

The Lord will come with the storm

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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When I committed my life to Christ as a teenager, I discovered the wonders of Christian books. I used to frequent Christian bookshops the way teenagers these days hang out at the mall. I still occasionally visit Christian bookshops, but not nearly as often as I did all those years ago. One reason is that the stock in the shops is now almost exactly in reverse proportion to what was stocked all those years ago. Then, there were ample stocks of theology books, commentaries on the Bible, discussions of social issues, and other interesting and stimulating books, and if you looked really hard, you might find on a small shelf in a back corner a small selection of Christian novels. If you visit a Christian bookshop these days, it is possible to find a good book of theology, or a commentary, or an insightful discussion of contemporary social issues, if you look fairly hard, but these are usually in a small section at the back of the shop. But the front of the shop is dominated by Christian fiction, self-help books, and the latest new programme to make church more exciting, more effective, more appealing to various groups in society. As a result, Christian fiction and “how-to” books sell in large quantities, while more serious works are very slow moving, and it is getting harder and harder to find these in local bookshops because of the low profit from stocking them. The consequence is that many people now learn what theology they know from Christian fiction.

A prominent example of this is the popularity of the “Left Behind” series written by Tim La Haye. Possibly there are some of you here who have read one or more of the volumes in this series. The basis of this series is what is called the doctrine of the “Rapture,” the belief that at some point in the near future, Jesus will return to rescue the true believers from a deteriorating world, and take them to safety in heaven. Meanwhile, the Antichrist will take over the government of the world, and begin a persecution against those who become believers in Jesus after the sudden mysterious disappearance of hundreds of thousands of people. These new believers include Jews who for the first time begin to accept the gospel in large numbers. The series then covers what these believers get up to and what other remarkable events take place

after Jesus has snatched his church to safety in heaven, and how the evil Antichrist eventually is defeated and peace restored under the reign of Christ from Jerusalem.

This scenario is based on the passage we read from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. However, it is my view that the way this passage is interpreted in these novels, and in the theological perspective on which they are based, comes from a serious misunderstanding of this passage. There is, in my view, no "Rapture" in which believers are rescued from the earth to avoid the persecution of the Antichrist. I have to admit, though, that when I first became a Christian, I accepted this view, simply because that was what I was taught by the leaders in the churches I attended at the time, and nobody I met ever questioned it. But after some years my doubts about this doctrine began to grow. There are a number of factors which contributed to this.

Firstly, it seemed to be completely unlike anything else I read in the Scriptures about God's activity in saving his people. It simply jarred with what seemed to be the general pattern of God's saving activity elsewhere in the Scriptures. This was a conviction that was fairly intuitive to begin with, but eventually was more firmly grounded in as my understanding of Scripture grew more mature.

Secondly, I read a number of books about the experience of Russian Christians under the Communist regime, and how difficult it was for them to live under a repressive and persecuting government, with many thousands punished with imprisonment, removal of their children, firing from their jobs, exile to Siberia and for many ultimately death. On the one hand, I was reading debates between American Christians as to whether the Rapture occurred before, during or after the tribulation, that is, the period of trial which was to come upon believers around the world. Many of these people were convinced that God would never allow Christians to suffer persecution under an atheistic anti-Christ, and that the Rapture would occur before any of these events began. On the other hand, I was reading about the terrible experiences of Russian Christians who seemed to be going through exactly what the American Christians were so certain that God would never allow them to suffer. I eventually had to ask myself, if we will avoid the tribulation and escape persecution, what is God doing about Christians in Russia? It seemed to me that the American approach owed more to the seduction of affluence and self-gratification and a narrow

conviction that God was specially blessing America, than to any serious consideration of what the Scriptures taught. I have to admit I learned more about serious discipleship from reading about the experiences of Russian Christians than I ever learned from Americans who dismissed the idea that American Christians would ever be persecuted by an atheistic government.

Thirdly, I discovered some obscure books which discussed the historical origins of this doctrine, and was surprised to discover that it originated not from a considered study of Scripture and from a long tradition of thought within the church, but from a prophetic utterance made by a Christian girl in a remote part of Scotland in 1830, communicated to one of the early leaders in the Brethren movement, who then developed it into the doctrine we encounter today in books like the “Left Behind” series. There is no indication that the doctrine of the “Rapture” as it is now understood was held by anyone prior to this time.

