

Holy Curiosity: The Rapture

May 8, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

So today we are continuing in our sermon series titled Holy Curiosity, where we are exploring topics – questions – scriptures – stories – requested specifically by you all, members of the congregation. And as I have mentioned a couple of times before, you all ask some really good questions. Some really challenging questions. Some of which don't have any clear-cut answers. And yet, I am of the firm belief that our longing to understand what God wants for us – and sometimes our struggle to make sense of the things of God – does in and of itself please God. And so, we are wrestling together with some good, challenging, hard topics. And even though we may come away from them without any clear-cut answers, it is my prayer that in the struggle and in the wrestling we will at the very least come away with a deeper understanding of the God who gave us the gift of curiosity in the first place.

So far, we have explored the really good and timely question of what God thinks about war – especially in light of the war in Ukraine, and to get to that question, we looked at the beautiful and popular and beloved story of David and Goliath. And then last week, we all humored my son as we explored not a question, but a favorite Bible story of his, looking at the *rest* of King David's story – not just the sweet and inspiring parts of it but the hard and painful parts.

Today we are shifting gears again. And moving from the Old Testament, into the New Testament, into the writings of the Apostle Paul. And as we do so, we are entering into a little, short passage in the book of 1 Thessalonians. But don't let the length of today's scripture reading fool you. It may only be six short verses long. But they are six verses that have inspired volumes upon volumes upon volumes of writing, both of nonfiction and of fiction.

So the topic that has been requested for today is a hot-button topic in theological circles, that has inspired TONS of debate. And that is the rapture. Or more specifically, what does the Bible have to say about the rapture?

So to get at this question, we are turning to the passage in scripture from which we get the word "rapture." That word is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, and the word is derived from the Latin word "rapturo" meaning "to be seized, or snatched up, or taken away." In Medieval times, this word was used most often in reference to a kidnapping, or a robbery, or an abduction. A kind of sudden, jarring, unsettling taking away or snatching away.

In the years of the early church, this kind of sudden, unsettling, sometimes violent seizing or snatching up or taking away was how death was often described. A kind of taking away that caused collateral damage.

That's the Latin word. But this Latin word was translated from the Greek word *harpazo*, which has a few different connotations. It can mean "to seize," "to take suddenly and by force," but it can also mean to be "caught up" or "drawn into." "To be gathered together." It is the word used to describe the way that Phillip was suddenly drawn somewhere else after he had finished ministering to the Ethiopian Eunuch. And also, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word used to describe how Elijah was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire.

In these instances, this word definitely describes a suddenness, a manner of surprise, something unexpected. But it's not so much a violent taking against our will, or a seizure that causes pain, but more of a jubilant receiving into, meant to comfort and welcome.

And that is a critical distinction as we do our best to wrap our minds around what is meant by the rapture.

So, before we really delve into today's scripture, a little bit about 1 Thessalonians. 1 Thessalonians was the very first book written in the New Testament. It was Paul's first letter, written to one of the very first churches that Paul ever planted. And in fact, 1 Thessalonians was written even before any of the gospels were written.

When 1 Thessalonians was written, everything about Christianity was fresh, and new. The church was still trying to figure everything out. And one of the key beliefs around that time was that Jesus would return, in bodily form, almost immediately. And that when Jesus returned, he would take up those who believed in him to dwell with him forever. Or else, Jesus would establish God's kingdom here on earth, once and for all. People weren't exactly clear about the details – would everyone alive be carried up to heaven like Elijah, or would heaven come down and establish itself on earth? That wasn't exactly clear. But it also wasn't all that important. The important fact was that Jesus would return. Soon.

But time started to pass. And then more time passed. And people who had known Jesus – people who believed in Jesus – started to die. And this began to cause quite a bit of panic in the new little faith community. "If my loved one dies, and Jesus hasn't come back yet, my loved one will have missed Jesus. They won't be part of Jesus's big reuniting with all believers." People were starting to get really afraid that they would never see their loved ones again, either in this life or in the next. For them, death had already "snatched away" their loved ones and therefore, there was no hope left for them.

