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The Rapture In The Thessalonian Epistles

What I want to do in wrapping up the Thessalonian epistles today is leave you with the greatest contribution these two letters make to the biblical canon; that is the doctrine of the Rapture. The doctrine of the Rapture is commonly taught in this congregation and I have personally read at least a couple of thousand pages about this doctrine. Usually the discussion is about the timing of the rapture. But today, rather than teaching the timing of the rapture I want to focus on what difference it should it make in daily life. It does very little good to know when the Rapture will occur if you don't know what kind of experimental difference it makes in life. But before we do this we need the doctrine before us so let's state it: *the rapture is the un-sigaled, spatial removal of one generation of living believers from earth before the day of the Lord wrath comes upon the world designed to purify the Church.* That is the biblical doctrine and that is the position I lay before us. Now the question is what difference should this make in life, what should the experimental results look like when the doctrine of the rapture is correctly understood.

Christians can claim to theoretically understand of the doctrine but do they experimentally understand the doctrine. That is, does it have any practical effect? And it may be highly doubted whether they truly understand the doctrine if they have no experimental application of it in daily life. What good is mere theory when it is not translated into practice? Probably too often we merely discuss the timing of the doctrine devoid of much discussion regarding its practical meaning. Probably many are aware that it is supposed to produce a pure life that somehow it relates to godly living but so far as specifics are concerned there is little awareness.

So today I want to draw out from both Thessalonian epistles the experimental results that Paul himself highlights. But before we look at them there is a problem I've mentioned before and I'm going to mention it again: even Christians who claim the Rapture is imminent, that it can come at-any-moment, rarely live as if it is. The litmus test for this is to compare our lives to the lives of the apostles who first taught this doctrine. What do their lives look like? Not that we're trying to mimic in every detail their lives but that they laid themselves down as a model and said, come follow me, cannot be questioned. So what did their lives look like?

Let's use the example of Paul. Paul ministered night and day; once on an overnight stay in Troas he preached all night long and that was probably a common practice when he was in a hurry to get someplace. At Thessalonica he taught night and day, at Ephesus he preached six days a week, five hours a day for 2 ½ years, when travelling from city to city he would take his disciples and train them along the Roman roads. It seems the man never stopped. He describes his life as a race that God had given him to run and he ran and he ran and he ran; when he faced obstacles he overcame them and when he neared the end he was nearly out of breath but he persevered and finished the race. Not in his own strength, but in God's.

Contrast that with what a friend told me a month ago. He called his pastor wanting an appointment to talk about some life issues. Guess what his pastor said; I'm too busy building a retaining wall at home and I can't meet with you for the next month.

Both Paul and this pastor profess loudly and clearly the doctrine of the Rapture laid before us. What then is the difference between Paul and this pastor? The difference is that only Paul understood the experimental result of the Rapture. Only Paul understood its motivating effects, only Paul understood the urgency it demanded in the propagation of the gospel message, only Paul understood the implications for intensity of training in Bible doctrine. It seems then that only Paul understood what a true expectation of an any-moment return of Christ truly meant. It meant, in a capsule, the end of history has already arrived with the resurrection of Christ and therefore there is no more time, each moment in your life is your last and when you look at the world around you there are men's lives at stake, their eternal destiny is one of eternal wrath lest they believe on the Son and the

eternal reward status of those who have believed rests on what they have done today, not on what they may do tomorrow. Sadly we have lost this sense of historic urgency, sadly we have lost that sense of expecting Christ's arrival today and sadly it has resulted in a much deteriorated form of Pauline Christianity. We have lost that drive to live every moment for the glory of God.

