

1 Thess 4:13, and the “*Rapture*”

Dr. Ian A. Fair

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Robert Gundry

In his magisterial study of *The Church and the Tribulation* Robert Gundry provides an extensive inductive exegetical study of the texts that Paul wrote. Gundry is critical of the unfortunate *misapplied* interpretation of *Premillennial, Dispensational, Tribulation* and *Pretribulation* theorists in support of *their unfortunate unsupported Scriptural theory of a Rapture*.

Bruce, Jewett, and Malherbe provide similar refutes of Rapture Premillennial/Dispensational views. *Inductive exegetical* commentators of 1 and 2 Thessalonians argue that in order to support a *Rapture* “theology” one has to *introduce presuppositions extraneous* to 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Like the expression *second coming*, the word *rapture* *does not appear in the major translations of the English Bibles!* They have to be introduced into the discussion from presuppositions extraneous to Scripture.

David Jeremiah¹

David Jeremiah, *The Great Disappearance: 31 Ways to be Rapture Ready*, claims that the Rapture is a biblical doctrine, but the word Rapture does not appear in any of the major New Testament translations of Christian Scripture!

Rapture is an expression **imported** by dispensational premillennial theorists, Nelson Darby, Cyrus Schofield, John Walvoord, and Hal Lindsey, into their *supposed biblical theologies* to support their “*theology*” of a literal *thousand year kingdom reign on earth* before a *final second coming*. Scriptures such as Rev 20:10 are interpreted *literally* without consideration of their obvious *apocalyptic genre*.

Furthermore, it is claimed that the Greek word ἀρπάζω, *harpázō*, which occurs in 1 Thess 4:17, means “*to snatch away*” or “*to seize*”.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians “*Then we who are alive, who are left, will be **caught up** [ἀρπάζω, *harpázō*] in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.*” Again, I emphasize that the concept of *rapture* has to be *imported* into the meaning of ἀρπάζω, *harpázō*, since the word *rapture* is not supported from *exegetical*, *etymological*, or *contextual* sources.

The *Rapture event* or *action of **seize up, or caught up***, emphasizes the *power of God and Christ*, which are not inherent in the word ἀρπάζω, *harpázō* which *contextually emphasizes the positive excitement of the event*.

One alert theologian, Dr. Douglas Foster, an Abilene Christian University professor of *church history and Bible*, once observed that the word ***rapture*** is more appropriate to the event than *rapture*!

Paul’s closing message to the Thessalonian Christians

This text is one that Premillennialists and Dispensationalists, and those who argue for a ***Rapture***, cite as a primary foundation to their ***rapture heresy***, 1 Thess 4:1-18, 5:1-11. It is a long pericope which the *rapture theorists* fail to consider. This major pericope is *not about a rapture*, but as Malherbe points out is in a *cultural morality discussion*².

Regarding 1 Thess 4:13ff it is in a section expressing a major point, *Christians who believe in Jesus’ death and resurrection do not mourn the death of their fellow Christians since their future is secured with Christ, and who will return with him when he comes, at the parousia, the final judgment*.

The following is a general discussion of this extended pericope in the appropriate context of this Pauline *exhortation*. The appropriate context is not a *fanciful premillennial rapture* which in fact is not mentioned in this pericope.

1 Thess 4:1-8. Exhortation to purity, fornication and marriage fidelity

“¹ ***Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more.*** ² ***For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.*** ³ ***For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity;*** ⁴ ***that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in***

¹ We should note that Jeremiah’s doctorate is an honorary doctorate awarded by a college in which he and his father were prominent leaders. His Master’s degree is in ministry, awarded by Dallas Theological Seminary, not in Biblical studies or theology.

² Malherbe, 1 Thess 4:1ff.

holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; ⁶ that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

1 Thess 4: 9-12. Love one another, and show benevolence toward others

*“⁹ But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to **love one another**; ¹⁰ and indeed you do **love all the brethren throughout Macedonia**. But we exhort you, brethren, to do so more and more, ¹¹ to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to **work with your hands, as we charged you**; ¹² so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody.”*

1 Thess 4:13-15. Comfort regarding others who have died, reassurance for the coming of the Lord

*“But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, **concerning those who are asleep**, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that **Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep**. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that **we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.**”*

1 Thess 4:16-18. The coming, of Jesus, parousia, at the angels call, the sound of the trumpet, the final judgment, and resurrection assurance regarding those who have died

“¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; ¹⁷ then we who are alive, who are left, shall 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. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

The expressions *cry of an angel*, the *sound of a trumpet*, and a *resurrection from the dead* are *not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture in connection with the term or concept of a Rapture*.

