

WHEN SHOULD WE EXPECT THE THIEF?

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A BIBLICAL ESTABLISHING OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE RAPTURE AND THE RETURN OF THE LORD, HIS COMING AS A THIEF IN THE NIGHT, AND OTHER RELATED ESCHATOLOGICAL MATTERS, AS SUGGESTED BY PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS.¹

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. 15 For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive [and] remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. {prevent: or, come before, or, anticipate, or, precede} 16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive [and] remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 18 Wherefore comfort one another with these words." (I Thessalonians 4:13-18).

*"But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. 2 For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as **a thief in the night**. 3 For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. 4 But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. 5 Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. 6 Therefore let us not sleep, as [do] others; but let us watch and be sober. 7 For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. 8 But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. 9 For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him." (I Thessalonians 5:1-10, author's emphases).*

Introduction:

All preaching and Bible teaching read and heard by this author, to the best of my recollection, as well as much gospel music, confuse the above descriptions of our Lord's returning. Often the distinction between the Rapture and the Return is obliterated so, that one is not certain when they speak of what.

A case in point is the declaration of Christ coming as a "Thief in the night." It is most often applied to the Rapture of the Church. This author contends that it is not so. Support for the thesis follows, with other related matters, with the correct view inherently incorporated in the refutation.

I. Consider the Context.

Chapter 4, verses 13-18, is the basic New Testament proof text for the "Rapture." The passage, then, is to the Church, and concerns only the Church.² The subject matter pertains to the "Day of Christ,"³ spoken of by the same Bible author, in Romans 2:16; I Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 1:6, 10, 12:14 and II Thessalonians 2:2. Only Paul uses the title.

Chapter 5 turns from the context of the Coming of Christ for His Church, to His Coming Again to Earth: That is, to the events of the Tribulation Period, preceding and including, His Return.

II. Consider the Terminology of Eschatology.

Bible students need to recognize the significance of titles, and learn to consistently interpret and express them.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew, alone introduces to us, and establishes the distinction between, the titles "Kingdom of God," and "Kingdom of Heaven."

The Kingdom of God is, according to I Chronicles 29:11, God's rule over all He created—and that is all there is! The title, "Kingdom of Heaven," is more definitive, referencing that time when the prayer of our Lord, recorded in Matthew 6:10, is answered. It is the fulfillment of the message proclaimed by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2), our Lord Jesus (Matthew 4:23), and His disciples (Matthew 10:7). It pertains to the purpose of Christ's first coming, and the fulfillment that will occur in the promised Millennial Kingdom.

Many doctrinal errors are dispensed through sermon and song, due to the failure to distinguish between, and maintain a separation between these events.

Similarly, it is so with the titles "Day of Christ," and "Day of the Lord."

The Day of the Lord encompasses the entire period from the beginning of the Tribulation Period, to the consummation of the Millennial Reign. The Return of the Lord Jesus to the earth is the heart of the definition. His Return both consummates the awful wrath from God upon the earth, and initiates the millennial era of peace.

Chapter 5 clearly concerns the Day of the Lord, according to verse 2. To interpret the context as referring to the Rapture of the Church, is contrary to the context, and the terminology.

Then there is the terminology profusely used, and regularly confused, in referring to our Lord's returning.

Some say that Christ's coming will be in two parts, or two phases: His coming for the church, and His return to earth, seven years later.

Others speak of His return as "His Return," or, "His Second Coming." Until they explain their meaning, however, one does not know if they are referring to the Rapture, or His coming to earth, or worse, if they even believe in both, or, if they are able to explain their meaning.

Consistency is an anchor only when one totally separates the Church Program from God's Program for Israel. To apply that principle is to understand that Christ's Return is when He comes the second time, in like-manner as He did the first time. His first coming was to Israel. It was to establish the Kingdom. His message initially only concerned the kingdom. The first time, He came to the earth: So shall He do the second time. In His Second Coming, He shall accomplish those purposes of His First Coming. This is His Return, His Second Coming—to the earth--nothing else can fit the title.

His coming for His Church, however, is entirely different. The Church program must abide separate from God's program for Israel. The Church's existence dates from the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit baptized 120 (approximately), believers into the Body of Christ (Acts 11:15, 16; I Corinthians 12:13). That Body was created in that holy act.⁴ The Church program began at Pentecost, and will end at the Rapture of the Church. It is strictly separate from God's program for Israel, which latter program is presently in temporary suspension. When the Church program is completed, God will resume

His plan for Israel.