What must be regained in order for a restored, revitalized Pauline Christianity to work its way out in our lives? I believe a Pauline view of history. A view of history that is not lulled to sleep by the trappings of uniformity of historical process initiated by the monotony of daily life and grown by the ubiquity of dogmatic pronouncements of natural law. Who are we to say that because Christ has not returned as He promised for almost 2,000 years that He will not, or probably will not return today? I fear we have fallen asleep and fallen captive to the pagan view of history that has been ever prevalent since the foundation of the world. Namely, as those in the antediluvian world so glibly responded to the righteous preaching of Noah. A global flood is coming? Why that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, there's not even enough water on the planet to cover my house, much less all the land mass, no, it will not happen, I have never experienced any such thing. I prefer to believe that everything that *can* occur occurs in the same way as my vast experience dictates, and they went on their merry way. Then suddenly their vast experience was interrupted and without warning, and without provision, suddenly they were all swept away. Suddenly the guise of human experience and what *can* and *cannot* happen was disrupted by the Person who stands outside of human experience and not only controls whatsoever comes to pass but graciously reveals it as a warning in advance. How pitiful that men do not listen with open ears to Him with whom we have to do but rebel in ignorance against Him. His wrath will not forever be held back, it will be unleashed. And it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Why have we Christians now adopted this pagan view of history that all continues as it was from the beginning and there are no major disturbances, probably Jesus will not return today. Why we have got to put off this pagan view of history and must we put on the biblical view of history; we must listen with open ears to Him with whom we have to do. His word and its declarations must be thought of as infinitely superior to our monotonous

experience. If this is not corrected and continually corrected on a daily basis then all is lost and our lives will be less than a mere shadow of the apostle Paul. Yes, the only correction is to daily put on the truth that there is nothing that must happen before Christ can return, there is nothing standing between Him and us that impedes His arrival for us. It has been that way since He departed and it remains that way today.

So we have got to change our thinking. We have got to reject the underlying premise of the world's view of history that leads to an experimentally weak, impotent Christianity and embrace the underlying premise of the Christian worldview of history that leads to an experimentally powerful, conquering Christianity. You'll say I can't do it. Paul would agree. You can't do it in your own strength, but with God, all things are possible. So today I want to show you the experimental results of this doctrine when a Christian philosophy of history is embraced. First turn to 1 Thess 1. Each chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with some reference to the Rapture. So we're going to list the experimental results of the Rapture that Paul records in these two epistles.

Now the first one is embedded in 1 Thess 1:8-10. Verse 10 teaches the Rapture, "and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." We said the word "wait" means "to wait expectantly," to wait up for something," it is the kind of waiting you do when you are expecting someone to arrive at your door any moment. That is the doctrine of Christ the Thessalonians believed and that is the doctrine they were living. Observe the practical effects in verse 8-9, "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." A famous phrase, *turned to God from idols*. You may not realize the magnitude of this report. Obviously the people of the Roman world realized it. The report spread like wildfire, millions of people in Macedonia and Achaia got wind of the Thessalonians doing something that was extremely strange. What they did was break completely with paganism; they "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." Now that is a radical shift in life and worldview because every city had its gods and goddesses and the local temple. And these gods and goddesses were related to every sphere of life; from travel (Mercury)

to love (Venus) to fertility (Ashtarte) to storms (Baal) and so forth. Life revolved around these gods and goddesses and if you wanted a good life, if you wanted the favor of the gods and goddesses then you would worship at the local temples. Worship at the temple was the way to manipulate the gods into blessing you with love and fertility in your fields and so forth. All of life depended on the gods and goddesses. So to “turn to God from idols” was to deny that all of life depended on the gods and goddesses and to claim that they were worthless and dead, not even in existence, and that there was one living and true God who had a Son who had defeated death and been accepted with this God and He was going to return to rescue us from the wrath that is coming upon the world associated with idols. So this was a radical break with paganism indeed and the reason they did it was precisely because they understood the nature of salvation and they understood that their Savior was going to return at any time, they were waiting expectantly for Him. And who wants to be caught by Him down at the local temple? So they immediately broke completely with paganism. That’s the first experimental result of the doctrine of the Rapture. You break today completely with paganism. You don’t wait till tomorrow. You do it today because He may arrive today. If you want to know what the idols in America are today that you must break with there are many groups, these can be categorized; one category of idols are the idols of history, the idol of inevitable progress, the idol of upward development; another category of idols are the idols of humanity, the idol of humanitarianism, the idol of equalitarianism; another category of idols are the idols of money, the idol of price control, the idol of wealth redistribution, the idol of fractional reserve banking; another category of idols are the idols of nature, the idol of nature as deterministic, the idol of nature as religion, all these must be broken with and many more, idols of the State, the idol of centralized government, the idol of the State as educator of children and it goes on and on and on. There are idols everywhere, our world and what is happening in this country is one big monster of idolatry in every sphere, it is blasphemous and a believer in the Rapture should break it today!

