The Rapture

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction: I want to survey the major eschatological events that Scripture shows us are yet to come. These are not going to be comprehensive studies. But there are among us some who may have heard these terms used but aren’t really sure what those terms mean or where they are taught in the Bible. I think it is very good to both know theology and know where the Bible mentions it. Some of them pertain to the nation of Israel and some to New Testament age believers. Some of these events will impact either all saved people or all lost people.

Our text this afternoon is about the rapture. One of the most significant events of the “end times” or “last days” will be the rapture of believers. When I was younger, there were many prophecy conferences. The doctrine of the rapture was kept constantly on people’s minds. Even many unbelievers were somewhat familiar with this doctrine because it taught so continuously on the radio and in churches. Christian people used to hand out Gospel tracts that urged the lost to trust Christ because the rapture would leave them on earth during the Tribulation Period. That emphasis is now gone.

In the past 20 years there has been an assault against this doctrine. This attack against our blessed hope has not come from Roman Catholics or false cults. They are opposed to this doctrine, but their influence in Baptist churches is nothing. It has not even come from left-leaning Evangelicals. The assault is being waged by certain fundamentalists who believe Christians must go through most, if not all, of the Tribulation Period. Today I want to settle your minds that God has not appointed us to wrath.

Traits of the “Last Days”

Most conservative Bible teachers do not believe that the Gospel will triumph in this age. Yes, that is the position of some Protestants, but nothing in the Bible or in human experience leads us to conclude this world will keep getting better and better till finally there is heaven on earth. To be sure the Gospel will gain the victory individually in a great many people’s lives. However, this world that we live in is not going to see a gradual increase in godliness. In fact, the Bible plainly teaches the opposite to be true.

The Kingdom parables in Matthew 13 do not teach a glorious triumph of the Gospel. In the parable of the seed and the sower, of the four types of soil that the seed fell upon, only one produced any fruit at all, and that of varying degrees. The second parable of the wheat and the tares teaches that false believers will abound. The parable of the mustard seed teaches an abnormal growth that provides a resting place for birds which are typical of Satan and his evil spirits. Also, the parable of the leaven in the loaf of meal warns of corruption since leaven is always typical of sin.

Aside from Christ’s prophetic parables, we can find Paul speaking of growing moral decay in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. Jude warned of the same problem in verses 17-19 of his Epistle. Paul further warned that the time would come when scriptural truth would be rejected in 1 Timothy 4:1-2 and 2 Timothy 4:2-4. The apostle Peter foretold of a time when many will begin to follow false teachers who preach liberty only to bring those foolish enough to heed them into bondage (2 Peter 2:1-3, 17-22). Clearly the Bible teaches that in the last days there will be a growing interest in spiritual or religious things that does not follow true holiness but is characterized by immorality, iniquity and every man doing that which is right in his own eyes.

Although it is important to recognize that we are living in the last days, some have become obsessed with trying to identify “signs of the times.” Signs and wonders were not primarily intended for believers. They were for the benefit of unbelievers, most likely for unbelieving Jews specifically (1 Corinthians 14:22).

As we shall see later, there are no specific signs for which you and I should be looking. Our expectation is that we shall be caught up to be with the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Therefore, caution should be exercised when attempting to use natural disasters, moral decay, and spiritual decline as “signs of the times.” Of course, the Bible does associate those things with the last days, yet those things have always existed. If we hear more about them now than we did a few generations ago, it is probably not because of an increase, but rather only an increase in the reporting of them.

Terminology of the Doctrine

The terms rapture (which although it is not in our English Bible we can still confidently use) and the Second Coming of Christ are often used to speak of the same event. However, they should be distinguished. Properly speaking, the rapture is when Christ shall suddenly and without warning catch up all regenerated believers, both living and deceased, to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17; Colossians 3:4; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). The Second Coming on the other hand, is when Christ shall return literally and physically to Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:4, 16; Matthew 25:31-32) at the end of the Tribulation Period. Some prefer to think of the rapture as the first stage in the Revelation or Second Coming of Christ.

Throughout this study we are going to speak of them as separate events for the sake of clarity. As previously noted, the term rapture does not appear in our English Bible, yet we need not feel ashamed to use it though some cults like the Jehovah’s Witnesses that deny the doctrine of the rapture try to make an issue of it.

