

“Ramped-Up & Raptured”
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
23rd Sunday After Pentecost; November 8, 2020

Last weekend we officially “fell back,” pushing our clocks back one hour, and forcing all of us to re-set our biological clocks. We have



been “falling back” though, for weeks and months, in more ways than one. The intrigue of this election cycle, regardless of one’s opinion about the outcome, will

continue to drag this nation down — well beyond the next generation — causing many to feel constantly fatigued and suspicious of others.

That’s not just a partisan observation — that’s a fact of what we have become. Sick and tired.

“Spring forward” may sound good, but “falling back” is supposed to be better because at least people try to get an extra hour of sleep.

Except, of course, families with infants. Or if you have livestock or a hungry dog. Or if you have an internal biological clock that still wakes you at the same time no matter what.

Regardless, these mornings aren’t going to get any brighter as daylight hours continue to shorten. The darkness, instead, is just going

to invade earlier in the afternoon. For school-aged kids, this is the beginning of the season when it's dark as they get up in the morning and it starts getting dark when they come home in the afternoon. Some of us will need night-vision goggles for evening work schedules. Christmas lights are coming, but unless you live in a store, it's still a bit early to be jacking-up the electric bill with trees and lawn ornaments. November can be a rather dreary month. Transitions between seasons, climates, holidays, and what-have-you can leave us "in the dark" and wondering, "what's next?"

In his first letter to the church of Thessalonica, St. Paul offers words of comfort and power to a community that has found itself in changing circumstances and in dark, sad times. The Thessalonian Christians are themselves wondering, "What's next?" Paul's proclamation of Jesus's resurrection and God's promise of life eternal for all those who confess Jesus as Lord is now being put to the test by the reality of human frailty. These Jesus-followers, members of the Body of Christ, are struggling as they watch others suffer and die. People are dying whether from illness or accident or persecution or

simply the biological factor of old age. The transitoriness of the human condition has undeniably cast a shadow over the Thessalonian faithful.

Paul can well relate to the situation and so he sends a letter offering two assurances to those who are struggling to reconcile their faith in God's promise with the painful present reality of sickness unto death among their kith and kin. To those who grieve earthly deaths when promised eternal life, Paul consoles them by saying, "We don't want you to have the kind of grief that other people do, people who don't have any hope."



Surrounded as the Thessalonians were by a pagan culture that saw no hope beyond the grave for any mortal being, despair in the face of death seemed like a reasonable response. The only "life beyond death" even a well-situated pagan could hope for was to die in such a blaze of glory that one's fame might continue to be told by future generations. But for ordinary men and women, who barely scratched-out a living, death meant only the end. There was no more. The end of life was a hopeless grave.

Against that miserable, dark ending Paul reiterates the gospel declaration that “if we believe that Jesus died and rose, that’s the way God will also, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” “Fallen asleep,” as you may have guessed, was perhaps Paul’s way of softening the sting of death. Those who are joined to Christ in faith will not be separated from him by death. Those who die in Christ will share in his presence with God for eternity. Death will still invade our lives in this vale of tears, but there will come a day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

While it’s good to be reminded of this eternal promise, Paul senses another issue which seems to be bugging the Thessalonians. He addresses an unstated concern that there could be some odd sort of saintly hierarchy starting to develop. As Christians during the 1st century eagerly anticipated what they believed to be the imminent return of Christ, Paul counters the oh-so-subtle suggestion that those who might still be alive at that time of triumphal return might somehow “rate-first” among the faithful. Correspondingly, those who had already died before Jesus’s return were considered “second-tier” disciples who

would be “called back later.” Imagine how distressed you would feel having your departed loved-one somehow relegated to the “B-team” upon Christ’s return.

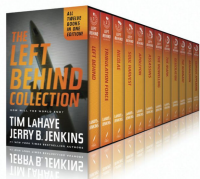
Such meritocracy (a sad temptation for the church right from the beginning), Paul doesn’t buy into. His explanation dispels any such notion. When God commands that “the Messiah’s dead will rise first,” it’s clear that they will then be joined by those “who are left” to reunite with everyone who are part of the Body of Christ.