Consequently, one may not properly speak of the Rapture as being Christ's Return. To "return," one has to have a first coming. Christ has never before come to, or for, the church." He cannot come again for it.

The Rapture will not be His Return, or His Second Coming. It rather will be...The Rapture. He is simply coming to receive His Church, His Bride, unto Himself.

When one speaks of Christ's Return, or His Second Coming, it should concern His coming to earth. When one references the Rapture, one should call it such—The Rapture-- and not confuse the hearer's understanding in mixing titles.

Finally, the same issue is present with the confusing interchanging of the titles, "Age of Grace," and, "The Church Age." They are neither synonymous, nor concurrent.

The Age of Grace starts with the end of the Dispensation of Law, at Calvary. It ends with the beginning of the Age of Peace, the Millennial Kingdom.

The Church Age (that is a misnomer—it is more correct to call it "The Church Program") extends from Pentecost (53 days after the cross) to the Rapture (seven years before the Return of Christ). It lies within the parameters of the Age of Grace, and is by definition distinct from it.

The Church Age ends with the Coming of our Lord for His Church. The Age of Grace ends with the Return of our Lord to the earth.

Such simplicity as the proper understanding and use of terminology would clear up the muddled minds of teachers and students alike, in interpreting and expressing eschatological matters.

III. Consider the Pronouns Used.

In Chapter 5, Paul speaks of "You," in verses 1, 2. However, in Verse 3, he changes to "They." Thus, he distinguishes between believers looking for the glorious event spoken of in Chapter Four, and the unsaved, who are going to be surprised by His angry outpouring of wrath.

Chapter 4 instructs concerning the blessings on believers, in the Day of Christ. Chapter 5 warns of coming judgment upon unbelievers, in the Day of the Lord. It is The Day of the Lord, which will come as a Thief in the Night, not the Day of Christ.

Paul, then, does not need to write to believers concerning "times and seasons" (5:1), for the Rapture is imminent—not impending, but imminent—it may occur at any moment. Times and seasons, on the other hand, refer to the return of our Lord, when signs must necessarily be fulfilled prior to the event. The Rapture is imminent: the Return of Christ is not!

Times and seasons, indicating the nearness of His Return, can certainly excite believers concerning the Rapture. When one knows that Thanksgiving Day precedes Christmas, but (for sake of illustration), doesn't know the date thereof, and begins to see indications (signs) in the shopping malls that Christmas is nearing—Thanksgiving Day must really be near. As we see the signs of the season of His Return occurring—though we know not the date--the Rapture comes first! But "Times and Seasons" refer, by interpretation, only to His Return.

IV. Consider a Thief.

A Thief, it is said, comes unseen by the majority of people, whereas the Lord coming to earth will be open to the eyes of the entire world (Matthew 24:27): It must, therefore, speak of the Rapture.

However, the title "Thief in the Night," is not referring directly to the personal coming of the Lord, but, to the "Day of the Lord." As already stated, the "Day of the Lord," initiates seven years prior to the Lord's personal return. It is clear that the "Day of the Lord," is that which will come as a Thief in the Night. It will bring great destruction upon this world, at the hands of both Satan's Man, and a wrathful God.

Peter, in his Second Epistle, confirms this view:

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (II Peter 3:10).

It is the Day of the Lord that so comes. Further, identification of the era in reference is clear. It is the time, in which ("ἐν ἡ") great destruction will occur. No such devastation will occur at the time of the rapture. However, at the end of the Millennial Kingdom, the context clearly shows, supplemented by Isaiah 24, and Revelation 21:1, such as is described shall occur. It is interesting that Paul refers to the segment of the Day of the Lord which occurs at the Return of Christ. But Peter zeroes in on that time frame involving those things which shall transpire at the end of the Millennial Kingdom, a thousand years later. So the phrase "Thief in the night," concerns the event, rather than the work of the thief himself, and clearly pertains to the Return of Christ, not the Rapture of the Church.

In Matthew 24:43, Christ's personal coming is likened unto a thief. But both Paul and Peter emphasize more the event of the Day of the Lord, and the resulting wrath, rather than the coming of the Person of Christ—in these specific contexts. However, in all three passages, whether or not the reader will agree with this view, one must see that it is not the Rapture, but the Return to which the idea of a "Thief" is related.

The Rapture shall occur, and the world will be none the wiser. Through great delusion, they will not understand that wrath is about to pour upon them. Rather, they shall doubtless consider that, at last, those who trouble them and hinder their godless program, founded and grounded in Satan's Big Lie,⁵ are finally out of their way. The heroic leader they have long desired will at last be revealed, and peace—temporary and false—but nonetheless, peace, will be achieved (Verse 3a). Just when they think utopia is in place, wrath will begin. It, characterized as travail (Verse 3b, as with a woman in childbirth), will begin slowly, but increases to its fullness.

