

# The Comforting Hope of 1 Thessalonians 4

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon explores the comforting hope of the rapture as presented in 1 Thessalonians 4, addressing the concerns of early Christians regarding death and resurrection.*

**Scripture:** Daniel 12:2, Zechariah 13:8, Matthew 27:52, John 14:1, 1 Corinthians 15:51, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 2 Thessalonians 2:1, Revelation 20:4, Revelation 20:12

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Rapture Theology"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the detailed revelation of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, emphasizing the importance of understanding the sequence of events leading up to Christ's second coming. The passage addresses the Thessalonians' concerns about death in relation to the rapture, clarifying that both the living and the dead in Christ will be united at the same time. Posttribulationists face challenges in explaining the delay in the resurrection of the dead, the nature of the revelation received, and the lack of warning about the great tribulation in this passage.

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## Transcript

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in Bibliotheca Sacra with the January-March, 1975 issue, is now published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 8 in the book. The series will continue through 1977.]

Although the rapture of the church was introduced by Christ the night before His crucifixion, as recorded in John 14:1-3, the details of the rapture were not revealed in Scripture until 1 Thessalonians was written. It is not too much to say that 1 Thessalonians 4-5 is probably the most important passage dealing with the rapture in the New Testament. Additional passages are 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; but more detail is given in 1 Thessalonians 4 than in any other passage.

Probably more pretribulationists base their conclusion for a pretribulational rapture on 1 Thessalonians 4 than on any other single passage of Scripture. By contrast, evidence indicates that posttribulationists find little of a positive character to help them in the details of this revelation. It would seem natural, if the great tribulation actually intervened before the rapture could be fulfilled, that this would have been a good place to put the whole matter into proper perspective, as Christ did in Matthew 24 in His description of the events leading up to His second coming.

## The Problem Of Death In Relation To The Rapture

It should be borne in mind as this central passage on the rapture is discussed that the Thessalonian Christians had had only a few weeks of doctrinal instruction before Paul, Silas, and Timothy left them. It is amazing that their instruction included such doctrines as election (1:4 ), the Holy Spirit (1:5-6 ; 4:8 ; 5:19 ), conversion (1:9 ), assurance of salvation (1:5 ), sanctification (4:3 ; 5:23 ), and teachings on the Christian life. Obviously there were great gaps in their understanding of theology in general, and more particularly of the prophetic future events.

It is most significant that in every chapter in 1 Thessalonians some mention is made of the future coming of Christ. The Thessalonians are described as those who are "to wait for His Son from heaven" (1:10 ). They will be trophies of Paul's gospel ministry at the coming of the Lord (2:19 ), and their ultimate sanctification is promised when Christ comes (3:13 ).

Although 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is addressed to correct their ignorance about the rapture, it is quite clear that Paul is not introducing a new subject, but clarifying an old one. He had faithfully told them of the possibility of Christ's coming, and it was with this eager expectation that they were exhorted to wait for the rapture. It is implied that the thought had not occurred to them that some of them would die before the rapture. Accordingly, when some of their number, after such a brief time, had passed into the presence of the Lord through death, they were unprepared for it.

As many commentators have pointed out, it is possible that the hopelessness of the pagan world may have affected their hope in resurrection. Yet the certainty of resurrection to which Paul refers in 1 Thessalonians 4:14 is so inseparable from the gospel itself that it seems highly questionable that they had any real doubt whether their loved ones in Christ would be resurrected. Rather, their problem was how the future resurrection related to Christ's coming for the living saints. This was the problem Paul attacked and concerning which they needed further revelation.

As 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 clearly shows, their fears were groundless. Their loved ones who had died would be resurrected, for all practical purposes, at the same time that the living would be raptured. They would, therefore, not have an inferior experience, and those living who were raptured would not have to wait for a period of time until their loved ones were resurrected.