Throughout the centuries since Paul’s writings, various groups and denominations have obsessed over the “how” and “when” of this moment at the end of time referred to as “the rapture.” But wise Christians will always take a cue from Paul himself. Paul was much more concerned with the WHO. (No, not the rock-n-roll group — “Pinball Wizard” and all that.) The WHO that Paul and other wise Christians have sense concerned themselves with is the WHO — which is the ever-expanding, extending, enduring Body of Christ here on earth. The Body of Christ here on earth will never be separated from those who

have gone on before. You, too, who believe in Christ are a member of the WHO — the Lord’s rolling-rock royalty.

The Greek word for “snatched up” is *harpagesometha*. It sounds like the name of a drug for insomniacs, but it’s not. Paul uses this strong word, but not to assure God’s people that Jesus upon return will somehow swoop down and fly away with them. Paul, instead, wants to reassure believers that Jesus will connect those who remain alive with those who have died. The dead in Christ will not be left behind in any way. “Snatched up” in the Greek as Paul means it, isn’t an abduction but an induction. The faithful will greet and meet Jesus in the clouds and will escort their King to where he will fully induct his kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

Since the mid-1990s, I guessing, the word “rapture” has most often been associated with the hugely popular *Left Behind* book series written



by a couple of fundamentalist writers named Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. They profited well for themselves as the series sold over 65 million books, spawned four movies,

and is still spinning spin-offs and even children’s books.

This type of book genre will continue to sell well because, when faced with an unknown and perilous future, anxious Christians will continue to read into Paul's words to the Thessalonians their vindication that God will spare the righteous (people just like them) from tribulation and terror in a world that seems to be going to hell in a hand-basket. But religious folk aren't the only ones looking for disaster insurance. The super-rich can buy security that can whisk them away to safety bunkers and panic rooms in a moment's notice. It isn't just left-behind end-timers who imagine being "raptured" out of apocalypse while unwashed, lower class riff-raffs are left behind to fend for themselves and die in a dog-eat-dog world.

Perhaps you didn't know this — the actual biblical understanding of "rapture" isn't something that takes you out of the world to fly away arm-in-arm with Jesus. The "rapture" is something that will take you into his kingdom right here on earth with new excitement and hope.

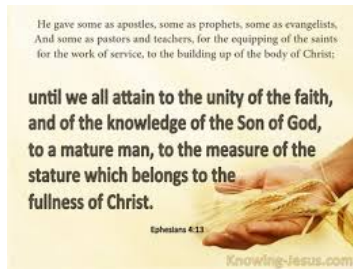


"Rapture" isn't reserved for some apocalyptic end-time, but for every time right now because Jesus's resurrection marked the beginning of the

end-time. The early Christians correctly understood Paul's discussion of the raising of the saints as not about a sudden "popping-up." They understood it to mean an on-going experience of "body building" as those who had gone on before are integrated into the Body of Christ as that Body reaches its "stature of maturity." The "rapture" doesn't so much end the church's mission by taking us out of the world. Rather, the "rapture" enlarges the church's mission and brings us into the world on deeper and higher levels of strength and service. First Thessalonians 4:18 reinforces the connection to the deceased: "So comfort each other with these words." Okay, so may these words be of comfort to us. God's kingdom is coming and we're going to get on it more fully than we dare to imagine.

Several times throughout the New Testament Paul alludes to believers striving to attain their "full stature of maturity" in Christ. In Ephesians 4:11-13, for example, Paul speaks about this striving for "stature" as part and parcel with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts, Paul claims, will differ from disciple to disciple. To some, the gifts the Spirit gives are that some would be apostles, some evangelists, some

pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for

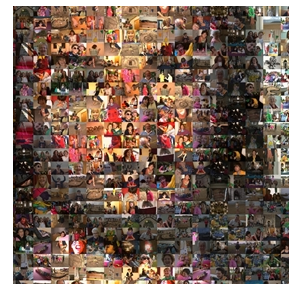


building up the body of Christ, until *all of us* come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God — to maturity, to the measure of

the full stature of Christ. Receiving the full stature of Christ seems to me a lot more exciting than just flying-off into the “sweet by-and-by.”

