

Study Series 14 Lesson 3: The *Parousia*: the Resurrection – 1 Thess. 4:13-17

Here is a quote of the whole context (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11), then our comments below. Put yourself in the shoes of the first century Thessalonians as you read this, and pay close attention to the words **boldfaced**:

- “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are **asleep**, so that you will **not grieve** as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will **bring with Him** those who have **fallen asleep** in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that **we who are alive and remain until the [Parousia]** of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will **descend from heaven** with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the **dead in Christ will rise first**. *Then* we who are **alive and remain** will 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**.

Therefore comfort one another with these words. Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just **like a thief in the night**. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then **destruction will come upon them** suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and **they will not escape**.

But you, brethren, are **not in darkness**, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then **let us not sleep** as others do, but let us **be alert and sober**. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

But since we are of the day, **let us be sober**, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has **not destined us for wrath**, but for **obtaining salvation** through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live **together with Him**. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.” (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11)

Purpose of Paul's Statements:

In the following sections I intend to provide excerpts from some of the standard lexicons and commentaries that will be helpful in your research, so that you can see we are not inventing these definitions and concepts, but that our conclusions are squarely based on the best grammatical, historical, hermeneutical and exegetical resources available. Here is what F. C. Cook had to say about the purpose of Paul's statements in 1 Thess. 4-5:

- ... His object now is to speak of those who were already dead... It was concerning such especially that, so far as we can judge, the Thessalonians had directly asked a question ... The question was, "Those, our dear ones, who have fallen asleep, who are dead, what of them?" ... The fear which the Thessalonians had for their beloved ones was, lest they might have suffered some loss. [*F. C. Cook's Explanatory and Critical Commentary* Volume 3, Romans to Philemon, pp. 723-724]

Almost all commentaries on Paul's letters to the Thessalonians affirm that the "living and remaining" Christians in Thessalonica were very concerned that their departed brethren might miss out on the benefits of the Kingdom that would be received at the *Parousia*. Paul reassures them that the living would not precede the dead in the reception of those Kingdom benefits. Note that those who lived and remained until the *Parousia* would realize a significant benefit, not just another "positional, spiritual or covenantal" change. And this benefit would be received by living saints at the *Parousia*, not later at their death.

Paul goes even further to comfort them with the affirmation that not only would the dead be raised "first," but that both the dead and the living would be reunited "together with them" **at the same place** to receive those benefits together **at the same time**. The living would experience this "catching up" and reunion without dying.

Then Paul reassures them even further by saying that once gathered into Christ's presence, they will remain with Him forever, no matter where He is (in the air, or back in heaven). So the basic purpose of this section of Paul's letter to the

Thessalonians is to comfort and encourage them, and to remind them to remain awake and alert while awaiting their soon coming Lord, who would raise the dead and catch them up together with the living saints into His presence.

Now let's look at the key words and phrases of 1 Thess. 4:15-17. We simply quote from some standard lexicons and commentaries with a little additional explanation.

"we who are alive and remain until ... " (vv. 15, 17)

Note who Paul is writing these words to. It is not to saints 2,000 years into the future, but to those saints alive then, some of whom would remain alive until the return of Christ. This is the same idea mentioned in Matt. 16:27-28, John 21:22 and 1 Cor. 15:51. Not all of the folks alive then would die before the *Parousia*. Some of them would "live and remain until the *Parousia*." This phrase is used again in verse 17 to identify who it was that would be "snatched away in clouds" to meet the Lord in the air at His descent from heaven. It was some of this same group of saints who would "live and remain **until** the *Parousia*," not some saints thousands of years into the future.

"will not precede" (v. 15)

This phrase directly addresses the fundamental concern of the Thessalonians. They were afraid their loved ones who had died would miss the benefits that would be experienced by those who lived until the *Parousia*. Paul reassures the living that they would not be the only ones to get these benefits. The living ones would not precede the dead, but would get the benefits at the same time. Immediately after the dead are raised, both the living and the dead would proceed together into the presence of Christ.

