** Topic: The Rapture * 1 Thes. 4:13-18, 1 Cor. 15 * 8/30/26 ***

MAIN POINT

A major source of encouragement for us in the midst of the chaos going on in the world today is the sure hope we have in Christ's return for His church, when we will be caught up to meet Him in the air, and be with Him forever.

INTRODUCTION

What is something in your life that you had a really difficult time waiting for?

Why do you think it can be difficult for people to wait patiently for something?

What role does waiting play in your relationship with God?

A large part of the Christian life involves waiting for Jesus' return in the midst of the suffering and evil that is so prevalent in this fallen world. When things seem to be going well, we may be tempted to think we wouldn't mind if Christ delayed, at least until some big event that we're really looking forward to down the road happens. This shows we don't understand just how amazing it will be to be brought into the presence of Christ forever. But during difficult times such as times of persecution, we should be greatly encouraged by the fact that Jesus will come back for us and bring an end to the wickedness in the world.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians was written to a church undergoing persecution. In today's lesson, we'll see the role our sure hope in Jesus' future return should play in motivating us to persevere.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12

Based on these two verses, what two areas of concern and confusion seemed to exist in these two young churches about the resurrection of the dead?

It appears that the new churches at Thessalonica and Corinth did not have a good understanding of our future resurrection. The church at Corinth was dealing with a false teaching that there would be no resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:12), and the people of the church at Thessalonica appeared to have been unsure about what would happen to Christians who had already died when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:13). This leads to Paul's description of the rapture in his letters to these two churches.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-14

How should the grief Christians feel when fellow Christians die differ from a non-Christian's grief?

Grief is a normal response to death. Notice that Paul did not tell the believers not to mourn. Paul exhorts us not to grieve as the world does. We have a great hope in the second coming of Christ.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-34

In verses 3-8, what events did Paul consider to be "of first importance" in his description of the gospel, by which "you are being saved?"

The fact that Christ died and rose again from the dead.

Why does Paul say the resurrection of Christ is so essential for us as Christians?

If Christ has not been raised, this would demonstrate he has no power over death, and so we would have no hope of being resurrected either.

What evidence did Paul give to prove the bodily resurrection of Jesus?

In 1 Corinthians 15:4-8, Paul cited two sources of evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus. First, Paul reminded the believers in Corinth that the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied the Messiah's resurrection. Second, he pointed to the vast eyewitness testimony. And this short passage is just the beginning of the evidence that supports the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. There were many eyewitnesses to the risen Christ who were still alive when Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians. History records no eyewitness reports that claimed the resurrection of Christ didn't actually take place. Quite the opposite. These eyewitnesses turned the Roman world upside down with the wonderful news of the risen Christ.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:15-18

Note to study leader: It is a fairly common misconception that the word "rapture" isn't in the Bible. That isn't true. In the midst of this beautiful, encouraging, clear description of the rapture given in these verses, there is an expression describing us as being "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (verse 17)." The word translated as "caught up" is the Greek word "harpazo", which when translated into Latin is "rapio". This is the word from which we get the word "rapture".

What five statements about the rapture does Paul make in verses 15-17? Of these, which impacts you the most? Which surprises you the most?

In verses 15-17, the apostle Paul made several prophecies that he affirmed were from the Lord Himself.

1. The Christian dead are at no disadvantage to those still alive at the Lord's return.
2. Christ's arrival in the clouds to call us to Him will be accompanied by a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God.
3. The dead in Christ will rise first.
4. Christians still living at Jesus' return will then be caught up alive, meet the Lord in the air, and join the resurrected Christian dead.
5. Together we will be with the Lord forever!

Consider verse 18. How can we follow Paul's exhortation to encourage one another with the five truths given in verses 15-17?

For one thing, we can read and study these verses together with our Lifegroup ☺

What can we do to encourage ourselves through this wonderful description of what we have to look forward to when Christ comes calls us up to meet Him in the air at the time of the rapture?

We can talk about it with other Christians (like we are right now). We can spend time meditating on this wonderful truth during our devotions. And we can spend time thanking God for this wonderful truth during our prayer time.

"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am there you may be also." John 14:3

Note to study leader: Next week's lesson will be on "The Tribulation". This lesson will include some information on the timing of the rapture.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 16:35-58

How does Paul's example of a farmer planting a seed help you understand the resurrection body?

In farming, an apparently dead small thing (a seed) gives life to a new, much more glorious living thing that looks nothing like the original seed. Similarly, God will give us new glorious bodies that don't compare to these present perishable bodies, and yet they somehow come from our present bodies.

How does Paul's example of different kinds of flesh help us understand our resurrection bodies?

God has created many forms of matter: humans, plants, mammals, birds, fish, stars, etc. Each of these is different from the others. We are being shown here that our resurrection body will not be like this one.

What traits describe our present mortal bodies? What traits describe our future immortal bodies?

Our current bodies cannot withstand the presence of God. Our perishable bodies are suited for earth but not heaven. Necessary changes that must occur.

