

Coming Soon

Don't You Love a Great Rescue Story

Don't you love a great rescue story? One of the hot movies right now is the thriller, *Argo*. The movie is based on former CIA operative Tony Mendez's account of the rescue of six U.S. diplomats from Tehran during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. Who can forget the Chile mining accident rescue in 2010, as 33 miners were trapped for nearly three months in the Copiapó mine after a massive cave-in? Remember watching joyfully when all of the miners were finally rescued? Then, there was the rescue of Jessica Lynch, an Army supply clerk, taken prisoner by Iraqi forces on March 23, 2003, after her convoy was ambushed after taking a wrong turn. She spent nine days listed as missing until a team of Special Forces launched a nighttime raid on the hospital where she was being held. Jessica was rescued, and the bodies of eight U.S. soldiers were recovered. **Don't you love a great rescue story?**

While on a South Pole expedition, British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton left a few men on Elephant Island, promising that he would return for them. Later, when he tried to go back, huge icebergs blocked the way. But suddenly, as if by a miracle, an avenue opened in the ice and Shackleton was able to get through. His men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard. No sooner had the ship cleared the island than the ice crashed together behind them. Contemplating their narrow escape, the explorer said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go!" They replied, "We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'The boss may come today.'" **Don't you love a great rescue story?**

Today we're talking about a rescue story...you're rescue, my rescue from this wicked world. I've got great news for you. If you've trusted Christ as your personal Savior, we're all going to get out of this! We're all going to be rescued. Please turn to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (p. 987). The Rapture is the next event on God's calendar.

Wouldn't you love to know what's going to happen tomorrow? If you own a Bible, you have an "early edition" of future events. By reading God's prophetic Word, you can know God's plan for all eternity. You can know that there's hope! By hope I mean absolute confidence and peace in both your present and future circumstances. Hope is one of the great blessings of the Christian life. At the start of this letter to the Thessalonians (1:3), Paul tells us that hope produces perseverance. If there's no hope in the church, there will be no perseverance, and no perseverance will destroy us and our church. Wonderfully, there's good news: God gives us hope even in a hopeless world. We and every other believer are going to be rescued. It's called the Rapture and that's what 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is all about.

1. What is the Rapture? Jane and I used to love to watch the popular TV show, *Without a Trace*. If you've never seen it, the setting is in New York City in a special FBI missing persons unit. Each episode is devoted to finding one missing person, and, usually, one of the agents assigned to the case develops a strong emotional interest that carries the story along. But the FBI doesn't have a dedicated missing persons unit. Investigations into disappearances are assigned to agents on a case-by-case basis. At the end of each episode, however, the show did touch on reality by providing public service information to help the FBI locate real-life missing persons,

people who'd vanished. Mystery is exactly what the word *vanished* implies. Headlines about people who vanish rivet our attention: "Relatives Wait for Word of Vanished Sailors"; "College Student Vanishes After Concert"; "Search Continues for Woman Who Vanished." We read such headlines with eerie wonder: *What could have happened to the missing person? How could she have simply been there one moment and not the next?*

Yet, according to the Bible, a time is coming when this very thing will happen on a massive, global scale. A day is coming when a billion people will suddenly vanish from the face of the earth without a trace! When that event occurs, calling in the FBI will be of no use. These vanished people won't be seen again until Jesus Himself returns.

What will this worldwide phenomenon be like? That's a question in the minds of many who—through popular novels, sermons, or religious writings have heard of this event but don't understand it. They know that Christians call it the Rapture, yet they have little idea what it means or what in the world is going on that could bring it about.

Last week there were massive evacuations on the East Coast in preparation for Hurricane Sandy. Massive evacuations leave large areas empty and desolate, as if their inhabitants had simply vanished. Imagine though someone who missed the call to evacuate, waking up after everyone was gone and stumbling through the wet, windy, empty streets, confused and amazed, wondering why he'd been left behind. That person's reaction would be nothing compared to the shock of those who witness this coming worldwide evacuation.

The Bible tells us that in a brief moment, millions, if not billions, of people will disappear in less than a millisecond. And the purpose of that evacuation is similar to that of the emergency evacuation of those on the East Coast: to avoid horrific devastation. This evacuation will remove Christians from the disastrous effects of coming earthquakes, fire, and global chaos. Jesus will remove every Christian from this world at the Rapture.

