

# Sermon Text for September 18, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## *Daniel 12:1-4, I Thessalonians 4:13-18* *“The rapture”*

On January 14, 1986 I was a senior in high school and I was with a youth group from Beacon Evangelical Free Church in Galloway Township, NJ. Big Al Syvertsen who was my youth leader whom I had known since I was 8 or 9 was leading us on a winter retreat. I did not believe in God, he knew it, the kids in the youth group knew it, but I loved and respected him and I enjoyed the fellowship. On this winter retreat we were all in one room and as the speaker was talking I heard God’s voice tell me clearly, audibly, stop living for yourself. Live for something bigger than you, live for me. I was convicted, I broke down in tears and everyone was wondering what was going on, but my youth leader knew.

God gave me a vision that day on what I was to do with the rest of my life, pretty heady stuff for a 17 year old. I was lined up to either go to Middlebury College or Swarthmore to become an interpreter in the state department, that was my goal, I would have reached it, but God literally told me, take a gap year, learn about me and learn about you, go to college go to seminary become a pastor and go on the mission field. I continue to try to follow God’s voice as He calls me. When I took that gap year before going to Swarthmore I went to PCB, which is now Cairn University. I know, some of you think a gap year can’t be another educational institution, well, I did a gap year at another college.

While there I was introduced for the first time in my life to a theological construct about Jesus’ second coming called the rapture. Now, remember I grew up in a Christian family, missionary mom and dad who loved Jesus and we read Scripture before every dinner so I knew my Bible and I knew about God, but I had never heard about this thing called the rapture. You see, one of the favorite discussion points at PCB was this whole thing called Millennialism which has as many theories as there are people in the world. It is all wrapped up with the when, the how, and the what of Jesus’ return.

I believed that Jesus was coming back, but I knew the Bible and I knew that the Bible says over and over again that he is coming back but no one, not even Jesus himself, knows when that is and here is a group of people trying to lay out for me exactly how and when and the what of Jesus’ return. It didn’t then, and it still doesn’t now, sound like something that God would

really want us to do. I knew that Jesus was coming back as a thief in the night and somehow I was surrounded by people who were telling me they knew when the thief was coming, where he was coming, and how he was coming back. And it was really important to them!

When I was a pastor in Italy it never really came up at all, but when I served in Florida these books by Timothy La Haye got everyone's attention, I read them and thought it was bad fiction, but I had people from church coming up to me asking me permission if they could read the book. I said, of course, but read it as fiction, this is not real life and we do not know how Jesus is coming back. As we make our way through the Bible we have run across the primary Scripture that is used as support and a basis for this concept called the rapture in I Thessalonians 4. But it is a human construct squeezed out of a Scripture that addresses something very different, the consolation of the earliest community as they were grappling with the death of loved ones in what they considered the end times. Let's read.

### **READ**

I'm guessing that most of you have never heard of the rapture and probably are wondering so what does this have to do with me and why is this important. I guess my only response is that I have to preach on what the Scripture gives me, and today the Scripture gives me these verses that have been used to prove a point that is different from the point that Paul is trying to make when he writes this letter to the church in Thessalonika. The timeline of this theology can find itself back to 1833, so less than 200 years ago, when John Nelson Derby uses that term to describe the way in which Jesus will be partially come back to earth and he will meet those who are living, and those who are dead, in the clouds before his final return to earth. So the rapture is not considered by those who believe in this as the final return of Jesus, but kind of a partial return.

Matthew Henry in his commentaries used the term rapture when talking about these verses but didn't lay out the theology of it. The Scofield reference Bible made it popular as Scofield took Derby's theology and expounded upon it. It was a Bible used by many Christians especially within the United States and so this became very popular. I will tell you having served as a missionary across the world, the rapture is pretty much an American theology that other cultures and other countries, and other Christians who have been around much longer than we have and who have believed in Jesus much longer than we have wonder what in the world are we up to. That is another red flag for us as well. It is pretty much an American theological construct.

Before the final return of Jesus, that we all expect, there will be a partial return and at that partial return those who are living and those who are dead will be “raptured” up to heaven with Jesus in the clouds. That’s the premise. Now, there has always been a sense of expectancy for the return of Jesus and it is something that our liturgical calendar highlights and is set up to capture. During Advent we sing Come Thou Long Expected Jesus. We have taught from this pulpit that Jesus is coming back, but like a thief in the night.

