

A Forward Focus: Living in Light of the Imminency of Christ

Introduction:

The rapture of the church is a teaching that is classified as a mystery in Corinthians 15:51. This indicates that that this doctrine was not previously revealed. The Old Testament never discusses the rapture. It is consistent with the scope of Old Testament prophecy to not mention the rapture. For the most part, prophecy in the Old Testament was related to the first coming of the Messiah, and His second coming. Old Testament prophecy was written to Israel, and thus it makes sense that the rapture would not be discussed because the rapture is a doctrine in relation to the church. Jesus never discussed the rapture specifically, and this is consistent with the truth that the Old Testament continues into the Gospels. Jesus does talk generally about receiving us unto Himself in John 14:1-3. However, He does not discuss the timeframe or method of it. Jesus discussed many topics in the upper room that are related to the church, and the apostles further expanded on these topics in their writings. Paul is the only New Testament writer that talks about the rapture in much detail. John also briefly mentions the topic in Revelation 3:10. Paul discusses the rapture in I Corinthians 15:51-58, and throughout I & II Thessalonians. I Thessalonians 4:13-18 is perhaps the most thorough treatment of the topic. This is a topic that God wants the church to know about, and He wants us to have the right perspective on it.

An Eager Expectation:

I Thessalonians 1:10 introduces the idea of waiting for Jesus' coming. This is not the idea of just sitting around waiting, but rather this is the idea of eagerly expecting something to happen. This idea is connected to the sanctification of the Thessalonians. The previous verse indicates that they turned to God from idols for two purposes. The first purpose was to serve God. The second purpose was "to wait¹ for his Son from heaven." They directed their lives to follow God in order that they would have the right perspective on Jesus' coming. The rapture is not something to be feared for believers, and in fact it should be the opposite. The rapture is something that we should be eagerly expecting. The more we orientate our lives toward God, the more we will eagerly anticipate His coming. When you have a close relationship with someone, you look forward to seeing him or her. When you have a close relationship with Jesus, you will look forward to seeing Him. Paul mentions this idea again in II Thessalonians 3:5 when he says, "And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting² for Christ." This has more of the idea of waiting with endurance. While we are eagerly expecting the rapture, we are also being steadfast in what He has for us until He comes. Notice that it is the Lord that directs our hearts in this mindset of waiting with endurance.

The timeframe of the rapture is of course connected to the fact that we can eagerly expect His return. The rapture could take place at any time, and there is no prophetic event that has to happen before it can occur. In I Thessalonians 5, "the day³ of the Lord" refers to the time period of the tribulation, and how we are not in darkness "that that day should overtake you as a thief."

¹ ἀναμένειν – This word can also carry the idea of waiting with expectation.

² ὑπομονήν – This word has more of the idea of being steadfast and enduring.

³ ἡμέρα – This is a word that indicates a period of time.

As believers, we will not be overtaken by the tribulation. Verse 9 further explains that “God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ.” Revelation 3:10 contributes to this discussion as well. Jesus says, “I also will keep thee from the hour⁴ of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” One of the reasons that Paul was writing to the Thessalonians was because of their confusion on the timing of the tribulation. The Thessalonians were currently experiencing persecution and distress, and it seems that they might have thought that they were already in the tribulation. Paul clarifies here that they will not have to face the tribulation. Paul reemphasizes this idea in II Thessalonians 2, and he essentially tells them to not be fearful of the day of the Lord based on what he has taught them about “our gathering together unto Him.” The doctrine of the rapture is always talked about in a comforting and encouraging sense because we do not have to face the time period of the tribulation or God’s wrath. We can eagerly expect Christ’s return because He could come back at any time.

A Joyous Occasion:

Of course this will be a joyous occasion because we will be meeting Jesus face to face. However, there are other joyous aspects of the rapture. I Thessalonians 2:19 talks about a joyous aspect of the rapture. Paul says that the Thessalonians are his hope, joy, and crown of rejoicing at Jesus’ coming. This points to Paul’s eternal focus in his ministry. Being raised together as one body and one bride to Jesus is a joyous occasion. Paul did not measure success in ministry by numbers, but he measured success based on the fact that the Thessalonians grew in their faith in the face of persecution and distress. When Paul heard from Timothy about how well the Thessalonians were doing spiritually, he said “what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God.” Paul was currently apart from the Thessalonians, but he had a strong desire to see them. He was confident that he would see them at the rapture of the church, and that was a joyous thought for Paul. I Corinthians 15:51 discusses another joyous aspect of the rapture, and it is the fact that “Death is swallowed up in victory.” We will be given incorruptible bodies, and death will no longer be a reality for us. What a joyous occasion that will be!