According to theologian, Dr. John F. Walvoord, *"The term rapture itself is derived from the Latin Vulgate version of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 where the expression 'caught up' is translated by the Latin rapturo."* The Rapture of the Church then is probably the most compelling prophetic event in the Bible. To put it in simple terms, the Rapture of the Church is when believers will be taken out of the world to meet Jesus, their Lord and Savior in the air. It's when Jesus comes to take His faithful ones Home. The Rapture refers to the sudden removal of all of God's people on the earth. In the twinkling of an eye, every born-again person will be suddenly transformed out of our human bodies and will rise up into the air to join Jesus Christ in the clouds.

2. Many confuse the Rapture with Christ's Second Coming. Many passages in Scripture that are talking about the Second Coming (which we'll talk about in a few weeks) are applied to the Rapture. These are two very different events in God's prophetic calendar so we don't want to get the Rapture confused with the Second Coming of Christ. The Second Coming will occur at the end of the Tribulation, as Jesus comes to earth to set up His kingdom. Someone has compared the coming of the Lord to a two-act play separated by a seven-year intermission (the Tribulation). The first act is the Rapture, then the Tribulation and finally, Christ's Second Coming.

There are a number of differences between these two appearances. At the Rapture, Christ comes in the air, and believers rise to meet Him and go back to heaven. There is also a resurrection of the dead. At His Second Coming, Christ rides out of heaven on a white horse with an army following Him, and He comes to the earth to judge, make war, and overthrow all earthly powers. He then rules for a thousand years from His throne in Jerusalem, and no resurrection occurs at the moment of His coming. The Rapture and Second Coming are very different events, separated by at least seven years.

If you study prophecy or what's called eschatology, you'll find there are differing views concerning the Rapture and three primary theories. They are (1) the mid-tribulation rapture theory; (2) the post-tribulation rapture theory; and (3) the pre-tribulation rapture theory. Let's look briefly at each.

* **Mid-tribulation Rapture theory.** The Mid-tribulation Rapture position is a compromise between the Pre-tribulation and the Post-tribulation views. According to this view the seven-year tribulation is divided into two halves; the first half described as the wrath of man, and the last half as the wrath of God. The Rapture then will take place in the middle of the tribulation period, three-and-one-half years prior to the Second Coming.

* **Post-tribulation Rapture theory.** Those who hold this view believe the Church will enter the seven-year tribulation and just prior to the Second Coming be raptured and then return immediately to the earth with the Lord. Some post-tribulationists view this entire present age as the tribulation, although the majority accept the literal interpretation of the tribulation period as a portrayal of actual events preceding the Second Coming.

* **Pre-tribulation Rapture theory.** According to the pre-tribulation view of the Rapture, the Church will be raptured prior to the seven year tribulation when God pours out His judgment on this world. We are raptured prior to the seventieth week of Daniel (Daniel 9:27) and return with Jesus to the earth at His Second Coming. Hand in hand with this view is the doctrine of imminency, which emphasizes that the Lord can return any moment without regard to any signs. All signs are for Israel and therefore relate to the Revelation (Rev. 19:11-21), when Jesus will come with His saints at the end of the tribulation period.

Personally, I'm a pre-tribulationist. I believe the Bible teaches that Christ is coming for His church prior to the beginning of the Tribulation. But one could hold any of those three theories and still be orthodox. Someone jokingly asked, "Do you know what the thirty minutes of silence in heaven is for? (Revelation 8:1)" "It's so everyone can correct their prophetic charts."

In summary, I believe in the literal, personal, imminent, pre-tribulation and pre-millennial return of the Lord Jesus Christ with His redeemed ones. That's a mouthful, isn't it? The return of Christ will not be symbolic but will involve Jesus Himself. Let me share with you why I believe that the Pre-Tribulation Rapture is correct and lines up with what God's Word teaches.

a. Jesus promised His Church that they'd be spared God's wrath. This is the promise that Jesus made to the faithful church of Philadelphia, which is representative of the true Church in all ages. The Lord said in Revelation 3:10, "*Because you have kept My word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.*" The "hour of trial" is the

Tribulation. Jesus used this terminology to describe the Tribulation because He was saying the Church is going to be kept from the very time frame in which the Tribulation will occur. To be kept "from," or "out of," a situation is different than being kept "through" it. The preposition translated "from" suggests the Church will not be around when the Tribulation breaks loose.

b. The Church will be in Heaven during the Tribulation. It's worth noting that immediately after this promise, Revelation 4 begins describing the time of God's final judgment on earth, but the Church is nowhere to be found amid all the horrors that a righteous God is going to unleash on a sinful world. The best explanation for the Church's absence from Revelation 4 until the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in Revelation 20-21 is that the Church will be raptured before the Tribulation begins.