The word "precede" implies the living will also go into His presence, but will not precede the dead. Both the resurrected dead and the living saints would be "snatched away" together as a group. The living saints were **expecting** to **experience** the *Parousia* and **receive** the benefits while they were still alive, not later after their death (as some figurative rapture advocates suggest). Otherwise their grief for the dead would have been pointless, if they would have to die to get the benefits, why were they grieving over the dead? They would instead be longing to join the dead, instead of preferring to "live and remain until the *Parousia*." Paul clearly says they would live and remain until the *Parousia* and experience that "catching up" (together with the resurrected dead) without dying.

- Did they see it, but not consider it important enough to say anything about it the rest of their lives?
- Or were they simply "snatched away" and no longer around to say anything?

"descend from heaven" (v. 16)

This is another very interesting phrase. Notice it says Christ descends "**from heaven**" into the "air." So, whatever the "air" is referring to, we know it is **not heaven**, since heaven is where Christ descended from in order to come **into the air**. This needs to be kept in mind as we look at the meaning of "air" later on in this study when we come to that section.

"dead in Christ will rise first" (v. 16)

Note the word "first" that is used here. It is a matter of priority. Paul reassures the grieving saints there in Thessalonica that their dead loved ones would not be left out of the coming reunion with Christ. The dead would be raised "first." This is a sequential statement that is closely (if not inseparably) connected with the first word of verse 17 ("then"). Before the whole group of saints (living and dead) could be "snatched up together" into the air to be with Christ, the dead had to be raised. So there is a strong sequential statement here in verses 16 and 17. **First** (this will

happen), **then** (the next thing will happen). This is a common usage in the New Testament to enumerate lists of events that happen in **sequential order**. There are no indications built into the words "first" and "then" to indicate how much time elapses between each of these sequential events. The point of their usage is simply sequential. To find out how much time is to elapse between these sequential events, we have to study each **context and all related passages** on the subject. Notice what *The Interpreter's Bible* has to say about this sequence and timing in connection with 1 Cor. 15.

- "The Lord himself will descend from heaven The dead shall rise at his coming and his call. G. G. Findlay (*The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, Cambridge: University Press, 1904; Cambridge Greek Testament, pp. 100-101) thinks that the "sleeping saints" will have already been raised and will come with the Lord. But in 1 Cor. 15:52 it is explicitly said that "the **trumpet** will sound, and the **dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.**" Both resurrection and transformation are to take place **in connection with the sounding of the trumpet that heralds the coming of the Lord**. Following this rising of the dead in Christ, then we who are alive... shall be caught up together with them in the clouds. No exact parallel to this thought is found in the G.T. or N.T. However, the clouds as mediums of translation to heaven are found in Acts 1:9; Rev. 11:12. The coming of the Lord "on the clouds" or "in the clouds" is reflected as a part of the early Christian thinking (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; Rev. 14:11-16). The disciples heard a voice out of the cloud at the Transfiguration (Mat. 17:5; Mk. 9:7; Luke 9:35). 2 Kings 2:11 speaks of the going up of Elijah in a somewhat similar way." [*The Interpreter's Bible* Vol. 11, p. 306-307]

"Then" [Gr. *epeita*] (v. 17)

The "catching up" is what happened to the "living" at the *Parousia*, and the word "then" is a sequencing indicator to tell us when this "catching up" will occur. Let's take a look at how various commentaries and lexicons define this word "then" (Gr. *epeita*) and explain its usage **in this context**: (boldface emphasis mine):

