



1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Play Like a Thief in the Night clip

Ooh, scary, isn't it? I only played this clip for Brian Larrington's benefit. I've never seen the movie but he told me that it scared him silly when he was a kid. And that was the sole intention of the movie—to scare people into believing they would be left behind. Wait—did I just say “left behind”? This movie, *A Thief in the Night*, became a four-part series which was the 1970's equivalent of the *Left Behind* series. Wikipedia describes the last movie in the series. “The fourth film involves life after a nuclear war, where mutants roam the Earth.” Thanks, but no thanks.

Speaking of the *Left Behind* series, most may only know about the first seven books. In reality, there were almost 70 books, a video game, a music CD, graphic novels and three movies. The books alone brought in over a billion dollars in sales for Tyndale Publishers.

Hal Lindsey's, *The Late Great Planet Earth* has sold about 40 million copies. This one was popular when Karen and I were first married—88 reasons *Why The Rapture Will Be* in 1988. Remarkably, it sold 5 million copies. More recently, John Hagee's *Four Blood Moons* sold over a million copies. This is interesting given the fact that on Sunday night we experienced a Super Blood Wolf Moon. And we're still here.

Call me cynical, but I am not a fan of prophecy related books, seminars, etc. Most of them focus on the fantastical or obscure. Or even more so, they make the obscure into something fantastical and scary. Or they may be vague predictions that are about as specific as astrologers, palm readers and faith healers. For example, in his blood moon book, Hagee said, "I believe that in these next two years, we're going to see something dramatic happen in the Middle East involving Israel that will change the course of history in the Middle East and impact the whole world."¹ If you give yourself a two year window and the bar you have to reach is “something dramatic,” that could be almost anything. It's like saying I believe there is someone in this room with back pain. So yes, most of these guys end up on my “rascals list.”

So then why do they sell tens of millions of books and make billions of dollars? Part of the reason is because Christians tend to be mindless sheep who follow the hottest trends. But part of the reason is because they use snippets of the Bible to prove their case. For example, the Bible says there will be a blood moon at the time of Jesus' return.

Joel 2:31—The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

Matthew 24:29-- “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light.

Acts 2:20—The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. (Peter is quoting from Joel.)

Revelation 6:12-- When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood

So there is enough Biblical and circumstantial data to convince many people, especially the four blood moons back in 2014 and 2015.² Also, the Bible does say that Jesus will come like a thief in the night. But what the 1972 movie never tells you is that two verses later, Paul added this very important detail. “But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.”

Furthermore, the reason that Paul wrote about the second coming of Christ wasn't to scare his readers, but to encourage them.

4:18—Therefore encourage one another with these words.

5:11—Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

That verse certainly would have helped little Brian Larrington not be so scared, right? Context, baby. Paul's purpose was to encourage believers, not to frighten children into the kingdom—the very opposite of the movie and the way most Christians talk about the second coming of Christ. I am not saying that there is not an evangelistic, fear of God aspect to the second coming of Christ. Clearly there is and I will address that. But at least in this passage, Paul wanted his readers to be encouraged.

The second half of chapter four and the first half of chapter five are clearly one unit of thought. I want to read them together, but we won't finish working our way through the entire text this morning.

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about 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 a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, 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, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

1. Jesus died and rose again.

This is a core principle that Paul introduced in verse 14. *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again.* Most commentators believe that this was a creedal formula that was already widely used before Paul put it in his letter to the Thessalonian church. It is like a mini doctrinal statement: We believe that Jesus died and rose again.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul called this “the gospel.” The word gospel appears 97 times in the New Testament but in almost every case, it is merely stated and not defined. That’s why 1 Corinthians 15 is so helpful.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...

1. Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.
2. he was buried
3. he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

This is the gospel and it is the core of Paul’s message in regard to Jesus’ second coming. This is the implication of Jesus’ first coming and if you fail to grasp it, you will also miss his second coming. Jesus death and resurrection—and his victory over sin and death—is the foundation for everything else in this passage.

2. Jesus is coming again.

Verse fifteen is the purpose Paul wrote this passage.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. Somehow, the church in

Thessalonica got confused about what will happen when Christ returns. Paul wanted them to understand that deceased believers would be resurrected before believers who were still alive. There was a vital piece of information missing in their belief and it was causing them grief. That’s why Paul was writing—to clear up the confusion so that they would have hope. I’ll get to that point a little later, but first, we need to be clear about Jesus’ return. We need to be certain we know that he is coming again.

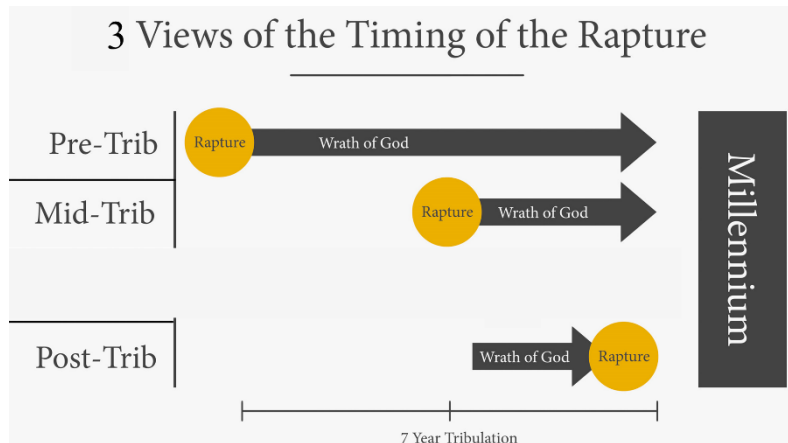
*16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be **caught up** together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*

There it is with crystal clarity. Jesus is coming again one day and there are certain signs that will accompany his return. Many of you will know this as the “rapture.” Technically speaking, the word rapture is not in the Bible, unless you can read Latin. Here are two other places it is used in the New Testament.