### Posttribulational Interpretation Of 1 Thessalonians 4

Posttribulationists usually do not treat 1 Thessalonians 4-5 extensively. Gundry is an exception and devotes a whole chapter to it.[1] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), pp. 100-111. Ladd discusses it for only a few pages, with references scattered throughout his discussion, at the same time devoting a third of his book to the historical argument for posttribulationism.[2] George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 77-80.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, posttribulationists face a major difficulty. As presented here, the hope of the rapture is an imminent hope with no events such as the great tribulation regarded as intervening. Posttribulationists must find some explanation for this silence and for the major problem that the hope of the Lord's return is presented as a comfort to the Thessalonians sorrowing for their loved ones who have died. The hope of a rapture occurring after a literal great tribulation would be small comfort to those in this situation. Thus posttribulationists have marshalled a number of arguments in an attempt to answer both

problems and others that face them in this passage.

Generally posttribulationists encounter the following problems in 1 Thessalonians 4: (1) the nature of this supposed delay of the resurrection of the dead in Christ; (2) the nature of the revelation claimed to have been received "by the word of the Lord"; (3) the meaning of the revelation that saints will meet the Lord in the air; (4) the problem of emphasis on translation as opposed to resurrection; (5) the problem of silence concerning any warning of the coming great tribulation; (6) the problem of the exhortation to comfort in view of the rapture of the church.

### The Nature Of The Supposed Delay

The first problem faced by all expositors is discerning the reasons for the unusual sorrow of the Thessalonians over the death of their fellow believers. Various explanations have been given as to why they feared a delay in the resurrection of the dead in Christ that would place it after the rapture of the church. Pretribulationists have a convenient and plausible explanation in the possibility that the resurrection of the dead in Christ occurs at the end of the great tribulation when the tribulation martyrs will be raised (Rev 20:4). Even Gundry mentions this: "We might think that the sorrow of the Thessalonians derived from the mistaken belief in a remaining behind of deceased believers at a pretribulation rapture with a consequent later date of resurrection, perhaps after the tribulation." [3] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 100. This would make sense if the Thessalonians had been taught pretribulationism.

In rejecting the pretribulation explanation of the possibility of delay in the resurrection of the dead in Christ, Gundry offers instead another interpretation. He writes, "The Thessalonians further thought that departed brethren, along with the wicked dead, will not rise until after the Messianic kingdom, and thus will miss the blessedness of Christ's earthly reign. This view gives a more substantial basis for the Thessalonians' sorrow than the notion that the dead in Christ will be left out of the pretribulation rapture." [4] *Ibid.*, p. 101. It is curious that Gundry discards the pretribulation argument because it is based on an assumption, but considers as cogent and plausible the posttribulation argument also built on an assumption.

There are some real problems with Gundry's explanation. First, it is a new interpretation never before adopted by any other writer, whether pretribulation or posttribulation. Second, Gundry offers no factual support for his view. Third, pretribulationists can point to the fact that the Thessalonians had had some instruction on tribulation in general (cf. 1 Thess 3:4), as well as the coming great tribulation specifically (2 Thess 2:5-6). In other words, they had in mind the idea of a coming great tribulation which would be a time barrier between the rapture, if viewed as imminent, and the resurrection of the dead in Christ, which might occur after the great tribulation. Fourth, there is no indication anywhere in the Thessalonian epistles that their instruction included details of the millennium.

Gundry is grasping at a straw in injecting an explanation of the problem that has no support in the Scriptures. He undoubtedly does this only because he has no more plausible view to offer. While the Thessalonians might conceivably have had some grounds for confusion concerning the time of resurrection if they were pretribulation in outlook, why would they consider a delay necessary until after the millennium which is really not their immediate concern?

While both pretribulationists and posttribulationists can only speculate concerning the reason for the Thessalonians' concern, it seems the pretribulationists at least have some scriptural support for their view, whereas Gundry has none. For His own and take them to the Father's house, which is considered

equivalent to heaven. Gundry's spiritualization of the term "the Father's house" to get away from the idea that the saints go to heaven has been discussed and refuted in the preceding article in this series. Pretribulationists therefore view Christ's coming to the air above the earth as fulfillment of His purpose to receive His bride and take her back to heaven to the Father's house.