- *Barnes' Notes* on 1 Thess. 4:17 (p. 48) on the Greek word "*epeita*:" "The word here rendered *then* (*epeita*), does not necessarily mean that this would occur ***immediately***. It properly marks ***succession in time, and means afterwards, next, next in the order of events***, Luke 16:7; Gal. 1:21; Jam. 4:14. ...the next thing in order... The proper meaning of the word, however, **denotes a succession so close as to-exclude the idea of a long interval**... it will admit of the supposition of such a **brief, momentary interval** ("in a moment, in the blink of an eye," 1 Cor. 15:51-52)."
- *Commentary on the Greek Text of ...Thessalonians* (John Eadie, Vol. 5, pp. 168-169) on 1 Thess. 4: 17 - "The adverb *epeita* (ep eita) "then," not only introduces the second result of the Lord's descent, that the living shall be caught up, but also implies that the last event is **closely connected with the former**. ...The two events are consecutive, the **one follows close upon the other**.
- *Ellicott's Commentaries, Critical and Grammatical, on the Epistles of Saint Paul* (Charles J. Ellicott, Vol. 1, pp. 77-79) - [*epeital* "then" – **immediately after the anastasis of oi en Xristo**; second act in the mighty drama. The particle *epeita*, as its derivation [*ep eita*] and the following *hama* both seem to suggest, marks the second event as **speedily following** on the first, and...specifies **not only the continuity but the proximity of the two events**.
- *Arndt and Gingrich's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, says this about the meaning of the Greek word for "then" in 1 Thess. 4:17 - *epeita* adv., *then, thereupon*. 1) of time, Luke 16:7; Gal. 1:21; Jam. 4:14; John 11:7; Gal. 1:18; cf. 2:1. 2) to denote succession in enumerations: A) together with indications of chronological sequence (proton...*epeita*, **first...then**) 1 Cor. 15:46; 1 Thess. 4:17. (*proteron...epeita*, **first...then**) Heb. 7:27; (*aparche...epeita*, as firstfruit...next) 1 Cor. 15:23. (*epeita...epeita*, **thereupon...then**) 1 Cor. 15:6f, cf. 1 Cor. 15:5 (v. 1). B) of succession alone: (proton...*epeita*) Heb. 7:2; Jam. 3:17. As fourth and fifth members in a list, 1 Cor. 12:28.

- *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (translated by Joseph Henry Thayer, being "Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti," definition of various Greek words, p. 13ft) - *epeita*, adv., (*epi, eita*), **thereupon, thereafter, then, afterwards**; used: A) of time: Mark 7:5; Luke 16:7; Gal. 1:21; Jam. 4:14; *meta touto* is added redundantly in John 11:7; a more definite specification of time is added epexegetically, *meta ete tria*, Gal. 1:18; *dia dekatessaron eton*, Gal. 2:1. B) in enumerations it is used: 1) of time and order: *proton...epeita*, 1 Cor. 15:46; 1 Thess. 4:17; *proteron...epeita*, Heb. 7:27; *aparxe...epeita*, 1 Cor. 15:23; *eita...epeita*, 1 Cor. 15:5,6; *epeita...epeita*. 2) of order alone: *proton...epeita*, Heb. 7:2; *triton...epeita...epeita*, 1 Cor. 12:28.

Note that in 1 Thess. 4:17 it is the "catching up" itself that is to occur to the "living and remaining" ones at the *Parousia*, **not** just a change in the way the saints are handled at their death from the *Parousia* onwards. It is **not** a change in the process, but a "catching up" event.

So how should we define the word "**then**" (Greek "*epeita*") and understand its usage in this context? See the standard lexical definitions of the Greek word *epeita* given at the beginning of this section. We showed both lexically and in usage that *epeita* is used both in an "immediate next" sense, as well as an enumeration or sequential sense.

All students of NT Greek know that the precise connotative meaning of a particular form of a Greek word cannot be obtained merely from its lexical definition, but is **best derived from its specific usage in a particular context**. It is a common error of first year Greek students to assume that the root definition must be applied in every usage. What they soon learn, however, is that **the context itself is the final arbiter of meaning**. Lexicons and usage studies are helpful, but they are not the final determining factor. So it doesn't matter if a thousand texts having "definition A" could be presented. If the context itself clearly gives it is "definition B," we have to go with the contextual definition, if it is indeed one of the possible meanings of the word, as it is here.