Our first Scripture reading in Daniel gives us a powerful image of the archangel Michael, who is mentioned by Paul in our Thessalonians Scripture, protecting, sounding trumpets and the dead rising from the dust of the earth. This we believe. But the entire premise of the rapture is that it focuses on the living, on those of us on earth ascending into the clouds. We have become so focused on this Hollywood heightened intrigue of people who are alive being left behind and having to fend for themselves, we miss the entire point of Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians. It was written to answer the question of what will happen with those who have died, not those who are alive. When Jesus comes back and we are alive, what will happen to those who have died?

Let me explain. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is considered his first letter ever written to a community that he founded, that he loves. You can hear his pastoral tone to the people in just what we read together. I don’t want you to be uninformed about those who have died. I am going to cover what will happen to those who have died. Why was this important? Because it is thought that this letter was written maybe 15 years after Jesus had died and the community understood that Jesus was coming back. In fact, they believed that when Jesus said in Matthew 24:34 in the midst of explaining the day of Judgment which is when Jesus comes back he makes this statement: Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” So here they are 15 years later this community was so expecting Jesus’ immanent return that they were not expecting anyone to die before Jesus comes back to earth, and people are dying.

What is going to happen when Jesus comes back tomorrow, and we fully expect him to come back tomorrow, and these our loved ones are not here. Are they going to miss out on the glory of his second coming if they are not here when Jesus comes back. No, Paul says, you and they both will be with Jesus at the same time when he comes back. This is the point of this letter, this pastoral letter, to address those who are grieving over their loved ones not only because they are no longer with them, but also because eternally they were wondering if they would miss out with Jesus’ second coming. It had nothing to do with a predictive explanation of

how Jesus is coming back and certainly wasn't a timeline of events for Jesus' return. It was a pastoral explanation that you do not have to be worried or concerned, your loved ones who have died will be with you and with Jesus when he returns, whenever that is.

There is simply no room in this Scripture to provide a theology that has some people left on earth to try to figure things out on their own. It absolutely seems like a construct of humans and not of God. We simply do not believe in a preliminary return of Christ, a half or partial return. Jesus is coming back, period. Some would distinguish between the rapture and the second coming, I do not. Look at Matthew 24 again and we read these verses that some use to support the rapture: vs.40ff. This talks of the second coming, not of the rapture.

Paul in Thessalonians uses the term "caught up in the clouds" and some have used this to describe what is literally going to happen. That for a period of time there we will be with Jesus and those who have died dancing on the ceiling. But Paul uses that same phrase in II Corinthians 12:2 and then again in 4 to describe what happened to him on the road to Damascus when he first met Jesus and came to a saving knowledge of him. I would say the same of myself that when Jesus spoke to me, literally, I wasn't physically transported into the clouds, but I know that I was with the creator of heaven and earth who was addressing me directly.

This concept of the rapture has hijacked this verse which is very simply a pastoral letter of assurance in the resurrection to those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Paul is telling us here that the power of death cannot be matched by Jesus' resurrection power which is both for him and for us and our loved ones. I want to reclaim this pastoral address of Paul to his congregation without the intrusion of the rapture.

Paul's message here has nothing to do with the rapture. We are not to serve people with platitudes that they shouldn't grieve because their loved one is with God. Paul says grieve, absolutely grieve, but do not despair, do not lose hope in Jesus, because the power of Jesus over death in the resurrection is our hope. Paul does not address grief with the words: at least he is not suffering, she is in a better place, he is looking down on us in heaven. People in pain will seek out consolation, even if it is superficial.

But Paul says something very different here. The story of your loved one who died is intertwined with the Jesus salvation story in the resurrection, so there is hope. We have a promise of a future victory of God. Death is real, but the resurrection is realer. Look at vs. 14 which is our statement of faith here. We believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and so we

also believe in our bodily physical resurrection. Jesus will embrace those who have died in his and in their resurrection.

At the end of the day I'm guessing that some of you might be disappointed in my approach to this Scripture. You know by now that I try to address Scripture without an agenda and just try to give you insight into my understanding of the Word of God for us without any pretension. You know the statement in essentials unity, non-essentials freedom, in all things love, well, this is not an essential. Jesus is coming back, nobody knows when or how or what it will look like, and if someone approaches you and is certain of it, back away. The point of this Scripture is to comfort those who are in grief, it is a pastoral letter. Paul tells us simply, do not grieve as those without hope. We know that death does not have the last word. When death occurs it doesn't take our hope away from us, in fact we grieve, but we believe that death does not have the last word.

The point is that Jesus' resurrection is not an isolated event, a single rabbit God pulls out of the hat. We will all be raised from the dead. That's the point. One last word of warning in regards to the rapture. Remember the words of Deuteronomy 4:2, and Revelation 22:18-19, and Proverbs 30:5-6. Amen.