Posttribulationists have a twofold problem: (1) to explain why the church leaves the earth to meet the Lord in the air, and (2) to prove that the saints, having met the Lord in the air, change direction and proceed to the earth.

Gundry debates this as follows:

Other things being equal, the word "descend" (katabaino) indicates a complete, uninterrupted descent, like that of the Spirit at Christ's baptism (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32, 33) and that of Christ in His first advent (John 3:13; 6:33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58 ). Where a reversal from downward to upward motion comes into view, a specific statement to that effect appears, as in Acts 10:11, 16 ("a certain object coming down, ...and immediately the object was taken up into the sky"). In the absence of a statement indicating a halt or sudden reversal of direction, we naturally infer a complete descent to the earth, such as will take place only at the posttriblilational advent.[6] Ibid., p. 103.

It should be noted that Gundry is attempting to solve this problem by definition of a word, a definition quite arbitrary and slanted in the direction of his conclusion. The text does declare that the church will meet the Lord in the air, which at least implies a halt for the meeting, even if it does not specify a change in direction. Gundry here again appeals to the argument from silence, which so often he disavows for the pretribulationist view. He says, "But surely it is strange that in this, the fullest description of the rapture, there should be no mention of a change in direction from earthward to heaven, or of a halt. The absence of a specific phrase such as 'to the earth' cannot be very significant, for there is not one NT account of the second coming which contains such a phrase." [7] Ibid., p. 104. Here, on the one hand, Gundry argues from silence that there should be mention of a change in direction if such took place, but he discounts the silence of the passage on any indication of its continued direction to the earth. as a whole is concerned, the doctrine of resurrection is a familiar truth found in both the Old and New Testaments, whereas the idea of a translation of living saints is a new revelation. Thus the main point for Christians today is that 1 Thessalonians 4 presents in clear detail the fact that Christians living in the last generation will not die, but will meet the Lord and enter into their eternal relationship to Him without experiencing death.

In these facts, posttribulationism has a specific problem. Passages relating to the second coming of Christ to the earth, such as Revelation 20:4, speak of resurrection after the arrival on earth at the time Christ enters His kingdom, not during His descent from heaven. The resurrection, however, is specified as relating to the martyred dead of those in the immediately preceding generation who had refused to worship the world ruler and consequently died for their faith. There is no indication in this text that the resurrection extends to any other class of people, such as the church as a whole.

In a similar way, Daniel 12:2 refers to a resurrection occurring after the tribulation mentioned in Daniel 12:1. This seems to refer to Old Testament saints, or at least to include them. In none of the passages in the Old or New Testaments where a resurrection is tied to the second coming of Christ to the earth is there any clear identification that the church is included. From the standpoint of pretribulationist interpretation, this is no accident, but a clear revelation that all people are not raised at the same time. Revelation 20, of course, also distinguishes the resurrection mentioned in verse 4 from the resurrection of the wicked which

occurs after the millennium (v. 12 ), as is usually understood by premillenarians.

Posttribulationists usually argue that the resurrection of Revelation 20:4-6 is declared to be "the first resurrection." On the basis that it is called "the first resurrection," they argue that no resurrection can precede it, such as a rapture at the beginning of the tribulation. Ladd argues along this line and asks the question, "Does the Word similarly teach that the first resurrection will consist of two stages, the first of which will occur at the beginning of the Tribulation? No such teaching appears in Scripture." [9] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 82.

The problem here is the common misunderstanding of what the word first means. First does not mean the number one resurrection, but rather that the resurrection here revealed occurs before the final resurrection in the millennium, mentioned in Revelation 20:12-14. It merely means that the resurrection occurs first or before the later resurrection.

Indeed, everyone has to agree that the resurrection of Jesus Christ Himself is the first resurrection. Any subsequent resurrection could not be resurrection number one. Also, in Matthew 27:52-53 a token resurrection of some saints occurred in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's resurrection. The resurrection of Christ and these saints is the token of the resurrections to come. Accordingly, if there can be two separate resurrections which are already history, why should it be thought incredible that there should be more than one resurrection of the righteous still to be fulfilled, namely, the resurrection of the church or the saints of the present age before the tribulation, and the resurrection of the Old Testament saints and the tribulation saints who die just before the time of Christ's coming to set up His kingdom? Logically, no argument can be built for posttribulationism on the word first because all these resurrections are "first," or before the final resurrection of the wicked at the end of the millennium.