The Bible also promises that as God's people, we will be delivered "from the wrath to come" (1 Thes. 1:10). God's wrath here is not only hell, but the Tribulation period. Later in 1 Thessalonians, Paul said, "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (5:2). But then Paul said to the church, "But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief" (5:4). And finally we have this promise in verse 9, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

c. The Tribulation will not begin until the Antichrist is revealed. When Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, the believers there were all rattled again, this time because there were false teachers who were saying the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord had already started. Turn to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8 (989).

Picking it up in verse 3, Paul said (and let me read *The Message's* rendering of this), "Don't let anyone shake you up or get you excited over some breathless report or rumored letter from me that the day of the Master's arrival has come and gone. Don't fall for any line like that. Before that day comes, a couple of things have to happen. First, the Apostasy. Second, the debut of the Anarchist, a real dog of Satan. He'll defy and then take over every so-called god or altar. Having cleared away the opposition, he'll then set himself up in God's Temple as 'God Almighty.' Don't you remember me going over all this in detail when I was with you? Are your memories that short? You'll also remember that I told you the Anarchist is being held back until just the right time. That doesn't mean that the spirit of anarchy is not now at work. It is, secretly and underground. But the time will come when the Anarchist will no longer be held back, but will be let loose. But don't worry. The Master Jesus will be right on his heels and blow him away. The Master appears and—puff!—the Anarchist is out of there." Now the Thessalonians were rattled for good reason, if the Tribulation had begun, that meant they'd been left behind. But Paul set their end times theology straight and in the process made clear the order of events. The Tribulation will not begin until the Antichrist, who is described so vividly in these verses, is revealed. And he won't be revealed until the restrainer, the Holy Spirit, is taken off the earth.

Follow the reasoning here. The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church. He came at Pentecost to take up His residence in the bodies of believers who make up the Church. In fact, it's the Holy Spirit's baptism that marks a person as a member of Christ's body the Church (1 Cor. 12:13). If the Tribulation doesn't begin until the Antichrist is revealed, and if he won't be revealed until after the Holy Spirit leaves, guess who leaves when the Spirit leaves? The Church!

Based on these passages, I don't expect the Church to go through the Tribulation. Before a nation attacks a foreign country, one of the things the attacking nation does is remove its citizens from that foreign country. We've seen this happen many times just in the last few decades. The U.S. removed its medical students from the island of Grenada before invading it to end a coup attempt. American citizens in Kuwait were evacuated before the attacks of Desert Storm began. Our citizens were told to leave Yugoslavia before the United Nations executed its bombing wrath to stop the bloodbath in Kosovo.

The same principle operates in heaven. Jesus Christ is going to bring the citizens of heaven Home before God executes His fierce wrath on the earth. Jesus will come before the Tribulation and Rapture the Christians who are alive and resurrect the redeemed who have died and take us all back to heaven with Him. This will be followed by a 7-year period of unprecedented Tribulation. At the end of this time, Christ will return with believers and set up his 1,000 year-reign on earth. Thus, we believe the Rapture is "*pre*," or before the Tribulation; and Jesus will return "*pre*," or before He inaugurates the millennial kingdom.

3. There are a series of events that make up the Rapture. The rapture is the next event then on God's prophetic calendar. But what we're seeing in our world today in a very remarkable way is the setting of the world stage for the events that will follow the rapture. The Bible teaches that the Rapture is imminent. It could happen at any time. Look again at 1 Thes. 4:13-18. Paul shares all of this to encourage us. The Rapture, the fact we're going to be rescued, should be the most exciting news that there could ever be.

a. The Rapture anesthetizes us against the pain of sorrow. In verse 13, Paul begins by saying that he does not want them to be *uninformed*. It's a very emphatic statement meant to get their attention. These were brand new believers and they were experiencing intense persecution. Perhaps they thought Jesus was going to return any moment and rescue them from their trials. But when their brothers and sisters in Christ started dying, it caused them concern. Did their deaths disqualify them from meeting the Lord when He returned? Had they somehow missed out on the end time events?