The English word “rapture” is from a Latin word for the phrase “caught up” as found in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. Thus, while the word itself is not in the Bible the doctrine unquestionably is. One expression that is often used and that is unbiblical is the phrase “rapture of the church.” This is a favorite phrase of dispensationalism that is completely without biblical support. Since the Bible nowhere speaks of a “rapture of the church” we should strenuously avoid using this expression.

Timing of that Day

There is no way of knowing when the rapture will occur. This is referred to doctrinally as imminency. When Christ’s disciples asked Him to identify a sign of His coming (Matthew 24:3), He warned them, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no not the angels of heaven, but my father only” (Matthew 24:36). Since this warning probably concerned Christ’s Second Coming, and not the rapture, we can begin to understand how impossible it will be to foretell the exact time of the rapture.

We know that based on Daniel 9:24-27 and Revelation 12:6, 14 that the Second Coming will take place approximately seven years after the rapture. But we have no way of knowing when the rapture will take place. There have been many prophetical crackpots that claimed to have discovered the day of the rapture. They have all been proven false prophets!

That this is true can be discerned from the three parables of Matthew 24:42-25:30. The central theme in all three of these parables (the ten virgins, the talents, and the judgment of sheep and goat nations) are about the necessity of fulfilling obligations until the arrival of an unexpected day. Clearly Jesus wants us to have an eager sense of anticipation regarding His Coming for us. If we knew that the rapture could not possibly happen in our lifetime unless first preceded by certain signs it would be inevitable that we would slack off in our watching (holy living) and our occupying (serving).

Theories about that Day

Perhaps no other area of prophetic studies has engendered as much debate in the past hundred years or so as the rapture. Some of the different theories proposed have included the pretribulational view, the mid-tribulational view, the pre-wrath view, the post-tribulational view, and the extreme Baptist bride or partial rapture view. The debates have been intense with churches splitting and careers ending. So acrimonious and vitriolic have been the books, journal articles, and open letters that many people outside the theological academic community have shunned the whole matter. A great number of people have been unwilling to commit themselves to any particular doctrinal point of view and seem to be taking a “wait and see” approach.

Quite a few well-meaning people apparently think having no doctrinal position concerning the rapture is, in a sense, taking the high road. If they hold to no firm conviction about prophecy, then unity with other believers won’t be compromised. Yet we must meditate on what the Bible teaches about doctrine (Romans 16:17; Ephesians 4:14; 1 Timothy 4:1; 6:3; 2 Timothy 3:16; Titus 2:1; Hebrews 13:9). Obviously if Paul and Timothy and Titus were admonished to take heed to doctrine, we bear exactly the same responsibility. We really don’t have the option of “taking the high road.”

As Baptists we believe strongly in the priesthood of the believer, soul liberty, the authority of Scripture, and the supremacy of the local church. Where the necessity of unity is stressed in the Bible (Ephesians 4:3), we rightly understand it to mean unity is essential in the local church. Unity is, of course, wholly impossible in a “Universal Church.” However, since only one view of the rapture can be correct, and all of Scripture is inspired and is profitable for doctrine, we ought to be able, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to understand this Bible teaching correctly.

Where there are differing doctrinal views, there is usually pride. Pride has no place in the Christian life. Too often men find a certain satisfaction in finding what nobody else has ever noticed before. Honest students of the Bible will admit to times when they have read the Bible and some ingenious interpretation has popped into our heads. It seemed so fascinating at the time, but later the error of that idea was realized when Scripture was compared diligently with Scripture.

Diverse doctrines are often the result of stubborn men who will not admit they may be in error. If you will not own up to a mistake now and then, please don’t presume to preach and teach the Word of God! If we will lay aside pride and the traditions of men and let the Bible speak, the Holy Spirit will illumine us to its truths.

The devil also puts corrupt thoughts into men’s minds. People are often willing to acknowledge Satan as the instigator of immoral thoughts but forget that he also wants to corrupt pure doctrine. An imminent pretribulational rapture of believers is the only doctrine that is consistent with the totality of the Bible’s teaching. It stresses the necessity of being ready now. It stresses God’s love for His children by not appointing them to wrath. It encourages wisdom and diligence in redeeming the time.

I do strongly believe that all other views distract from service to Christ by preoccupying believers in watching for mysterious, subjective “signs.” Satan has succeeded when he convinces men that Christ will not come in our lifetime. All of that undoubtedly delights the devil and hordes of unclean spirits. When the doctrine of the rapture is correctly applied it will keep us closer to God. It will help keep us from sin. It will make local churches stronger and more effective.