Note that verse 56 says, "The sting of death is sin." It would seem appropriate to say, "The sting of sin is death" since death is a result of sin (Romans 5:12). Why do you think verse 56 is worded this way?

Sin is what separates us from God, and death leaves sinners to face His judgement (Heb. 9:27). But for Christians, death means being brought into the presence of the Lord forever (2 Cor. 5:8, Phil. 1:23, and 1 Thes. 4:17). Truly, the sting of death has been removed (verse 55)!

According to verse 52, how quickly will this transformation take place during the rapture?

The words translated as "moment" or "flash", and "the twinkling of an eye" refer to the briefest amount of time possible. The Greek word "atomos" (from where we get the English word for "atom") literally means something so small that it can't be broken down into any smaller units. This is combined with the Greek word "rhipe", which means the blink of an eye. Combining these two emphasizes the fact that this transformation will be instantaneous. When Christ returns, all believers, dead and alive, will be instantly made like Him. Though we live in corruptible, aging, sinful bodies, we will all one day be like Him.

Looking at verse 58, what should your response be to our sure hope in our future resurrection?

Our labor as Christians produces an eternal reward. Our hope in the resurrection provides us with strength to live in the present.

APPLICATION

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 PETER 1:8-9

How should the hope we have in our salvation affect us today?

Jesus instructed us to pray "your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). In the last prayer in the Bible, John prayed, "Come Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20). Am I eagerly praying for and looking forward to the second coming of Christ? If not, what can I do to adjust my praying and thinking?

PRAYER

Thank God for the sure hope we have in Christ's return. Give us the conviction to live each day while looking forward to the sure hope of being united with Christ.

COMMENTARY

The LIFE Acronym

This acronym is part of our “Starting Point” training programs. The letters in LIFE stand for the following:

Loving our neighbor: I am motivated to show God’s love and compassion to others where I live, work, and play.

Intentional friend: I am purposefully cultivating relationships within my church family.

Faithful follower: I am sensitive to the moving of the Holy Spirit in regular times of prayer, worship, and Bible study.

Engaged disciple-maker: I am regularly looking to invest in others to help them take their next step in following Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

4:13. Paul was about to clear up some misunderstandings regarding death and the coming of Christ which were causing the Thessalonians a good deal of anxiety. Evidently these young Christians felt that those who died before the return of Christ would miss out. They must have thought there was a special advantage to being alive at Christ’s return. This meant, in their minds, that there was a disadvantage for those who did not make it. Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians quit sorrowing and grieving like everyone else around them.

4:14. First Paul made an assertion of faith: We believe that Jesus died and rose again. This is the bedrock of our faith. Paul then tied the truth of Christ to the unknown future. Whatever Christ does, His people follow. Wherever Christ is, His people are there. Christ died and rose again. Christians who die (fall asleep) will rise again. Christ will return again. Those who have died will return with Him. All of this is carried out by God’s power.

4:15. Paul next introduced something new, a special revelation according to the Lord’s own word. He received direct word from Christ about what followed. Paul’s primary concern was not to teach an eschatological lesson but to assure and encourage the young church at Thessalonica. He did this by stating with the authority of Christ’s words, that everyone who is alive on earth at the time of Christ’s coming will not go before those who have died. Paul was pointing the believers away from grief toward hope regarding those who had died. The dead loved ones will not miss out or come in second place.

4:16-18. Paul then handed the readers a program of sorts, an order of service. Christ is coming, and this is how it will occur. The Lord, Christ Himself, will come down. There will be a lot of noise. The dead believers will rise first. Christians who are still alive on earth will rise next. Everyone meets together with Christ in the air. Eternity begins. The Lord Himself will come down. The rapture of believers is a very personal affair. Christ Himself will be there in His great and shining glory. With a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. It is debated whether this describes one great sound, or whether two or three distinct sounds will occur. The “shout” or “loud command” could signify the shout of triumph expressed by Christ, the conqueror of death, as He descends from heaven. After that, we who are still alive will be caught up. There is probably no great time span implied here, for everything will happen in “the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52). There will be people from every nation on earth when Christ returns, and these will be “caught up.” The word can be translated “snatched, swept up, carried away by force.” The Lord literally “snatches” the bodies of the living, and they are transformed and their bodies glorified. These two groups, the living and the dead, will join Christ in the clouds. This is a great company. All believers back through the centuries will join those who are living at that moment, forming the church united with its head, Christ. And then we will be with the Lord forever. Paul’s conclusion: Therefore (in view of this) encourage each other with these words.

1 Corinthians 15

This chapter represents the most comprehensive discussion of resurrection in the entire Bible.

15:1-4 These verses recount the basic gospel message as Paul delivered it in town after town.

15:5-11 Early Christian evangelists validated the certainty of Jesus' resurrection by recounting His post-tomb appearances to authoritative eyewitnesses (e.g., Ac 2:32). Paul refers to himself as one abnormally born due to his late arrival in the chain of eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection (Ac 9:1-6).