Second, and along a different line is the experimental result of the Rapture in 1 Thess 2:18-20. The Rapture is taught in verse 19, “For who is our hope our joy our crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?” At His arrival from heaven we will go immediately to the judgment seat of Christ. This is a judgment for rewards, it

is not a judgment for salvation, everyone who is Raptured already has salvation, so it is rewards for sanctification, spiritual growth, the fruit of the Spirit. And observe the practical effects the doctrine of Rewards in connection with the Rapture had on Paul and Silas' life, verse 17, "But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us."

Remember the satanic hindrance that got established through Jason and some other young believers. They got arrested by the local authorities when they couldn't find Paul and Silas. And the authorities apparently said something along the lines of you pay us \$10,000 dollars and we'll let you go this time, but if Paul and Silas ever come back you're going back in the slammer. So Paul and Silas were blocked and they interpreted this as a satanic hindrance. Satan was able to deceive these young believers into worrying about their own situation rather than trusting the Lord to get them through it and this blocked Paul and Silas. And this separation revealed a practical result of the Rapture, namely that they wanted to come to them, they wanted to fellowship with them, they wanted to finish their training, they didn't get to finish establishing them in the faith. So this is another practical outworking of the Rapture. It may sound strange to you, but desire to spend as much time as possible with the believers you are ministering to. Why? Because these are your crowns at the judgment seat of Christ! These are the people you have poured your life into, they are the products of your ministry and you want a good product don't you? This is just one of the many reasons its poor spiritual hygiene to separate yourselves from believers in Christ. They are your crown. And one day you want to be able to stand before the Lord and say, look at this product Lord, look at these firmly established believers that I poured my life into, or rather You poured Your life into through me; look at their growth, fantastic products of your grace through me. That's why Paul and Silas wanted to spend time with them; they wanted to say, Lord, look at the fruit of our labors! Isn't this a fantastic product? "For you [Thessalonians] are our glory and joy." If you want to know what this looks like today it's a yearning to be with other believers and to minister to other believers in the capacity that you have been given. You're not running away from them trying to hide. Why not? Because Christ may come today and then you can't minister to them anymore, you can't take them to the judgment seat of Christ and say, hey, look at this person Lord, I poured tremendous labor into this person. What do you think about this? The

Rapture doctrine should stimulate us to pour everything we can into our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. To minister to others. And to do that you have to be with them. Do it today, don't wait till tomorrow! There's no time.

Third, and this brings us to 1 Thess 3, this actually relates to point two, because if you look at verse 11 Paul's still wanting to come to them, to be with them, to minister to them, to complete what is lacking in their training, they are his rewards. But here the rapture is in verse 13, so let's start there. "so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints." When the Lord returns for us we're going to be presented before the Father, there's going to be a presentation of sorts. What happens sequentially is here we are on earth today; we are to be waiting expectantly for Christ to return for us. The practical effect of that is that we break completely with paganism today, right now. That starts us on a track for ministering to others, pouring our life into theirs; giving them the word of God. Then when Christ returns for us we have something to show for it, or someone rather, people who we've poured ourselves into, they are the basis of your rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. Then we will be presented before the Father as this verse reveals. After we are rewarded the Lord Jesus is going to take us before the Father to show us off, look at these pure, spotless, trophies of My grace. A terrific moment that follows the Rapture and the judgment seat. Now look at verse 11 to see what this wonderful moment should induce in us today, what should be the experimental results? "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father," at that presentation. That presentation after the Rapture is put out as the motive behind Paul's prayer for increased love today. Not tomorrow, today. We should abound in love for one another. This is not time to put love on hold, there is no time to withhold love, there is only time to expend it. If you really understand the Rapture then how could you withhold it? For both those inside the church, your fellow believers, and outside the church, for all men. If you really understand the truth of any-moment return then you really understand that today is absolutely critical, today is the day when believers can build rewards and today is the day when unbelievers still have an opportunity to change sides. Today is a day of grace.

Tomorrow? There are no guarantees. So there is no time to wait to love, why are you withholding love from your fellow Christian? Do you want them to not grow spiritually and not grow in reward status? Why do you withhold it from your neighbor or from your co-worker? Do you want them to fry in hell? There is no time to wait. But at the same time Paul is not so naïve as to think we can increase our love for one another and all men without the help of God the Father and God the Son. That's why this is inside a prayer, a prayer for increased love in light of the fact that the Rapture is coming any day and then we're going to be presented before the Father. So the third experimental result of a true understanding of the Rapture is increased love, always increasing, not increasing to a level and then stopping, always increasing, there is always room for more love. And I think this should be a vital part of our prayer life. If you want increased love then you better pray for it, because we can't produce it all by ourselves.