Our Continuing Sanctification:

I Thessalonians 3:12-13 discusses what the Lord is still doing in our lives until He comes. Jesus is working to make us more like Himself. Verse 12 says, “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you.” Jesus is working to increase their love for everyone, but especially to each other as believers. Verse 13 reveals the purpose for this, “To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.” This is the concept of continual sanctification. Positionally, we are blameless in holiness before God because of the great exchange where we received Christ’s righteousness. Practically, we would all agree that we do not always live in accordance with our position in Christ. That is where sanctification comes in. God wants you to be sanctified, and that is evident in I Thessalonians 4:3. Love is the central component to this process of sanctification, and of course love is a fruit of the Spirit. Therefore, sanctification with increasing love is only possible by the enablement of the Spirit, and it is not possible through the efforts of our flesh. Hence why the verse says “the Lord make you to increase and abound in love.” It is encouraging to see that the Thessalonians

⁴ ὥρας – This is another word that indicates a period of time.

did in fact increase and abound in love. II Thessalonians 1:3 says, “the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth.” Jesus wants to do that same work in your life until He comes. He uses everything in our lives to make us more like Him. The Thessalonians faced pressure and distress, and Jesus used that to make them more like Him.

I Corinthians 15:58 discusses the fact that Jesus still has work for us to do. In context of the resurrection and the rapture, Paul writes, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord⁵.” While we are eagerly expecting Christ’s coming, we should also be working. This verse emphasizes the fact that our work for Christ is not empty or pointless. This connects back to the area of Paul’s ministry that he would be joyous about at Christ’s coming. Paul would be joyous about seeing those that he evangelized and disciplined at Christ’s coming. Part of our work now is to evangelize and disciple. Anything done for the Lord, by the means of His empowerment, and in His character is not vain. Once again this puts the rapture in context of an encouraging passage. We are encouraged to continue in our service for the Lord. This is in contrast to the idea that we should be anxious or fearful about the rapture. We should not be dreading whether or not we are living perfectly when Christ comes because we know that we are not under condemnation. Rather we should simply be encouraged to continue in service for the Lord in light of the joyous occasion that we are eagerly expecting.

Our Current Comfort:

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 discusses the actual event of the rapture in the most detail. The concept of the rapture is connected with the doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection. This is evident by the fact that Paul discusses the rapture in the context of his discussion on the resurrection in I Corinthians 15. In Thessalonians 4:14, there is once again an emphasis placed on Jesus’ resurrection. The verse says, “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” There is a similarity between Jesus’ resurrection and the resurrection of those that have died in Christ. This is relevant to the rapture because the rapture involves both those that are alive on earth and those that have died in Christ. This seems to be something that the Thessalonians were concerned about. They wanted to know how this would work for their fellow believers that had already died in Christ. We see that Jesus Himself will come down from heaven in the clouds, and those that are dead in Christ will be raised up first. Then those that are still alive on earth will be “caught up⁶ together with them in the clouds.” This idea of being snatched away is essential to our understanding of the rapture. Without I Thessalonians 4, we would not be able to understand the rapture. The purpose of this snatching away is “to meet the Lord in the air.” The focus of this event is on the Lord, and the fact that we get to finally get to meet Him face to face. Once again the rapture is discussed in the context of an encouraging passage. Specifically, this doctrine is meant to be a comfort to us. They are told to “comfort one another with these words.” There is a comfort we can experience today based on this future reality. We can be comforted when our fellow believers die because we know that we will see them again. However, there is an even greater comfort we can experience based on this future reality. The comfort is that we will be with Jesus forever. All current suffering pales in comparison to the glory and joy we will experience when we see Jesus. God wants us to comfort one another based on this future reality.

⁵ Close association – “ἐν Κυρίῳ” This is labor that is for the Lord, by the means of the Lord, and in the character of the Lord.

⁶ ἀρπαγησόμεθα – This word literally means to snatch away.

Conclusion:

God has revealed the truth of the rapture to the church. God has a purpose for giving us this knowledge. He wants us to be eagerly expecting His return. The rapture is something that God wants us to be looking forward to. The imminency of Christ is something that should excite us. God wants us to understand that it is a joyous occasion, and that this is not something we should dread or be anxious about as believers. God wants us to continue growing and being sanctified while we wait for Christ's return. We should be active in serving Him because living according to God's purposes has eternal value. God wants us to be encouraged by the fact that our labor for Him is not empty or pointless. God wants us to be comforted in the face of suffering or even death based on this future reality of the rapture. Do we have that forward focus on Christ's return, and are we allowing the reality of His return to influence our attitude and behavior?