Let's do some usage analysis of this word *epeita* ("then") in **all 16** of its occurrences in the New Testament. Here is the list:

- Luke 16:7 "**Then** he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He *said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'
- John 11:7 **Then** after this He *said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."
- 1 Cor. 12:28 And God has appointed in the Church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, **then** miracles, **then** gifts of healing, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.
- 1 Cor. 15:6 **After that** He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;
- 1 Cor. 15:7 **then** He appeared to James, then [Gr. *eita*] to all the apostles;
- 1 Cor. 15:23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, **after that** those who are Christ's at His coming,
- 1 Cor. 15:46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; **then** the spiritual.
- Gal. 1:18 **Then** three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.
- Gal. 1:21 **Then** I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.
- Gal. 2:1 **Then** after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.
- 1 Thess. 4:17 **Then** we who are alive and remain will 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.

- Heb. 7:2 to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of His name, king of righteousness, and **then** also king of Salem; which is king of peace.
- Heb. 7:27 who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and **then** for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.
- James 3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, **then** peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.
- James 4:14 Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and **then** vanishes away.

Epeita is not consistently used in only one way. It is used several ways, in enumerations without any temporal (time) attachments, as well as in contexts where there are long, short or even immediate sequences. **The key idea is sequential, with the context determining how long, short, or immediate that sequence will be.** It can be simply sequential as in enumerated lists of items that have no connections with time at all, or it can be used in a sequential timing sense with indicators in the context to define how long the interval is between its sequential events.

With that in mind, let's look again more closely at the list of every occurrence above to see if there are any examples of an "immediate" sequential usage. Look at the contexts of these two texts in particular: **(Read)** Luke 16:7 and Heb. 7:27. In all the occurrences which have temporal (time) intervals between sequential events, the amount of time between those events is indicated in the context. It can be quite long, or brief, or immediate, depending on the context. Now notice these two texts. In **Luke 16:7**, the timing was extremely short or immediate between these meetings with his master's creditors, since this steward had already been terminated from his job and was preparing an accounting for his former master. He had to make haste in settling the accounts. There was no long period of time, if any time at all, between these sequential sessions with the creditors – rapid succession – immediately or almost immediately with little (if any) interval between them.

The point is, the word *epeita* does not include within it a necessity for a long interval or any interval at all. The sequential events may be immediate if the context allows it. See also **Heb. 7:27**. This is a reference to the ministrations of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). There was no interval between his sequential sacrificial services. They were performed immediately, one right after the other in tight sequence. The waiting pilgrims in the outer courts got real anxious if his duties dragged on too long. This is a clear instance of where the word *epeita* is used in a sequence that is immediate.

The context must always be examined to determine how long the interval (if any) is supposed to be between these sequential events. Consider this verse and its preceding two verses (**Read again: 1 Thess. 4:15-17**). Notice that it is only those saints who are still alive at the *Parousia* who will be "caught up" together with the resurrected dead (vv. 15, 17), and this "catching up" happens to them while they are still alive at the *Parousia*. We also noted above that the word "precede" (v. 15) implies that the "living and remaining ones would proceed into the presence of Christ at His descent into the air, but not before the dead were raised. There was a proper sequence in this "processional" event. And the descent of Christ at his *Parousia* is into this very "air" where the meeting with the resurrected dead will take place.

It is clear from all the other resurrection texts in our NT that the saints do not stay there in the air after that meeting, but **ascend back to heaven with Christ** after He has judged His enemies and conquered the last enemy death. The point that is crucial here, is that the "living and remaining ones" are caught up together with the resurrected dead into this **meeting in the air**. This meeting occurred at His *Parousia*, and before He ascended back to heaven with his saints. The phrase "together with them" (Gr. *Hama sun autois*) in verse 17 also points unmistakably to a tight immediate connection between the resurrection of the dead and the catching up of the "living and remaining ones."