Now we come to chapter 4. The Rapture is specifically mentioned in verse 17 under the classic Greek verb *harpazo*. "Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord." This is a central passage to a part of the doctrine we originally placed before us, *the rapture is the un-signaled, spatial removal of one generation of living believers from earth*, that part right there about spatial removal of one generation of living believers is derived from this verse. The question it leaves us with is what about those who are not living? Are they going to miss out on this blessed event? Paul's answer is by no means. They will not only take part in it, but they will take part in it before us! We will by no means precede them, they will precede us. And observe what the experimental result is for those of us who see a fellow brother who has lost a loved one. Verse 18, "Therefore comfort one another with these words." The word comfort is *parakaleo*, it means to come alongside of them, to support them, and specifically with these words about the Rapture. That is a practical thing we should be doing in light of our belief in the Rapture and it is a thing quite needed. When a person loses someone that is one of the most difficult times in life, some are more difficult than others, a lost spouse or lost child is the most difficult, a lost parent as a young child is also tremendously difficult. But whatever the case the hurt does not go away, there is a vacancy, normally much larger than you realized before, and it is heart wrenching, emotion can come upon you suddenly when you're just standing in the supermarket staring at the coffee beans, it is astonishing how

close we can get to another human being and their loss is a very real one. I'm asking all of you to comfort these believers that have lost ones with these words. These words are the most comforting on the subject in all of the world. Think of the doctrine of natural philosophy, if that's your philosophy of life then all you can say is your family member is gone and has returned to dust, they will be broken down, eaten by earthworms and reassembled into plant material in the never-ending cycle of life vs a very different and magnificent truth about the future. You're relationship with your lost loved one has not come to an end, it has only come to the end of the beginning, you will meet your loved one again and you will share love and laughter far beyond anything you enjoyed here. A love that will have no end. This is the great comfort. Our separation from one another is only temporary. And oh how temporary it is. When Paul says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." He means to say that the quality of life then will be so overwhelming that it will be as if you are staring at the sun in a room full of light. Yet you cannot see any of them for you are too blinded by the sun. Really there is no comparison between this world and the next; it is utterly beyond all worldly analogies. What He has in store for us is totally beyond human comprehension. Be living for this coming day, be living for it today, do not wait to comfort someone who has lost a loved one, tomorrow may be too late, comfort them today with these words, they need them, come alongside of them and support them.

Now turning to chapter 5:23 we find another reference to the Rapture and the practical effects it should have now. "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is another prayer; this one is for complete sanctification, that God would totally sanctify them such that they are found without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The verbs in the prayer are in the optative mood, so it's a wish, it's a hope, there's no guarantee this prayer will be answered in this life, it's about a 5% chance in the optative mood of it coming to pass, but nevertheless Paul prays it. The next verse indicates 100% fulfillment and it will be fulfilled at the Rapture, but before, that's not a guarantee. But here's the practical truth. The Lord Jesus Christ can come at-any-moment so we should be learning complete loyalty to Him at every moment so that we will be mature spiritually when He arrives. The truth of the Rapture is one of

those truths that is really mind boggling so far as how practical and serious it really is. It's the issue of what do you want to be found doing when He arrives? Do you want to be found partially sanctified? Because the implication of the verse is that most will be found only partially sanctified but there are some who will be found entirely sanctified. And what entire sanctification means, it doesn't mean sinless perfection, it means that the person is blameless, that they are complete through and through, that they have achieved a high level of spiritual maturity in every area of life. And since we don't know when He will come, but He may come today, then what are you doing today to reach advanced spiritual maturity? Will you be found sanctified entirely, will you be found complete, will you be found blameless? That is a practical purifying effect of the Rapture.