15:12 Though it is uncertain what caused some Corinthian believers to deny the resurrection of the dead, Greeks viewed bodily death as final, with some saying the spirit survived disembodied. This view likely influenced the church at Corinth.

15:13-15 If Christ were not raised, then apostolic preaching of the resurrection was without foundation, the Corinthians' faith was void, and the apostles were false witnesses. "Faith" here refers to the content of the gospel message and is synonymous with "system of beliefs."

15:16 A restatement, in reverse order, of the implications of the Corinthian skepticism regarding resurrection.

15:19 Christians should be pitied more than anyone if there is no resurrection, for in that case we have placed all our hopes in a falsehood. Christianity is fundamentally a resurrection faith.

15:20 Christ's genuine, well-attested resurrection is the guarantee of our future resurrection. Firstfruits refers to the guarantee that Christ's resurrection is the first-of-a-kind resurrection that promises others will follow in the end time (cp. Rm 8:23, where "firstfruits" can be translated "guarantee," "first installment"). In this instance the phrase those who have fallen asleep refers specifically to those who have died in Christ.

15:21-22 Paul presents a parallel of necessary effects. Through one man, Adam, death came to humanity. If this is ever to be reversed, it must be done so through like kind: a man. God has appointed just such a man: Jesus Christ, who is fully divine and fully human. Through His resurrection the promise of resurrection comes to a new humanity "in Christ." The second occurrence of the word all refers to all those who are joined to Christ through faith.

15:23 Jesus' resurrection precedes and makes certain the resurrection of those who belong to Christ at His coming.

15:24-28. The Son, as the resurrected Messiah, will conquer and subdue everything, including the last enemy— death. By saying "He must reign," Paul touches on the set-in-stone divine plan that assures us that history will end in just this way: with God triumphant over all evil and God's people reigning with Christ forever.

15:29. "Being baptized for the dead" probably refers to the practice, apparently unique to the Corinthian church, of someone undergoing baptism on behalf of a believer who had died without undergoing baptism. Paul was not condoning this practice, and certainly Scripture nowhere directs us to conduct such baptisms. Paul simply pointed out that it was meaningless for the Corinthians to enact such practices.

15:32. "Wild animals" is almost certainly metaphorical for struggles Paul faced from human opponents of the gospel.

15:35-38. Paul compares human resurrection to the life-death-life cycle from agriculture. The seed body that dies gives rise to a totally different plant body, and yet there is retention of identity. So it is with our present bodies and our future resurrection bodies.

15:42-44. Having reviewed differentiations within the created order (vv. 35-41), Paul turns to differentiations of the resurrected body. It was sown in corruption and will be raised in incorruption. The body changes from a perishable body (a natural body) to an imperishable body (a spiritual body), though one that has physical characteristics (e.g., Luke 24:39). It is sown in dishonor and weakness, and it will be raised a glorious, imperishable body.

15:45. The first man Adam received the breath of life, a life that would become corruptible and perishable. In contrast, the last Adam (Jesus) will impart life, granting believers an incorruptible, imperishable, eternal body. Jesus will make believers alive through His life-giving Spirit, a power God alone wields.

15:46. Grammatically, the words the spiritual and the natural are in the neuter gender. They refer to two kinds of bodies (see v. 44) and not to Adam or Christ. “Spiritual” here refers to a body brought to life by the last Adam, Christ.

15:47-49. Paul contrasts the first man Adam and those who have borne his image with the second man and those who will bear his image. The first man was made of earth. This language emphasizes the transitory nature of those who are related to the first Adam, with bodies that return to dust. The “second man” from heaven refers to Jesus in His glorified humanity, as God-man and Messiah, who is coming from heaven to impart imperishable eternal bodies to those who have borne the image of the man made of dust.

15:50. Our earthly condition is such (flesh and blood and corruption, references to our perishable physical nature) that our Adamic bodies cannot inherit the kingdom, implying that they somehow must be changed.

15:51. Paul supports the above implication (v. 50) with an apostolic revelation that though not everyone will die before Christ’s coming, those who are alive when He comes will all be changed. No one is transported to the eternal state unchanged.

15:52. “In a moment” signifies the smallest possible division of something, in this case time. “Twinkling of an eye” similarly implies rapidity. Such will be the swiftness of the transformation of the living when the last trumpet sounds at Christ’s return.

15:53. The body that bears the image of the man of dust (the first Adam) must inevitably be changed into the incorruptibility and immortality of the body that bears the image of the man from heaven (the second Adam).

15:54-55. Paul conflates Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14 in this citation. The exchange of corruptible for incorruptibility comes only when death and corruption are swallowed up by Jesus Christ. This passage does not teach the doctrine of “soul sleep”—a suspended state for believers between physical death and the change into glorified bodies. Believers are with the Lord immediately after death (see Luke 23:43; Acts 7:55-59; 2 Cor. 5:1-8).

15:56-57. This verse represents a theological aside that Paul developed further in a letter he wrote some months after this present one (see Rom. 7).

15:58. Most anything we do in this life is vanity (Ecc. 1:2-3), but labor in the Lord has eternal value.