Paul is writing to clear up their confusion about those who had "*fallen asleep*." The phrase "*fallen asleep*" is used in verses 13-15 to describe believers who've died. What a wonderful way to speak of death for the believer. Used in this way, it always refers to the bodies of believers when they die. Our souls don't sleep at death; they go immediately into the presence of the Lord, "*We rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord*" (2 Cor. 5:8). But our bodies are "*asleep*" in the sense that they'll wake up again and be resurrected. In John 11:11 when referring to Lazarus who'd been in the grave for several days, Jesus said: "*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.*" This is the same word where we get our word "*cemetery*." It was the early Christians' optimistic name for a graveyard. It was a sleeping place for dead people who will one day be resurrected. A Christian's spirit goes to be with Jesus, while our bodies go to sleep.

Paul's concern is that these new brothers and sisters refrain from grieving like those who have no hope. There are really only two groups of people in the world those who have hope and those who don't. Believers have the guarantee that there's something

better coming, while unbelievers have no hope at all. The moment of death marks a great division in the human race between those who are saved and those who are lost.

Now Paul is not saying that believers shouldn't sorrow when a loved one dies. He's simply stating that a believer should grieve differently than someone who doesn't know Christ. We can grieve with hope because we don't really have to say "goodbye" to a believer. You're really saying "Good night" because if they know Jesus and you know Jesus, you'll see him or her again when their bodies "wake up" and they're reunited with their spirit.

b. The promise of the Rapture is a sure thing. We can know that the promise of the rapture is sure because it's built on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in verse 14, *"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep."* This is a concise summary of biblical Christianity. Jesus died as full payment for our sins. By rising from the dead, He conquered death. The Resurrection proved that God the Father accepted the sacrifice of His Son and guaranteed that we too will be raised to new life.

Have you ever been lost? When I'm lost in a big city, I'll often keep driving until I finally see something that I recognize. Just seeing something familiar helps me gain my perspective and encourages me. Likewise, the old rugged wooden cross is our focal point and the empty tomb is our hope of heaven.

As we focus our attention on the facts of our faith: the crucifixion and the resurrection, this gives us hope and we can then know that the promise of His coming for us is sure. Our resurrection and gathering with Him at His coming is predicated on Jesus' resurrection, 1 Corinthians 6:14, *"And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power."*

The first part of verse 15 gives us another reason to be confident of His coming, *"by a word from the Lord."* This may refer to something that Jesus said when He was alive that was not recorded in the Gospels or it may be something that Jesus revealed directly to Paul. In any case, what is to follow is "the Lord's own word." As such, it carries with it tremendous authority. The Rapture is not some fairy tale, make believe doctrine. It's not theological speculation. It's sure because it's built on three pillars: the redemption provided by Christ; the resurrection of Christ; and the revelation of Christ.

c. The participants in the Rapture are a sure thing. In the remainder of verse 15 we see that the participants are certain, *"we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep."* There are two groups of people who will participate in the Rapture: Believers who are alive and believers who have died. Notice that Paul uses the pronoun "we" to indicate that he thought he'd be alive when Jesus returned. Those 1st century Christians believed Jesus would return in their lifetime and Paul was ready to be raptured. In his mind it was imminent. Flip back to 1 Thessalonians 1:10, *"and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."*

When Paul refers to those who've "fallen asleep" he directly addresses one of their concerns. The Thessalonians believed Jesus would return before they died and they were very worried about those who'd already passed away. Paul tells them that believers who have died not only will not be forgotten; they'll take precedence over Christians who are still alive. And they are actually experiencing the benefits of being in

the presence of Christ all the time. When the Rapture occurs, they'll be taken care of first.

Paul answers their questions. Living Christians have no advantage over the dead and won't miss the Rapture. No believer will be left out.

d. God's plan for the Rapture is already set. God's plan for the Rapture is unpacked in verses 16-17, "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*" Paul lists out **eight key elements** to this plan.

1. There will be a sudden descent. The Lord Himself will come down from heaven. He doesn't send an angel or a messenger. Jesus Himself is coming down from heaven just as Acts 1:11 declared that He would, "*This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven.*"

2. There will be a loud command. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament. It's a military term that was issued when the troops were "at ease" and it was time for them to "fall in." It also can mean to stand up.

Jesus is shouting for believers to get on their feet and fall in line. As Jesus said in John 5:25, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*" This is the time when the dead and the devoted will hear the thunderous command of our Commander in Chief of the armies of heaven.

3. There will be the voice of the archangel. In Daniel 12 and Jude 9 the archangel is identified as Michael. As Jesus comes down with his booming command, Michael's voice is echoing behind Him.