Alright, let's turn to 2 Thessalonians. Paul shares a few things in 2 Thess that relate to the Rapture. One teaching is that the coming of our Lord Jesus is actually a complex of events. It can refer to His coming in the air for His Church to save them at the Rapture, it can refer to His coming through angels to judge the world in the day of the Lord and it can refer to His coming to earth to establish His kingdom. In 2:1 he speaks of the first aspect of this complex, "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ [that's the complex] even our gathering together to Him [that's the specific aspect of the Rapture," when we are gathered together to Him," at the Rapture. We will be gathered together to Him in the air. Then the instruction that he gives is very practical once again for spiritual growth. So let's watch. Verse 2, do "not be quickly shaken from your composure" that's your mental attitude, your whole thought life, "do not be quickly shaken in your thought life "or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first." Now here we have a truth that is very practical. What is the time of the Rapture with respect to the day of the Lord? If they day of the Lord comes first then surely this would cause great mental disturbance. Anyone who knows the nature of the day of the Lord knows it is beyond any horror the most creative mind can produce. To enter it would be akin to entering hell on earth! And the thought that hell on earth could come today on earth is enough to so disturb the mind that all spiritual growth would immediately halt. So Paul in verse 3 writes to calm them down. No, the apostasy must come first. The apostasy there in verse 3 is the Greek word *apostasia* and

refers to the Rapture. It is not a doctrinal apostasy, it is a spatial departure. And for the first 1600 years of church history it was translated as “departure” to communicate the idea we call the Rapture. We can’t tell why Theodore Beza started translating it “apostasy” in the early 1600’s but unfortunately it stuck. Paul’s point nonetheless is to assure them that the Rapture must come first, and then the day of the Lord can begin. And what practical effect would this have? It would restore mental stability. You cannot grow spiritually if you are mentally unstable. And this was Paul’s great concern. This is why Paul is so avid in this chapter to correct this most terrifying error. All Christians need to know each day that Christ is coming to rescue them away from the wrath that is coming on the world. For God has not destined us for wrath but for obtaining salvation. How destructive it is today to tell Christians the lie that they must enter the day of the Lord wrath and live under Antichrist’s rule. Such thoughts have no place in the Christian life and will wreck a Christian. So the practical effect here is to bring the mental stability that is necessary to spiritual growth.

Let me now with all hope and prayer and petition conclude once more with the great experimental results of the Rapture highlighted by the apostle Paul in the Thessalonian epistles. If there is any one truth that these two letters center on it is the Rapture. And while it is wonderful to understand the doctrine of the Rapture, indeed it is first necessary, we must never neglect it, but if it is not followed by daily practical living then do we really understand it? Paul says the first thing the Rapture should do for our lives is cause us to completely break with paganism: to break from the idols of the world system. You say I will look very much different from the world. Yes indeed, that my friend is the point, that is your testimony to the world. And if you don’t you are nothing but a clanging cymbal. Why continue to cling to the death of idols and enjoy sensual pleasure when all the riches of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in the life abiding Christ? Second, increased fellowship with one another. The Rapture should cause us to want to spend more time with one another, I ministering to you and you ministering to me. The more we do this the more rewards. For you are my hope, you are my joy, you are my crown of boasting at the judgment seat of Christ and I yours. I run the race to win men to Christ. What have I to be more proud of than you at that great judgment, and you me? Third, increased love, an every increasing love for one another and for all men. Why, even if we do love, is that enough, or is there more room to love, and why withhold love, how dare we withhold that love

which Christ Himself laid hold of us! Indeed it is love in abundance that firmly establishes us so that when we are presented before the Father we stand without blame in holiness, as marvelous trophies of His grace. And fourth, increased comfort of one another with the words of the Rapture doctrine. When a loved one dies and hope is slipping away, we need fellow believers to come alongside of us and remind us of these great words of reunion. Words that remind us that Christ is risen and we will rise to meet Him with all the saints. That can happen today. Now can you endure such a short period of separation as this? Knowing that for 25 million years and counting you will be with those you love? Fifth, an encouragement to further sanctification. The Rapture should set us on a course that is unwavering in increased loyalty to God. Will we be found blameless in the day the Lord comes for us? This indeed is the aim of this doctrine and it is one repeated throughout the NT. It is purifying, when taken seriously and understood properly. And finally, it gives mental stability. We know that we have salvation to the utmost and we shall not enter into the wrath of the Lord. We have been chosen out of the world for obtaining salvation on that day. We can relax because we have inner confidence that no matter who is against us, God is for us and if God be for us, who can truly be against us? Godspeed.

It's my prayer that this doctrine will become more experimental in my life and in yours.

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