These factors eventually convinced me that all was not well with this approach to reading this passage from Paul. But if this does not describe the Rapture, what on earth is it talking about? After all, the main ingredients of the doctrine appear to be there: the Lord will appear on clouds in the air; the dead will be raised and the living will be caught up into the air with them, to meet the Lord, and thus we shall ever be with the Lord. Does that not sound like the Rapture to you? The other components are then taken from other doctrines, namely that during the time of Tribulation the believers are safe in heaven, then after this period, they will return to the earth with Jesus to carry out war with the antichrist and defeat him and his armies.

On the surface, that seems to be true. But let’s look at this passage a little more closely.

The occasion which prompted Paul to write this section of his letter was to correct the misunderstanding of some of the Thessalonian believers about the fate of those who had already died. It is helpful to remember that this is the first of Paul’s letters, and so he is teaching those who had not had the benefit, as we do, of reading his other letters. They seem to have held the view that the full establishment of the Kingdom of God would come about when Jesus returned, and that the believers would enter into this

kingdom with Jesus. But what about those who had died already? Were they to miss out? And what about them as well – if they died before Jesus returned, would they also miss out on the Kingdom of God? Paul stresses that he does not want them to be ignorant – to be unaware of the way in which the full salvation of God was to be experienced by everyone, and so the first thing he exhorts them, is not to grieve like others, those who have no hope in God.

Note that Paul does not say, “Do not grieve,” for even Jesus was grieved at the death of his friend Lazarus. We experience grief and suffering at the death of those we love, which is perfectly natural and understandable. After all, in spite of all that God has done for us in Jesus, and all that he has promised to do for us in the future, we still have to deal with the reality of death. Death is not natural, death is not good, death is to be resisted, not because life is in itself the supreme good, but because death is an enemy, a foe, something that has been unleashed on us as a result of sin. It has been overcome through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who has defeated death by submitting to it and then being raised again to life, never again to die, thus shattering all power of death over him. This is also our inheritance in Christ: as he has been raised, so we too will be raised to eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

Death, then, is not something we should welcome or aspire for, in the hope of entering a better life beyond death. Life is good, and is God’s great blessing to us. Death is bad, and the result of the punishment we have brought upon ourselves because of sin. The Old Testament indicates that one of the greatest curses that could be experienced by human beings is to die young, while a long life was a sign of blessing from God. “Those whom the gods love die young” is not a Christian sentiment but a thoroughly anti-Christian, pagan view that we should not give any place to in our thinking. So Paul stresses that he does not want them “to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” This is not a rejection of grieving, but to explain the way in which they should grieve. Not like those who have no hope, in other words, like those who know nothing of Jesus and his victory over death and the grave, but to grieve in a Christian way, fully recognising that Jesus has won the victory over death and the grave, but also expressing a perfectly normal human emotion of loss and pain when someone we love dies. The pagans grieved for the dead, because they had lost all there was to experience, and had entered into a shadow world of existence as a ghost or shade –

hardly something we could look forward to or accept easily for those we love. Christians, on the other hand, grieve for those left behind, who are bereft of the company and love of their family and friends who have died, and who miss them and long to have them with them again; while they in their turn have lost the company and love of those who are still alive, as well as all the blessings and goodness of life in God's good creation. This is a totally different approach and one which we should be careful to explain. Grief is natural because death is unnatural.

Paul stresses that what happens to the believers is patterned on what happened to Jesus. Just as he died, and rose again, so those who believe in him who die will also rise again. Not only that, when Jesus returns, he will bring with him those who have died in faith. What does this refer to? When Jesus returns, he will be accompanied by those who are his followers, both those who have died and those who are still alive at his coming. And not only that, we who are alive at that time do not have the advantage over those who have already died. In fact, they get in first! The Lord, Paul tells us, will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God, and then, Paul tells us, the dead in Christ will rise first. Then those who are still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. So far so good: this all sounds perfectly compatible with the doctrine of the Rapture as taught in so many books of fiction and non-fiction. But is that what it is talking about? I believe not. Let me explain the reasons why.

Firstly, this passage in Paul's letters does not give any explanation as to what happens next – we need to look elsewhere for that. All he says is that “So we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” What is the reason for encouragement? That those who have already died will not miss out, and if we happen to die before the Lord returns, we will also not miss out. The dead will be raised first, and then those who are alive will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. And after that, we will be with the Lord forever.