4. There will be the trumpet call of God. Scripture is filled with references to trumpets and they have a number of different meanings. In Exodus 19 a very loud trumpet was used to call the people out to meet with God. In Zechariah 9:14, a trumpet was used as a signal that the Lord was about to rescue His people. The trumpet sounds forth at the Rapture because God's people are called out in order to be rescued.

5. There will be a great resurrection. The dead in Christ will rise first. This is a statement of priority that calmed the concerns of the Thessalonians. Yet, it's the dead "*in Christ*" who are raised. This is only a resurrection of believers. Unsaved dead are left in their graves to be raised at the Great White Throne judgment later as spelled out in Revelation 20:5, "*The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.*"

All believers in Christ will be raised. That includes Christians who died 2000 years ago and those who died last week. It includes Martin Luther, David Livingstone, Corrie Ten Boom and believers from our own church family. They'll be raised indestructible with brand-new bodies, clothed with immortality, healed, restored, put in their right minds, and raised to live forever, to never die again.

6. There will be a glorious rapture. Rapture is a word that always implies a change of location. In this case it means that living believers will be literally lifted off the earth. How will it happen? 1 Corinthians 15:52 describes the scene as taking place "*in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye.*" How fast is that? It's faster than it takes to blink your eyes. It's how fast it takes to see light flash on the pupil of our eyes. A "*flash*" is the Greek

word that represents the smallest interval of time imaginable. One moment you're driving your car, the next nanosecond you're flying through the clouds. One second you're eating a chalupa, the next you're airborne. One minute you're in the rain, the next you're being blown dry at 30,000 feet. Just like that. We'll be here one moment and then gone the next.

And, when we're snatched, we're instantly transformed and given a brand new body according to Philippians 3:20-21, *"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself."* I've done a lot of funerals. I don't want to go like that. I want to ascend! Don't you?

7. There will be a fantastic reunion. Notice what Paul says in verse 17, *"We will be caught up together with them."* Then he says, *"we will always be with the Lord."* This is the ultimate family reunion. All Christians from all centuries from every land and nation will be together at last with Jesus. Your loved ones who loved Jesus will join you for an never ending family reunion. If you do ascend in the Rapture, and your loved ones are reunited with their resurrection bodies, they will join you on the way to heaven though they may beat you there! Jesus will come either with us or for us.

8. There will be a joyful meeting. Notice three key words. We will *meet* the Lord. We will be *with* the Lord. We will be with the Lord *always* or forever. Do you remember what Jesus said to the dying thief? *"Today you will be with me in paradise?"* Where's paradise? It's wherever Jesus is. The word *"meet"* is a beautiful word that was often used to describe the meeting of a dignitary as people rushed to get close to him. We'll not only meet Him, we will be with Him...and we'll be with Him always, never to be separated from the Savior again. Problems of pain and sorrow are solved because the promise of the rapture is sure, the participants are certain, and the plan is a done deal.

Conclusion: As we come to the end of 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul shares that the purpose of all that he's written is to comfort us, *"Therefore encourage one another with these words."* Jesus is coming for His own. Don't worry about believers who've died and don't be concerned about yourself if you know Christ. We'll all be there when He sounds the trumpet. We're all going to get Home before dark, and we're to use this fact to encourage one another! But we need to be ready!

Many of you are familiar with the famous Drake Hotel in Chicago. It's an older, yet 1st class hotel that overlooks Lake Michigan. Back in 1959, the Queen of England visited Chicago. Elaborate preparations were made for her visit. The Chicago waterfront was readied for docking her yacht. Public trash cans were painted. A red carpet was rolled out. Many hotels were alerted to be ready, but when they contacted the Drake, the manager explained, "We are making no plans for the Queen; our rooms are always ready for royalty." What an advertisement for the Drake!

Jesus is coming back! Are you ready? Is your life ready for royalty. Don't let His coming catch you unprepared! As believers, shouldn't we be talking a lot more about the Rapture than we do because knowing what is coming will influence what we're doing right now. The purpose for studying the Rapture is to give us hope, comfort and encouragement. Jesus is coming again. It's a promise for us to believe.

Remember the reply of those rescued by Sir Ernest Shackleton, *“We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, ‘The boss may come today.’”*

Friends, Jesus could come for us today! The shout and the trumpet call could come at any moment! We could be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. What should that knowledge do for us? Paul answers that in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 15. *“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain”* (v. 58). **Don't you love a great rescue story?**

Yet, at the same time, it's a frightening prospect for those who have not yet put their faith in Christ. If you don't know Jesus as your personal Savior, if you have not been born again, you will be left behind. Please don't let that happen. Come to Jesus today!