The stature of maturity must be every Christian’s life mission, the personal enablement and embodiment of the Great Commission, as given by Jesus while teaching his parting words to his followers: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all cultures.” This is the church’s mission. This is the mission of every disciple — to be a “body builder,” to be a real human being — to help build-up the Body of Christ, to grow fuller and more truly into the “mature stature” of Christ.

Every new generation of followers helps build “muscle mass” upon the Body of Christ, so that even as the generations pass away, the Body continues to develop. Every new incarnation of the gospel in an unreached culture or people group helps build



“muscle mass” upon the Body of Christ, maturing the Body into a fuller, more mature stature.

Paul assures believers then and now that the power, presence, and promise of all who “die in the Messiah” are not lost to this world forever. The Lord has the perfect memory and he will never forget his own.

November can seem particularly dreary when the gaudy brilliance of the autumn foliage is swept away by the first wintery winds. The bright and beautiful colors that we had gazed on are now a slippery, sodden, mud-colored mass underfoot. We complain that this is an ugly nuisance.

But those mushy fallen leaves aren’t to be taken as a sign of the nature’s failure. They are the promise of the tree’s continuing growth into the future. As any botanist will tell you, a tree is as healthy as the soil in which it has its roots. Fallen leaves decompose and create



“humus” — adding rich nutrients as they drop down to the good earth. A nutrient-rich leaf falls to the ground and yet continues to feed the tree from which

it sprouted. The fallen leaf makes possible new leaves that will emerge in the spring from an even healthier tree, thus helping that tree reach its “mature stature.”

Christians, of course, don’t grow on trees. We will ever and always will be a “moveable feast” for this world. The Holy Spirit wants to grow us into the mature stature of Christ, so that “Great Commission” may be truly great. The Body of Christ doesn’t belong to one place, one culture, one ethnic heritage, or anything concocted by humans as we tend to want the Body to be. With every new generation of followers, with every new incarnation of Christ into a culture, there’s a fresh revelation of the God for all nations.

Every “ethne” in the world is welcomed into the Body of Christ. And as every new generation is grown and grafted onto the Body, both Body of Christ “grows in maturity” and Christ’s presence is more “embodied.” And the “Great Commission” is still great.

What’s next? Who knows? Maybe the “rapture” of Jesus’s second coming is less about him coming down from heaven than it is about his rising up from the ground in Jacob’s seamless robe of all the colors and

cultures of the world. Maybe the “rapture” is more about his rising out of the clouds, the Great Cloud of Witnesses of those who have gone before.

But until that glorious, getting-up “Day of the Lord,” let King Jesus rapture you for the world rather than rapturing you out of the world. This perplexed world isn’t looking for something to believe in. It’s an already gullible world that believes anything and everything our media pundits and politicians tell us to believe. The world isn’t looking for another lame worldview as if Christ died to secure our 401(k)s, our pensions, along with the church endowment. This world isn’t hungry for any such worldview. The world wants a life story. Deep down within the human soul, people are not looking for a rapture from living. They’re looking for the capture of a dream and the rapture of aliveness — not a rupture in time, but a juncture in horizons and a rapture into hope, faith, and love.

November can be a rather dreary month. Transitions between seasons, climates, holidays, and what-have-you can leave us “in the dark” and wondering, “what’s next?” Who really knows? Only God

knows and the future is in his hands. But his church is nevertheless right here, right now to proclaim and embody the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. When the rhythm of our relationship with the one, true God gets ramped-up and raptured, that's called JOY. And Paul is telling not only the Thessalonians — but all believers for all times and circumstances — not to worry, not to fret, not to fear, no matter the carnage of the culture. The JOY of the Lord will be our strength.



May God's Great Commission to the church be truly great again in service to a world in desperate need of hope, faith, and love. And may the Holy Spirit please make it so, helping to build-up the kingdom, growing us into the full maturity of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.