The real embarrassment of the posttribulationists, however, is that not a single passage related to the resurrection at the time of Christ's second coming to the earth has anything at all to say about a translation of any saints, much less a specific translation for the church living on the earth. Most pretribulationists insist that there is no translation at all at the end of the tribulation; instead, the saints then living on earth enter the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies, not translated bodies. In view of the many passages that deal with both the subject of resurrection and the second coming of Christ to the earth, it is certainly a strange silence that there should be no clear passage indicating that any of the saints living on earth at that time should be translated. The alleged translation of the saints in Matthew 24:40-41 has already been demonstrated to be no rapture at all, but a taking away in judgment.

Therefore, the emphasis on translation in 1 Thessalonians 4 and in other passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, which have no clear contextual relationship to a second coming to the earth, leaves the posttribulationists groping for any proof that the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation. Their frequently asserted accusation against the pretribulationists--that pretribulationism is based on inference--is a hollow charge when it must follow that posttribulationism is also built on an inference. The fact that a translation is necessary to the resurrection of 1 Thessalonians 4 sets this apart as different from any other resurrection mentioned in the Bible, which includes no translation of living saints.

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Lack Of Warning Of Great Tribulation

The rapture passages are distinguished by there being no warning of an impending great tribulation. In every instance where the rapture is clearly intended as the meaning, there is an absence of impending events, in contrast to revelations concerning the second coming of Christ, such as Matthew 24 or Revelation 4-18 . If they are at all comprehensive, they uniformly mention events that precede and serve as signs of the approaching second coming. By contrast, these signs are lacking in all the major rapture passages.

This is especially pointed out in 1 Thessalonians 4, where the truth of the rapture is presented in considerable detail. No word of caution is given contextually that they should not look for this event until other events occur first--quite in contrast to the revelation concerning the second coming to the earth. Posttribulationists have no real answer to this problem, and they tend to ignore it.

### The Exhortation To Comfort

Undoubtedly the greatest problem posttribulationists face in 1 Thessalonians 4 is that the doctrine of the rapture is offered as a comfort to those who have lost loved ones in Christ through death. It is certainly a hollow argument to say that the truth presented is that of their resurrection. There seems to be no serious question that the Thessalonians believed in the doctrine of resurrection. They did have questions as to where this occurred in the prophetic scheme. This was primarily because the hope of the Lord's return for living Christians had been taught to them as an imminent hope, and they were actually waiting momentarily for His return.

If, as Gundry and Ladd agree, the great tribulation will be a time of great suffering and trial with many martyrs, and a Christian who enters this period must somehow survive the edict that all nonworshippers of the beast be put to death before he can hope to be raptured as a living saint, then the expectation of survival through such an awful period of suffering is small comfort. It would mean first that they could not possibly see their loved ones for years to come. It would mean that in the path ahead lay extreme suffering and privation and probable martyrdom. How, under these circumstances, could they derive any comfort from such a sequence of events? It would be far better from their point of view if the tribulation were to be indefinitely postponed and they were to live out normal lives and die and await resurrection at the rapture. That prospect would certainly be preferable to the possibility of survival through the great tribulation.

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Though not totally ignoring this point, posttribulationists have still to explain how the Thessalonians could derive any comfort whatever out of a posttribulation rapture, and how this would add at all to their faith and expectation at the time that they had lost loved ones through death. Those who, like J. Barton Payne, deny a literal, seven-year tribulation and therefore have a concept of genuine imminency of the Lord's return can with some justification offer comfort to Christians whose loved ones have died. But others, like Ladd and Gundry, who agree to a literal seven-year tribulation offer a most unconvincing solution by simply saying that the ultimate hope of resurrection is all that is in view. If the only way a Christian can experience the rapture is to survive the tribulation, it is no longer either a comforting hope or a blessed hope. Instead there should be grim preparation for what is probable martyrdom in the most awful time of human suffering and persecution of which Scripture speaks.