F. F. Bruce’s exegesis of 1 Thess 4:16 ff and the cry of command of the angel³

In an extended exegetical analysis of Paul’s exhortation F. F. Bruce observes: “ἐν κελεύσματι: “with a word of command.” This military noun occurs once in LXX: Prov 30:27, “the locust marches at one word of command” (ἀφ’ ἐνὸς κελεύσματος). In Aeschylus Pers. 397 the earlier form κέλευμα is used of the encouragement of oarsmen by the boatswain (κελευατής) at the battle of Salamis (ἐκ κελεύματος); in Thucydides *Hist.* 2.92 κέλευσμα is used of the cheer with which the Athenian encouraged one another at the battle of Naupactus (ἀπὸ ἐνὸς κελεύσματος). Philo (*De praem, et poen.* 117) *speaks of God as gathering people together from the ends of the earth with one shout of command (ἐνὶ κελεύσματι). Here it is the Lord himself who shouts the quickening word, which commands a ready and obedient response (cf. John 5:25, “the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live”).*

ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου, “**with an archangel’s voice.**” It is doubtful if we should think of one individual archangel here, whether Michael or another. The only other place in the Greek Bible where ἀρχάγγελος occurs is Jude 9 (Μιχαὴλ ὁ ἀρχάγγελος). Jewish tradition knew of seven archangels, “the seven holy

³ Bruce’s views are shared by Moule, Gundry, Jewett, Malherbe, and others.

angels who present the prayers of the saints and stand before the presence of the glory of the Holy One” (Tob 12:15; cf. Rev 8:2). In *1 Enoch* 20:1–7 (Greek) they are called ἀρχάγγελοι and their names are listed as Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel, Gabriel and Remiel. (The archangel Jeremiel in 4 Ezra 4:36 is probably to be identified with Remiel.)

ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ, “with the trumpet of God,” harking back perhaps to Isa 27:13 (σαλπιουσιν τῇ σάλπιγγι τῇ μεγάλῃ, “sound the great trumpet”), where the “great trumpet” summons the Jewish exiles home from Assyria and Egypt (the words are echoed to this day in synagogue worship in the tenth of the Eighteen Benedictions: “Sound the great trumpet for our liberation; lift up the ensign to gather our exiles ...”). Cf. also Joel 2:1, 15; Zech 9:14. NT parallels are the “last trumpet” of 1 Cor 15:52 (similarly summoning the dead to rise); Matt 24:31 (where the Son of Man at his coming “will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call” to “gather his elect”); Rev 11:15 (where the seventh of the angels “who stand before God” blows his trumpet as a signal that secular world dominion has been superseded by the eternal “kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” and that the time has come “for the dead to be judged”). **From the close association of angels with the trumpet blast in the last two passages it is probable that the “archangel’s voice” and “trumpet of God” here are two ways of expressing one and the same summons.** C. F. D. Moule (*The Origin of Christology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 42) compares the description of the opposite movement in Ps 47 (LXX 46): 6: ἀνέβη ὁ θεὸς ἐν ἀλαλαγμῷ, κύριος ἐν φωνῇ σάλπιγγος, “God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.”

καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον, “and the dead in Christ will rise first.” The use of ἀναστήσονται instead of the Pauline ἐγερθήσονται suggests that a pre-Pauline confession is being quoted (see comment on ἀνέστη, v 14). (Even so, the qualification of the dead as being ἐν Χριστῷ is probably Pauline.) But if a pre-Pauline confession is being quoted, the readers are presumably being reminded of something they had already been taught—that the dead would rise. They still needed to be told, however, how this resurrection hope (which relieved them of sorrowing like those who did not share it) was related to the hope of the Parousia of Christ.

With οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ cf. 1 Cor 15:18 (οἱ κοιμηθέντες ἐν Χριστῷ, “those who have fallen asleep in Christ”); Rev 14:13 (οἱ νεκροὶ οἱ ἐν κυρίῳ ἀποθνήσκοντες, “the dead who die in the Lord”). Those who have existed ἐν Χριστῷ in mortal life remain ἐν Χριστῷ after death. It is importing an element extraneous to the context to construe ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον as though it denoted the “first resurrection” (ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη) of Rev 20:5 (so Giblin, *In Hope* ... 23). That the dead would rise was known already; what was now divulged was that the dead in Christ would rise *first*: the added adverb πρῶτον being caught up by the immediately following ἔπειτα so as to indicate that, far from suffering any disadvantage at the Parousia, the faithful departed would actually have precedence over those still alive. *Their* resurrection would be the first result of the coming of the Lord; only after that would those still alive enter into their heritage. Temporal sequence is certainly expressed by πρῶτον ... ἔπειτα, despite the argument of Grass that what is meant is the priority which the dead have “in the Lord’s love” (*Ostergeschehen*, 151). Questions of sequence and precedence in the resurrection were discussed in some Jewish circles, as appears later in the first century in 4 Ezra 5:42, where the Lord assures Ezra that “just as for those who are last there is no delay, so for those who are first there is no haste.”

17. ἔπειτα, “then,” “next in order.” cf. 1 Cor 15:23, where the Resurrection sequence (τάγμα) is said to be: “Christ the first fruits ἀπαρχή then (ἔπειτα) those who belong to Christ at his parousia.” Here, however, ἔπειτα relates to the survivors, who yield in precedence to “the dead in Christ” at his Parousia.

ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι, repeated from v 15. “After the dead in Christ have been raised, we ... shall be snatched away together with them” (ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς ἀρπαγησόμεθα). The force of the preposition σὺν is strengthened by the preceding ἅμα. From the Latin equivalent of ἀρπάζειν (*rapere*) this incident in the Parousia is sometimes called the “Rapture” (snatching away) of believers. The verb

ἀρπάζειν implies violent action, sometimes indeed to the benefit of its object, as when the Roman soldiers snatched Paul from the rioters in the Jerusalem council-chamber (Acts 23:10) or **when the male child in the apocalyptic vision was caught up to God to preserve him from the great red dragon (Rev 12:5)**. It is used in Acts 8:39 for the Spirit's snatching Philip away after his interview with the Ethiopian chamberlain and (more germanely to the present passage) of Paul's being caught up to the third heaven or paradise (2 Cor 12:2, 3).

Nothing is said here of the transformation of οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι to fit them for the conditions of their new existence; Paul deals with this question later, in 1 Cor 15:50–52.

ἐν νεφέλαις, “in clouds”—not simply because clouds suggested themselves as convenient vehicles for transportation through space but because clouds are a regular feature of biblical theophanies; the divine glory is veiled in clouds, shines forth from them and retreats into them. cf. the thick cloud on Sinai when Yahweh came down to impart the law to his people (Exod 19:16) and when Moses went up to receive the revelation (Exod 24:15–18), or the cloud that enveloped the divine presence in the wilderness tabernacle (Exod 40:34) and in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10, 11; cf. Ps 97:2). Specially relevant to the NT background are the “clouds of heaven” with which “one like a son of man” came to be presented before the Ancient of Days in Dan 7:13 (cf. Mark 13:26 par.; 14:62 par.; Rev 1:7). Similar theophanic imagery appears in the narratives of the transfiguration (Mark 9:7 par.) and ascension (Acts 1:9): the “cloud” which received Jesus out of the disciples' sight on the latter occasion has a bearing on the angelic assurance that he would come “in the same way” as they had seen him go (Acts 1:11).

εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου, “to meet the Lord.” When a dignitary paid an official visit (παρουσία) to a city in Hellenistic times, the action of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escort him back on the final stage of his journey was called the ἀπάντησις. So Cicero, describing Julius Caesar's progress through Italy in 49 B.C., says, “Just imagine what ἀπαντήσεις he is receiving from the towns, what honors are paid to him!” (*Ad. Att.* 8.16.2), and five years later he says much the same about Caesar's adopted son Octavian: “The municipalities are showing the boy remarkable favor... Wonderful ἀπαντήσεις and encouragement!” (*Ad. Att.* 16.11.6). cf. Matt 25:6, where the bridal party is summoned to go out and meet the bridegroom (εἰς ἀπάντησιν αὐτοῦ), so as to escort him with a torchlight procession to the banqueting hall, and Acts 28:15, where Christians from Rome walk south along the Appian Way to meet Paul and his company (εἰς ἀπάντησιν ἡμῶν) and escort them on the remainder of their journey to Rome.