This is for "them," not "us. Believers are not appointed to (this) wrath (Verse 9), as they are.

In reality, the reference concerns neither the person, nature nor work of a thief. It concerns, in context, only the "coming" of a thief. The Day of the Lord shall come as a thief. That is, it shall come suddenly, silently, with no anticipation, and with great adverse consequence.⁶

The Rapture, in contrast, will come suddenly for sure, but expected, secretly, but with glorious anticipation, welcome, and great blessings. Neither does a thief come to steal that which is already His. If the reference were to the Rapture, that is what He would be doing.

V. Consider Prophetic Passages.

What our Lord spoke on earth, He spoke to the Jews alone, with but few exceptions. Therefore, His words concerning His return, normally concern only literally that—His coming back to earth. To interpret His teachings as prophecies of the Rapture, generates much confusion.

Paul did say, in Chapter 4 that His doctrine of the Rapture rests upon the Word of the Lord (Verse 15). A comparison of this statement with I Corinthians 7 is enlightening as to his meaning here.

In The Corinthian passage, he draws a distinction between his doctrine based upon words spoken by our Lord in His earthly ministry (Verse 10), and those positions based upon God's inspired Word, revealed to, and delivered through, him (Verses 6, 25, 40).

Shall one conclude, then, that in I Thessalonians 4:15, Paul has earthly ministry words of our Lord, upon which to base this doctrine of the Rapture? In a cursory reading it would seem so, but not conclusively.

First, the Author's stated position above is that Christ normally spoke not of the Rapture, but of His Return. However, there are likely two exceptions. They are, John 14:1-6, and John 11:25, 26.⁷ Biblical foundation is found In I Corinthians 15:51, where Paul clearly tells us that the Rapture was (up to that time), a mystery. The Rapture is absent in verses 23, 24, where "At His coming," must be viewed as the Return of Christ. However, in Verse 51, He fills in the void with the revelation of the Mystery.

Further, in Chapter 4, the phrase "The word of the Lord," is without definite articles, in the Greek text. The Greek word for "Word," is not "ρημα," as "a specific word," but rather, "λογος," as "message." Paul is not referring to our Lord's teaching the doctrine clearly, in the record of the Gospels, but to couched references thereto, in the previously cited passages. As a mystery, our Lord could not speak clearly of a rapture, as it was not then time for the mystery to be revealed. The mystery, however, was revealed to Paul. And while the other Apostles may not have been so clear in the matter (II Peter 3:16), Paul understood it, and recognized in the words of our Lord, from John's Gospel, wonderful allusions to the Rapture.

The point is that when our Lord spoke prophetically of His Return, He spoke of His coming back to earth. Therefore, Matthew 24, 25 speak not of the Rapture, as is also true in all the synoptic records. Only in the two places cited in John does He possibly, and likely, speak of the Rapture.

One must distinguish between prophecies of His Return, and of the Rapture.

VI. Consider One More Matter of Clarification.

When Noah was called to enter the Ark (Genesis 7:1ff), it is unanimously emphasized, and rightly so, how God said, "Come...into..." rather than "Go...into..." The point is that God was inside the Ark commanding Noah to enter: That, if He had been outside, He would have said, "Go... into..."

It will serve one well to use that same Bible logic in Paul's declaration of the Rapture. For all declare, in the recollection of this author, that when our Lord comes for the Church, He will bring the saints with Him (4:14, "...Them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him").

Bible logic would demand the position stated. The deceased saints are in Heaven. They must return to earth in order to unite with their respective resurrected bodies. The bodies will be changed in the resurrection, from corruption to incorruption (I Corinthians 15:52). It is illogical to think such bodies will rise all the way up to Heaven, and there receive the spirit (i.e. the saint who is to inhabit that body for all eternity).

However, as logical as that may be, the verse in question (4:14) does not say so! Paul does not say that Jesus will bring them. He says that God will bring them. Using the same principles we cited in the account of Noah, for God to bring them, He would have to be on earth. Being in Heaven, God then would have to "send" them with Jesus, for the verse to mean what is commonly preached and taught. Since Paul says "Bring," and not "Send," there must be a different message inherent in the statement. It is, and it is this:

The context is that the Thessalonians were afraid, since Jesus had not come prior to some individuals in the church congregation dying, that those dead saints would miss the Rapture. Paul then clarifies by assuring them that just as God brought Jesus up out of the grave, so He (God, the Father) would bring their deceased saved ones out of their graves with Him. In light of our Lord not only rising from the grave, but all the way up to Heaven, in Paul's mind may even have been the idea of God bringing them all the way up to where He brought Jesus. Further support for this latter concept will come later.