Notice in the lexical quotations given in the "together with them" section below that the word "*hama*" (together) when used together with "*sun autois*" (with them) almost certainly means both **together in place**, as well as **together at the same time**. This text says the living and remaining ones would be "caught up together with" the resurrected dead into that meeting in the air. This meeting in the air only lasted during the *Parousia*. Afterwards Christ took His saints back to heaven with Him. **From then onwards** any saints who died would **immediately** go into the Holy of Holies part of Heaven to where Christ had gone after His meeting in the air with His gathered saints.

"caught up" [Gr. *harpazo*] (v. 17)

If there were ever a key word or phrase upon which the meaning of a whole section of text depended, this is that word! Some have contended that this word (Gr. *harpazo*) should not be translated with any directional indicators (e.g., up or away), but simply as "snatch." The "up" (directional indicator) is certainly not a part of the root meaning of the word, but can be supplied by translators **when there is contextual justification for it**. As we will see in the lexical works quoted below, **there is every reason to add a directional indicator when the context allows, suggests or demands it**. We have three directional indicators in the immediate context of 1 Thess. 4:17 which not only allow the addition of "up," but **almost demand it**. We will look at those three directional indicators later in this section. It is amazing how much has been written about the meaning of this word *harpazo*. Here are statements from some of the more important lexical authorities: (boldface emphasis is mine):

- *Werner Foerster* says this about "*harpazo*" in volume 1 (p. 472) of Gerhard Kittel's 10-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, one of the top Greek lexical works in the theological world: *harpazo* - "...In the NT it occurs at 2 Cor. 12:2, 4 (vision); **1 Thess. 4:17**; Rev. 12:5 ("to **catch up** or away"); Acts 8:39 - always expressing the mighty operation of God.
- *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (translated by Joseph Henry Thayer, p. 13ft) – *harpazo*; fut. *harpaso*; 1 aor. *herpasa*; Pass. 1 aor. *herpasthen*; 2 aor. *herpagen* (2 Cor. 12:2, 4...); 2 fut. *harpagesomai*; to

seize, carry off by force: ...[Mat. 12:29, see *diarpazo*]; John 10:12; to seize on, claim for one's self eagerly: *ten basileian tou theou*, Matt. 11:12; to snatch out or away: Matt. 13:19; John 10:28; proverbial to rescue from the danger of destruction, Jude 23; to seize and carry off speedily, John 6:15; Acts 23:10; **used of divine power transferring a person marvelously and swiftly from one place to another, to snatch or catch away**: Acts 8:39; Rev. 12:5; 2 Cor. 12:2,4; 1 Thess. 4:17.

- *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (James Strong, def. of Greek word "harpazo") – *harpazo*, from a derivative of *haireomai* (to choose); to **seize** (in various applications): – **catch** (away, **up**), pluck, pull, take (by force).
- *Arndt and Gingrich's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, says this about the meaning of the Greek word for "caught up" in 1 Thess. 4:17 - *harpazo*, fut. *harpaso*. ...**snatch, seize, i.e., take suddenly and vehemently, or take away** in the sense of: 1. steal, carry off, drag away... 2. snatch or take away, a. forcefully, b. in such a way that no resistance is offered, ... esp. of the Holy Spirit, which carries someone away, Acts 8:39. Passively, be **caught up** to the third heaven, 2 Cor. 12:2. ...*en nephelais eis aera*, [**in clouds into the air**] 1 Thess. 4:17...