These analogies (especially in association with the term παρουσία) suggest the possibility that the Lord is pictured here as escorted on the remainder of his journey to earth by his people—both those newly raised from the dead and those who have remained alive. ***But there is nothing in the word ἀπάντησις or in this context which demands this interpretation; it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with his people) continues his journey to earth or returns to heaven. Similarly it is not certain whether the Son of Man, coming “in clouds” (Mark 13:26 par.; 14:62 par.), is on his way to earth or (as in Dan 7:13) to the throne of God.***

εἰς ἄερα, “into the air.” We should not overpress the classical distinction between the lower air (ἀήρ) and the upper air (αιθήρ, not found in the NT), although the mention of clouds would in any case suggest the lower air.

καὶ οὕτως πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἐσόμεθα, “and (having) thus (joined him) we shall be continually with the Lord”—the climax of blessedness. Cf. Phil 1:23, where Paul expresses his desire “to depart (ἀναλῦσαι) and be with Christ (σὺν Χριστῷ), for that is far better.” There, however, Paul refers not to the Resurrection at the Parousia, but to his mode of existence immediately after death, as in 2 Cor 5:8, where to be away from the body is to be “at home with the Lord” (ἐνδημηῆσαι πρὸς τὸν κύριον).

18. “Ὡστε παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους, “*so, encourage one another.*” The same expression occurs of general Christian duty in 5:11 below, but in the present context the sense of “comfort” is uppermost. P.Oxy. 115 (the letter of condolence mentioned in the comment on v 13 above) ends with the admonition to the bereaved parents παραγορεῖτε οὖν ἀλλήλους (“So, comfort each other”); *but the Thessalonian Christians are given solid grounds for comfort and hope.*

ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις, “with these words” (instrumental ἐν), especially as they are communicated with the authority of the Lord himself (ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου, v 15).”⁴

Conclusion to this study of 1 Thess 4:13-18 and Jeremiah’s Rapture theology

A careful *inductive biblical exegetical* examination of this extended pericope as expressed by scholars not driven by Premillennialist or Dispensationalist persuasions, *para* Darby, Schofield, Walvoord, Lindsey, Jeremiah, and others, does not support the *Rapture heresy* in any manner!

Rapture theorists do not support their theory by any *inductive biblical exegetical reflection*. The *Rapture heresy* has to be *deductively imported onto the text* of 1 Thess 4:13-18.

Contrary to Jeremiah’s statement that *the rapture is a biblical doctrine, it is not, and cannot be supported from within the biblical text* of 1 Thess 4:1-13.

The key thought introduced by Jeremiah and rapture theorists is a forced interpreted interpretation of the Greek ἀρπάζω *harpázō*,⁵ “to steal or take by force.” In the rapture heretical *forced interpretation a special interpretation* to this verb has to be introduced. The context of 1 Thess 4:13-18 does not fit well into the rapture theory which *implies a gentle taking, a kind rapture*, of the saints before the *supposed* great tribulation takes place. The meaning of ἀρπάζω *harpázō* implies a *sudden seizing or taking up of the saints to be with Jesus in the clouds*. The explicit apocalyptic genre language should not be overlooked.

Paul’s context implies that when Jesus comes *with the call of the angel and the sound of the trumpet, both signs of the final coming and judgment*, the saints will be caught up, *snatched away, or take to up by Jesus, at the final judgment. The Thessalonians need not fear for their loved ones who have died for they are already with Jesus, he brings them with him, Those who are still alive will be caught up by Jesus and not experience the end of the world judgment.*

Read the text carefully

1 Thess 4:13-18. “¹³ *But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep* (who have already died), *that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* ¹⁴ *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep* (those who have already died). ¹⁵ *For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.* ¹⁶ ***For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a***

⁴ Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, vol. 45, pp. 100–103.

⁵ Zodhiates, “ἀρπάζω *harpázō* To seize upon, spoil, snatch away. In Class. Gr., the future passive *harpázomai* is used more often than in the NT. Literally, *to seize upon with force, to rob*; differing from *kléptō* . . . to steal secretly. *It denotes an open act of violence in contrast to cunning and secret stealing.* Though generally *harpázō* denotes robbery of another’s property, it is not exclusively used thus, but sometimes used generally meaning *forcibly to seize upon, snatch away, or take to oneself* (Matt. 13:19; John 6:15; 10:12, 28, 29; Acts 23:10; Jude 1:23). Especially used of the rapture (Acts 8:39; 2 Cor. 12:2, 4; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 12:5); *to use force against one* (Matt. 11:12).”

cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God (signs of the final coming and judgment). *And the dead in Christ will rise first;*¹⁷ *then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up* (seized, taken up) *together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.*¹⁸ *Therefore comfort one another with these words."*