Acts 8:39—And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord **carried** Philip **away**

2 Corinthians 12:2--I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was **caught up** to the third heaven

In each case, the Latin form of this word is used, which is *rapturo*, which means “to take away.” And since theologians tend to like Latin, this became the basis of the doctrine of the rapture. As you may know, there are four basic views on the timing of the rapture. In other words, it’s a “when” question—when is Jesus returning for his church? There are four basic views, although the Pre-wrath rapture is basically a restatement of the Mid-Trib position, so I’ll cross that one out and keep it at the traditional three options.



Pre-trib is the belief that Jesus will return before the seven-year tribulation. Jesus’ return is synonymous with the rapture because he has to return in order to take us with him. Mid-Trib is the belief that Jesus will return in the middle of the Tribulation, at the 3 ½ year mark. And Post-trib is the belief that he will return after the seven-year tribulation.

PRE-TRIB	MID-TRIB	POST-TRIB
<div style="background-color: #c00; color: white; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Rich?</div> Jesus will return BEFORE the Tribulation	<div style="background-color: #c00; color: white; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Rich?</div> Jesus will return IN THE MIDDLE OF the Tribulation	<div style="background-color: #c00; color: white; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Rich?</div> Jesus will return AFTER the Tribulation

To show you the fundamental importance of this belief, here is a chart of what I believe. Here's the thing. As far as I know, in my eighteen years as the pastor, I don't think I have ever stated my position on the timing of the rapture. I may have in a private conversation, but I don't think I ever have in a message. This makes sense given what our church and our denomination teaches on it. See if you can identify what we believe.

9. Christ's Return

We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

Did you find it? You didn't find it because it's not there. We don't take a position on the rapture. We never have. When we get into 2 Thessalonians I'll share my belief but for now, I just wanted to introduce the topic. But the main thing to know is that Jesus is coming again. He will come in glory. He will be announced in the heavens. Jesus said that many false prophets will arise and claim to be him, but there's no way you could miss this-- *a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God*. Nope, not way anyone will miss Jesus' return.

3. Jesus will resurrect all believers.

What will happen after the trumpet and angelic announcement? *And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...*

Not only is there a lot of hype about the last days and Jesus' return, there is a tremendous amount of confusion. And the resurrection is one of these topics of confusion. I think that a large number of Christians don't even realize that we will receive a resurrected body. John Piper is helpful here.

It seems to me that the hope of resurrection does not have the same place of power and centrality for us today that it had for the early Christians. And I think one of the reasons for that is that we have a wrong view of the age to come. When we talk about the future and the eternal state we tend to talk about heaven, and heaven tends to imply a place far away characterized by non-material, ethereal, disembodied spirits.

In other words, we tend to assume that the condition that the departed saints are in now without their bodies is the way it will always be. And we have encouraged ourselves so much with how good it is for them now, we tend to forget that it is an imperfect state and not the way it will be, nor the way Paul wanted it to be for himself. Yes to die is gain, and yes, to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord, but no this is not our ultimate hope. This is not the final state of our joy. This is not our final or main comfort when we have lost loved ones who believe.³

1 Corinthians 15 has the most thorough description of our future resurrection. "I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in

a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:50-53).

I think of my friend Dwight, the former associate pastor I visited in the hospital. He has been wheelchair bound for over fifty years. He is looking forward to taking his first steps. But he won't be taking those steps when he dies. We will not have our physical resurrected bodies. The Bible is more or less silent on this but it would seem that we would exist in spirit only. We will be with Jesus. The Bible is clear about that, but we will not be walking around like we do now. But just as this young church did, we are to look forward to our final resurrection.

4. Deceased believers will be resurrected first.

And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

The Thessalonian church was concerned about their loved one and the resurrection. But there was a larger concern than just the mere order of the resurrections. It wasn't just who goes first. It was much deeper than that, even though their precise concern may not be clear to us. Regardless, the church was concerned about it and Paul's goal was to take away their fear and give them hope.

5. The resurrection is a cause for hope in the midst of grief, not hopeless grief.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.



In Derbyshire, UK. You can visit the St. Oswald Church where you will find the Boothby Monument. This is a marble monument of Penelope Boothby who died in 1791 just shy of her sixth birthday.⁴ It is said that her parents never really recovered from losing their daughter and the inscription on the monument bears this out.

“She was in form and intellect most exquisite. The unfortunate Parents ventured their all on this

frail bark. And the wreck was total.”

These are the words of grief without hope. But as believers, we grieve with hope. I am reminded again of my friend Dwight. The first thing he said to us was, “I'm really looking forward to the future.” I'll ask you the same thing. Are you looking forward to the future?

Rich Maurer
January 27, 2019

¹ <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/insideisrael/2014/february/divine-sign-for-israel-hagee-explains-blood-moons>

² What interested prophecy teachers was not just the number of lunar eclipses in those two years but the timing of the eclipses. In both 2014 and 2015, a full lunar eclipse occurred on the first day of Passover and the first day of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles). In addition to the two lunar eclipses of 2015, two solar eclipses also occurred. Similar lunar eclipses in back-to-back years have happened seven times since the time of Christ. Some of those have occurred in years of significance for the Jewish people, such as 1948 (when Israel was granted statehood) and 1967 (when the Six-Day War was fought). (<https://www.gotquestions.org/blood-red-moon.html>)

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-happens-at-death>

⁴ <https://www.geni.com/people/Penelope/6000000029078707039>