Without intending to suggest any need of another translation, because the verse is so misunderstood, this rendering may help establish the accurate interpretation:

"For since we are believing that Jesus died and stood up out of the grave, even so also (the) God, the ones having fallen asleep through (the) Jesus, will lead away together with Him."

The succeeding verses explain in more detail how the procession will occur. Our Lord will come back to where He blazed the path (Acts 1:12, Christ ascended from a mountain top), call the dead saints to life, transform the living ones, and God will lead them away into His own presence, thus bringing them to where Jesus is (i.e. "is" in the sense of the time frame in which Paul is writing).

In further support of this view is the passage in I Thessalonians 2:19. If the Rapture is going to occur as rapidly as is most often preached—"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye..." (I Corinthians 15:52a),⁸ --there will not be much time to reflect on who is there and what part we might have had in bringing them to Christ. Paul's use of the strong phrase, "In the presence" ("εμπροσθεν") might rather suggest that in his mind was: The presence of us all, at the completion of the rapture, in Heaven.⁹

Since we find that same Word "εμπροσθεν" also used in 3:13, as it speaks of the coming of the Lord, with all His saints, into the "personal presence" of God, the weight of the argument is increased. All three verses: 2:19, 3:13, and 4:14, as well as the initial, theme establishing, declaration of 1:10, speak in unison of our Lord Jesus coming into the presence of the Father, with raised and raptured saints!

It is not that Jesus is going to bring the saints back to rejoin their resurrected bodies, true as that may be. The lesson is that God will not leave those same saints in the grave, but that as He brought forth the Lord Jesus, so shall He do for them. As He brought Christ to Heaven, into His own presence, so shall He do for them.

Conclusion:

Many songs would have to be re-written, and many sermons revised, if the above principles were recognized, accepted, and applied.

Likewise, much pulpit and classroom ministry would take on new clarity and effectiveness, upon a clear understanding and application of these principles.

¹ This endeavor is not a research paper, but a position paper. The author has not detailed and referenced what others have said. The sole purpose is to state his established position, to this point in time, on these matters. The reader may then profit there-from in whatever way possible.

² The author is a dispensationalist, and seeks to make a clear distinction between that which is spoken to the Jew, the Gentile, and to the Church. This distinction is based on the pattern established in I Corinthians 10:32. Failure to recognize, and/or understand this principle of interpretation will naturally lead to confusion in the student's theology.

³ The translation, "Day of Christ," is accurate, according to the underlying Greek Text—contrary to footnotes found in many study Bibles. Viewing it as a reference to the Rapture is the only way the passage can be properly interpreted.

⁴ It is not within the author's purposes to prove and substantiate this doctrinal position, herein. This is his established position, herein declared, and offered as the foundation of the argued thesis. These doctrines are discussed in other studies available on his website. Suffice it to say here, the Church was not born on that Day, but was created. Neither did it exist prior to that Day.

⁵ Read the author's sermon concerning [Satan's Big Lie](#), on his website.

⁶ Since there obviously is a thief involved, what identity does he have? Initially, it is Satan's Man, the Antichrist, who will come upon this world with great deception, and wrath. The world would not welcome him if they knew his true purpose and design. However, the main event of the Day of the Lord, as previously stated, is the coming of the Lord Jesus. He will be without welcome, and will be opposed, but unsuccessfully. He will bring true peace, after the time of great wrath (Matthew 24:43).

⁷ Again, while it is not the author's purpose to exegete these passages, and show them to be Rapture related, it is only in such a view that, particularly, John 11:25, 26, can be rightly interpreted. The view there is that Christ speaks of those who die, and those who are still alive at the Rapture, who shall never die.

⁸ The author suggests that one consider if it is only the "change" that will occur so quickly, that the phrase does not necessarily pertain to the catching away itself.

⁹ The phrase "at His coming" is one Greek word, "παρουσια" which speaks of His personal presence. Since it would appear that the issuance of rewards might be behind, at that time, it could even be interpreted to refer to the Return of Christ. Mitigating against that is that every other reference in the first four chapters, is to the Rapture. This one would be the exception. That is not likely, according to sound hermeneutical principles.