But what about the tribulation? What about the antichrist? What about the mark of the beast, the false prophet, and all the other terrible things which are supposed to happen next? This will have to wait for another day to discuss, but let me just say here that it is not necessary or even desirable to understand these things the way they are

presented in the various fiction books I have mentioned. And let me also say, that I firmly believe that these things are not prophecies of events to come at some point in the future, but realities which affect us here and now, and which need to be discerned and resisted, because we encounter them in our daily lives in ways which we seem unable to recognise, and as a result, we are immersed in a spiritual warfare that we seem to be oblivious to.

Let us return to the passage from Thessalonians. What is the difference between what I am saying and what is expressed in the “Left Behind” series and similar books? Simply this, that the reason that the dead and the living are caught up to the Lord in the air is to “meet” him, as Paul says. This is significant, and is I believe the key to the passage. Who is meeting who? We, both the living and the dead who have been raised, go out to meet Jesus. He is not coming from heaven to meet us. The doctrine of the Rapture assumes that Jesus is coming to rescue us from the world collapsing into tribulation under the Antichrist. Jesus comes from heaven to meet us, and takes us back with him to heaven to be with him during the time of trouble. But if that is the case, what on earth are the dead raised for? They are under no risk of danger from the Antichrist! Those who need to be rescued are those who are alive and at risk of being put to death! So this is the first clue that something else is going on here: those who go out to meet Jesus are up to something else – they are not queuing up to be rescued – the dead first, then the living! Then it says at the beginning of the passage, that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him, that is, the believers who have died. So it seems to me that Jesus is off somewhere, and those who believe are being given the opportunity to join him on his journey.

And this is what we discover if we look more carefully at the word “meet.” The Greek word used here is used only three times in the New Testament, so let us look at the other two occasions and see what this teaches us. The first is in the other passage we read this morning from Matthew 25, when the cry rings out, “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” So the virgins who had their lamps prepared went out to meet the bridegroom. They had been waiting at the venue where the wedding was to take place, and their task was to welcome the bridegroom to the celebration. They went out in the darkness with their lamps to light the way for him to the venue for the celebration, and went in with him and shut the door. That is, the virgins waited at the

destination, went out to meet somebody heading for that destination, and accompanied him on the last stages of his journey there.

The other passage is in Acts 28. Paul had reached the end of his journey to Rome, after imprisonment, trials, shipwrecks, and many other adventures. Some of the believers in Rome had heard that Paul was coming, so they went out to meet him, and accompanied him on the last stage of his journey into that city.

Returning then to Thessalonians, what happens if we take this approach in understanding what Paul is saying? Simply, that Jesus has set out from heaven on a journey, and before he reaches his destination, the dead are raised, and the living are caught up with them, to meet him in the air. Then what? I believe that they then accompany him on the last stages of his journey towards his destination, namely, the earth, where he is about to take full control of his kingdom. The last thing I think we can expect is that Jesus will turn around and head back where he came from accompanied by those who set out to meet him. He is not coming to meet us, to accompany us on our journey on to heaven. Rather, we have set out to meet him, to accompany him on the last stage of his journey towards the earth. And that, I think, is a fairly conclusive argument from within this passage itself, against seeing it as a doctrine of the Rapture.

But surely this is all a rather arcane debate that has little relevance for us here and now, and affects only what may or may not happen in the near or remote future? Why should we bother with all this anyway? What difference does it make if we read and believe the kinds of books that operate on this premise? On the contrary, I believe it is of profound significance, not that we should be focused on the details of what may or may not happen when the Lord returns, although these are important. Rather, it indicates our basic attitudes to some far more fundamental issues, which have led to the understanding of this passage as teaching a doctrine of the “Rapture.” That is, why would anyone even come up with this doctrine in the first place? Such views do not just spring into being, without cause or context. Christian thought develops as a result of a number of complex interacting factors, not least of which are personal desires and aspirations; the contemporary political and social climate; and the influence of ideas from other movements. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for we live and work in a

complex world with many influences upon us. But it does mean that we need to exercise a little caution when examining ideas which are being taught, to see whether they really do faithfully teach doctrines which are built from the whole of the story of Scripture, or whether they are supported solely from one or two isolated passages that perhaps tell a different story if placed in a wider context. This passage from 1 Thessalonians is, I believe, a prime example of the need for caution. So let's look a bit further at the wider Biblical context into which we can place this passage and get some deeper understanding of it.