Gundry posits several arguments to solve this difficulty in posttribulationism. In general, he first tries to soften the rigors of the tribulation by making it a time of satanic wrath instead of divine wrath. This has

been previously discussed.[10] See John F. Walvoord, "Posttribulationism Today; Part VI: Posttribulation Denial of Imminency and Wrath," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (April-June 1970): 108-18; or John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), chapter 6. Actually, if his view of the tribulation is right, it works against what he is trying to prove, because Satan's wrath is specifically against Christian believers and Israel. If Gundry is right, it emphasizes the rigors of the tribulation, instead of softening them. Any reasonably literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation, such as Ladd and Gundry attempt, should make clear that probably the majority of believers who are in the great tribulation will perish. The percentage of Jews who perish in the land is said to be two-thirds (Zech 13:8). The world's population as a whole will probably be reduced to less than half (Rev 6:8; 9:15). Such a prospect is hardly harmonious with a message of comfort. Only an imminent translation could provide real comfort.

Even posttribulationists like Ladd recognize that the translation of the living saints is the most important truth. Ladd writes,

God had never before revealed to men what would be the particular lot of the living saints at the end of the age. The doctrine of the resurrection had long been taught (cf. Dn. 12:2), but the fact that

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the living are to put on the resurrection bodies at the moment of the Lord's return without passing through death and join the resurrected dead in the presence of Christ is revealed for the first time through the Apostle Paul.[11] Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 80.

Generally, posttribulationists tend to ignore the problem of how a posttribulation rapture could be a comfort. They dogmatically deny that comfort is affected by the prospect of the great tribulation. Gundry, for instance, attempts to dispose of the problem in two paragraphs.[12] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 101-2. Such a feeble attempt to erase the problem is an obvious confession that he has no realistic solution to offer. The prospect of the rapture after the tribulation is small comfort to those facing martyrdom. It is not too much to say that this is a most difficult problem to posttribulationists; as a group they tend to evade it rather than face up to it.

If a delay in the resurrection of the dead in Christ were a concern to the Thessalonian believers, how much more would have been their concern if they faced the prospect of dying as martyrs and joining these dead in Christ? Further, if martyrdom were a probability, they should have rejoiced that the dead in Christ had escaped the rigors of the tribulation. According to Revelation 14:3, the voice from heaven declares those who die as "blessed" because they will escape the persecution of believers in the great tribulation. As Hiebert expresses it, "But if they had been taught that the church must go through the great tribulation the logical reaction for them would have been to rejoice that these loved ones had escaped that great period of suffering which they felt was about to occur." [13] D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 205.

Posttribulationists by and large do not solve their problems in 1 Thessalonians 4. The expectation of the Lord's return is uniformly pictured as an imminent event. Their prospect for imminent rapture was such that they feared a delay in resurrection for the dead in Christ. Posttribulationists have no adequate explanation for Paul's omission of any warning that the great tribulation was ahead and necessarily preceded the rapture; under the circumstances, such an omission would have been most misleading and contrasts sharply with the clear presentation of events leading up to the, second coming of Christ recorded

in Matthew 24.

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#### Summary Of Posttribulation Interpretation Of 1 Thessalonians 4

As a whole, the posttribulationists' interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4 does little to advance their argument. They have no reasonable explanation how a posttribulation rapture offers comfort to sorrowing Thessalonians. They have no satisfactory answer why Paul is silent on the impending great tribulation. There is no good explanation why the rapture is portrayed as an impending event. There is no reasonable connection between this passage and the Olivet Discourse. The rapture of living saints is a new revelation not connected with the second coming of Christ in previous revelations, as ever) posttribulationists like Ladd concede.

Obviously posttribulationism is at its weakest point in 1 Thessalonians 4, where the doctrine of the rapture has its most detailed revelation.

As the discourse relative to the future continues in 1 Thessalonians 5, however, posttribulationists have posed some problems for pretribulationists that warrant careful attention. These problems will be considered in the next article in this series.

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