And so the Apostle Paul writes this passage to push back against that belief. And he writes it to give these new little baby Christians some hope.

“No, that’s now how this works,” Paul is saying. When Jesus returns, those who are alive will be taken up, caught up, drawn into, the presence of God. But Jesus’s victory over death means that even death itself cannot “snatch away” those who belong to God, try though it may. People may die. People will die. Those we love will die. *We* will die. Sometimes, the death of a loved one might feel to us like a violent kidnapping, or an abduction, as those we love are taken suddenly from us. But death is not the end. God will snatch that person right back from the jaws of death and lovingly draw them into the fullness of God’s presence.

Now, this idea is probably not exactly what we think of when we think about the rapture. When we hear the word “rapture,” what comes to mind is probably the idea that started around the year 1830 and became really popular in the mid- to late-20th Century. And this is the idea that before Jesus returns, God will instantaneously “snatch away” everyone who believes in him, and will institute a 7-year period of pain and suffering and punishment called the “tribulation,” where the antichrist will return to earth and reign, until the end when God finally defeats the antichrist once and for all. Those who turn to Christ during these seven years will suffer the pain of the tribulation, but will be spared from God’s final judgment.

This idea was made especially popular back in the ‘90s through the *Left Behind* series of Christian novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. And I have to tell you that when I was in high school, I was basically obsessed with those books.

Now, I recognize that this may not be a very popular answer, or a satisfying response to this question. But I will share with you my own personal belief. And this is something with which you are more than welcome to vehemently disagree, and I won’t take it personally.

My belief about the end of time is basically the same as my belief about the beginning of time. Was the world created in six literal days, or did God use things like evolution and the Big Bang as part of the way in which he created? We don’t know. And that is not the fundamental question that the Bible sets out to answer. The question that the Bible is concerned with is not the “how” or the “why,” but the “who.” Who did the work of creation and called it all good?

Same thing with end times. What, exactly, will things look like at the end of the world? And when will that be? Are the four horsemen of the apocalypse described in the book of Revelation something that will literally take place during a time of tribulation, or are they there to describe the pain and suffering that we *all* experience as a part of life outside the kingdom of God? We can argue about that all day, but in trying to figure out times and dates and specifics and logistics, we miss the whole point.

And the point is this: Death is a reality of life. Death is painful, because it separates us from those we love.

Sin is a reality of life. And sin is painful, because it also serves to separate us from those we love.

We live in a broken world. A world that is torn apart and ripped asunder by the reality of sin. And we see that playing out in painful ways that mirror a “tribulation” of sorts – in death, yes, but also in disease and sickness. Famine and poverty. War and violence. We see it when Christians turn even against other Christians and we cause harm to one another. That is *anti-Christ*. Completely contrary to the nature of who Christ is. And the effect of all of this is that it only serves to increase the distance between us and the kingdom of God.

But the good news that we see playing out in the book of 1 Thessalonians, and the book of Revelation, and the book of Daniel, and every other piece of scripture that points us to the end of time – the whole point of every single one of these passages – is that God is bigger than all of it. God is where everything started, and God is where everything will end. God is stronger than death. God has defeated death, once and for all. And because of this, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. The writer of Hebrews later underscores this point. That “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.” Nothing. Period.

And therefore, we need not fear – for ourselves, or for our loved ones, or for anyone else. Because the end is written. God wins. God conquers sin and death; God conquers all the evil powers of this world; and God “snatches back” that which belongs to him. Which is everything. Everyone. All of us. You, and me. The victory is God’s. Wholly and completely. And nothing can change that. God’s final act will be to restore everything that is dead, to life, and to reign over a new heaven and a new earth forever and ever and ever – a beautiful kingdom in which sickness and death and pain and suffering and mourning and crying will be no more.

A place where what is old will pass away, and everything will be made brand new.

So my friends, let us rejoice today in the knowledge that no matter what it looks like or how it plays out, God has snatched us away from the jaws of death. God has broken every chain that binds us and has set us free to live life as children of God. Children of the king. Citizens of the kingdom of God that will never end.