Firstly, God has no intention of rescuing us from a world gone bad, recovering what he can from a deteriorating situation so that at least something survives when the world is eventually destroyed by fire. Rather, God has every intention of rescuing his world, and us with it, not by taking us out of the sinful world, but by taking the sin out of us and putting to an end our abuse of the world he has made. This does not mean that we will not suffer any persecution or trials for our faith, but it does mean that if such trials and tribulations do come, God in his mercy will care for us and give us the strength to endure, just as he gave strength and grace to so many Russian believers who suffered under the Communist regime.

Secondly, the army that Jesus commands in his battle with the powers of evil in the world is not made up of angels and other mysterious beings, but of those human beings who believe. We are God's army, a regiment of soldiers doing battle against evil wherever it is found. If we are to see any headway made in the struggle for faith and righteousness in our society, then it is up to us to work to see that come about, through firstly living obediently and faithfully ourselves, being true to the Scriptures and informed and convinced of the teaching we find there, and expressing that in the life of the community of believers as we go about our business in everyday life. It is God who is at work in and through us in the power of the Holy Spirit who will achieve these things, but without our action nothing will ever come of that. One acquaintance of mine many years ago made some critical remarks about the charismatic movement with regard to the way it was responding to what were no doubt genuine works of God in their midst. He compared the charismatic churches to steam engines, and said that when you have built up a full head of steam, that is, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, you have two options: you can sit in the station

blowing the whistle to your heart's content and make a lot of noise, or you can use that power to actually go somewhere. Unfortunately the church has too often used its head of steam to make noise rather than action. Until we can find ways to turn this power into activity for good, then those outside the church will continue to be justified in saying that Christians don't ever do anything, they just talk about it.

Thirdly, we need to recognise that there are many Christians around the world even today who suffer terribly for their faith. Even though nearly all the various Communist governments have fallen, there are still countries which persecute Christians, and not simply through tolerating prejudice or violence against them, but officially promoting and sponsoring persecution. China of course is still one country where Christians are not treated fairly, although the situation seems to have improved considerably in recent years. But think of other places like Burma, where Buddhist government engages in officially sponsored persecution of Christians. Indonesia and Malaysia are other places where being a Christian is risky. We could also mention of course the many officially Islamic countries (not counting Indonesia, which while the largest Muslim country is not officially Islamic), where conversion to Christianity can result in a death sentence, either carried out officially or where unofficial murder of converts is sanctioned. Some years ago I was in a worship service where a Christian from Malaysia spoke about the suffering of some of his congregation at the hands of Muslims, including false imprisonment and beatings. Those at the service prayed for the blessing of God on these believers. It was then suggested that we sing an appropriate hymn to express our support and solidarity with members of the church who were undergoing persecution. However, after much frantic searching through the hymnbooks available by a number of people, we were unable to come up with a suitable hymn for this occasion. This I think indicates the poverty of our spiritual lives when we have failed to make provision for joining in the suffering of other believers even if only through expressing this in a hymn.

Many years ago, round about the time I was undergoing a rethink of my views as described earlier, I took part in a house group where the Bible passage being studied was 2 Timothy 3. All was going well until we came to verse 12, which caused considerable consternation. This reads: "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Many of those present felt they had never suffered

any persecution for their faith, and maybe this then indicated that something was lacking. The pastor, however, resorted to downplaying their fears and expressed the view that persecution these days may well mean merely the sniggers of non-Christians if we mention we attend church, or jokes about church-goers in the media, or ridicule of Christian beliefs. While I do not expect that all Christians everywhere need expect full-blown persecution the whole time, I found it rather distasteful that slight social disapproval counted as “persecution” while Christians in Russia were being sent into exile in Siberia! We do ourselves a disservice by such interpretative antics, and maybe it would have been better to stress that while we enjoy peace and quiet for the sake of the Gospel this is not guaranteed and we could experience harsh treatment if the mood of society or government changes. Nor should we see it as persecution if we engage in inappropriate and confrontational stunts which anger and alienate others who then respond with fierce and critical comments, such as we have seen earlier this year. Persecution because of godliness is one thing; criticism and abuse because of stupid and insensitive public posturings is another and the two should never be confused. And maybe it is possible that if we actually did live godly lives in the way that the New Testament describes that persecution would in fact occur!

So then, I think we can discount as misguided and misleading the view that God will send Jesus to rescue a favoured few from the persecution of the Antichrist, to enable them to escape from a world gone bad, and to keep them safe and sound while the rest of the world disintegrates into chaos. Since this is then not the focus of this passage, what is it about and what can it teach us in our situation today?

Let’s look firstly at one of the aspects of this passage which I think is always overlooked, except in very few writers. That is, that the resurrected dead and the living believers are “caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” So it is something which takes place up above the earth – believers from all times and places are gathered together where the Lord is on his way from heaven to earth, and meet him in the air. But what about the clouds? What have clouds got to do with it? This is in fact not merely an incidental passing comment. Paul doesn’t do that: he has clear and specific things to say with not a lot of time or space in which to say them, and he doesn’t waste time on unimportant matters. I think the other major

component to understanding this passage is to see what we can learn about why Paul mentioned the clouds.

You will recall that the church in Thessalonica was one which was founded by Paul on one of his missionary journeys. In Acts 17 we read that he preached in the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath for three weeks demonstrating from the Scriptures, that is, the Old Testament, which were the only Scriptures in existence at the time, that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God. As a result a number of the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, that is, those sympathetic to and interested in the Jewish religion, were converted to follow Christ. They were therefore familiar with the themes and images of the Old Testament, so therefore would have caught the allusion that Paul was making. There was no need for him to spell this out in detail as they would have understood what he meant, while we who are less familiar with the Old Testament imagery don't always get these allusions.

So then, what are these allusions? Simply this: that the correlation of the Lord coming and clouds, recalled very strong images from many places in the Old Testament. In fact it could be said that the Lord very rarely shows up in the Old Testament without clouds. And for the Lord to be coming to the earth, as I have claimed that this passage from Paul means, rather than simply collecting the believers in the air to take them back to heaven, in association with mention of clouds, recalls precisely these images.

And let's think for a moment about the clouds: they are not big white fluffy summer clouds in a blue sky, or salmon-pink or rosy clouds in a violet sky in the evening. No, when the Old Testament talks about the Lord coming with clouds, the image is of a violent storm, thunder and lightning, big, black, turbulent clouds swirling across the sky. Think of what we have seen recently of Hurricane Katrina and you will get the sense of what the Old Testament is talking about. The Lord coming with clouds is not a summer excursion, it is the visitation of judgement and wrath on those who are in rebellion against his righteous and just rule. In Daniel 7: 13 we read,

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power;

all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

This passage clearly speaks of Jesus and his crowning as king of all creation, with all authority in heaven and on earth being given to him, as Matthew 28 tells us. In Psalm 18 we read

He parted the heavens and came down, dark clouds were under his feet.
He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering, his canopy round him the dark rain clouds of the sky.
Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced,
With hailstones and bolts of lightning.
The Lord thundered from the heaven, the voice of the Most High resounded.

Psalm 97:

Clouds and thick darkness surround him, righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side,
His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth.

In Jeremiah 4:

Look, he advances like the clouds, his chariots like a whirlwind, his horses are swifter than eagles. Woe to us! We are ruined!

In Joel 2:

Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming,
It is close at hand, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.

In Zephaniah 1:

The great day of the Lord is near – near and coming quickly.

Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior will be there.

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of anguish and distress,

A day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom.

A day of clouds and blackness.

Turning then to the New Testament, we can see Jesus drawing on these same themes, including the passage from Daniel 7, which actually contributed to his condemnation by the Sanhedrin. In Matthew 26 we read:

The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied, “But I say to all of you, in the future you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the High Priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses?”

Is it not striking that while Jesus was under suspicion, it is only when he said that the Son of Man would come on the clouds of heaven that the High Priest condemned him? The correlation of the Lord coming with clouds obviously meant something very significant to the Jews, and for Jesus to refer this to himself was seen as sufficient for them to condemn him. But it is also clear from the passages from the Old Testament that the clouds were clouds of storms and not the white clouds of a blue sky on a summer’s day – for the Lord to be coming with clouds indicated only the visitation of his judgement on the earth.

This then is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of Jesus coming with clouds: not to indicate simply that we will meet Jesus up in the air somewhere, among the clouds, high up out of sight, but that when Jesus comes to judge the earth with his armies of

warriors, were will we be? Raised up to the sky to meet Jesus and to join that army of judgement. Therefore, Paul says, “encourage one another with these words.”

The day is coming when Jesus will return to bring judgement on those who rebel against him and refuse the offer of forgiveness and redemption in this gospel of God’s bounteous grace. Those who have died will be raised again to join in the triumph of the kingdom of God over all evil: they will not miss out! Those who are still alive will also be joining their king in his triumphant victory over the powers of evil and all who resist his rule. The world will be taken back as his righteous domain and Jesus will rule on the earth. Let us then look up in hope and long for the day of his coming. Amen.