The "snatching away" (whatever its nature) was to be an "**event**" that would occur to those who were **alive** and **who would remain alive until the Parousia**. Paul even includes himself in the number of those alive at the time, some of whom would live to see this event occur (e.g., he says in 1 Cor. 15:51 that "we" would not all die)

This idea of a "snatching away" of living people at the *Parousia* in AD 66 is totally consistent with the Preterist view. Paul plainly separates the two groups (living versus dead) in 1 Thessalonians 4 and says the resurrection happens to the **dead**, while the "snatching" happens at least to the **living**, if not to the dead also. Note the word order in the Greek in 1 Thess. 4:17 – "Then we the living and remaining ones **together with them** will be caught up in clouds into a meeting of the Lord into the air." This word order suggests that both the resurrected dead and the living are **together in one group** which is caught up **at the same time** (not just to **the same place**).

While the primary root meaning of *harpazo* is indeed "snatch away" or "steal," **the context of each usage determines its exact meaning.** These lexical authorities affirm that the Greek word *harpazo* certainly can have the meaning of "catch up" in those places where it is used locationally or directionally. So we don't want to be guilty of the mistake many first-year Greek students make when they take the root meaning of a word and apply it universally in every occurrence, regardless of its contextual usage. The Greek word "*harpazo*" simply means a "snatching away." **We have to look in the context to determine the place to which the object (or person) will be "snatched."**

In some contexts (Acts 8:39) it is a snatching from one place to another on earth. In other contexts, it is a snatching away "up" into the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:1-7). It is "directional" only in the sense that Christ "ascended" into that realm in a cloud. But that realm exists all around us. It is "in the air" all around us, the same realm that Satan was the prince of the power of (Eph. 2:2), and it is that realm that God has to open up to view for us by rolling the clouds back (like a scroll) and letting us see into it. It normally is not visible to us. Elisha prayed for his servant to have his eyes opened so he could see into that realm (2 Kings 6:15-17). It is not every day that a Theophany like this occurs.

Josephus talks about one in AD 66 in which they saw the angelic armies in the clouds surrounding Jewish cities, and they saw the chariots (representing God's presence. Refer back to **Study Series 7 3a1 and 3a2** for those detailed studies into all the recorded phenomena). So it is technically correct to say there is no direction necessarily attached to the lexical definition of the Greek word "*harpazo*." However, when this word is used in a directional sense, there is always some indication in the context, and there are at least three other passages which contain a directional sense of "up" (2 Cor. 12:2, 4; and Rev. 12:5).

It is also true that the spiritual realm is all **around** us (kind of like a parallel universe), and in that sense Paul was "snatched away" into that heavenly (spiritual) realm (2 Cor. 12:2-4). But typologically the heavenly realm is quite often spoken of in Scripture with a **locational** or **directional** sense of being up above.

So it is not a misrepresentation of the lexical meanings to suggest the same meaning in 1 Thess. 4:17, especially when the "snatching away" is "into the air" (the spiritual realm) or into heaven where Christ and the Father are. Now maybe we could debate whether the usage in 1 Thess. 4 is a "directional" or a "positional" usage. But it doesn't really matter whether we take the meaning as "snatch away" into the spiritual realm or "catch up" into the spiritual realm. Both are legitimate possible meanings that still allow for an actual **transfer of living people to the spiritual realm where Christ is**. The usage of "air" and "clouds" together with the "descent" of Christ from "heaven" is a contextual signal that "*harpazo*" is **being used in an upward directional sense, and therefore means "caught up" rather than "snatch away."** But there is no problem using the definition "snatch away" either. It would work just as well in this context and allows for a rapture just as easily as the "caught up" phrase would. I prefer the "caught up" translation because of the three other skyward directional indicators used in the context (Christ **descended** from heaven, in the **clouds**, and in the **air**). When Christ descends from heaven into the "air/aer" (spiritual realm between heaven and earth) where the clouds are, He **first** resurrects the dead, **then** snatches away His "living and remaining ones" together with the resurrected dead to a meeting in the air with Him.

1 Thess. 4 is literally talking about the **dead saints in Hades being raised out of Hades**. Then those who are still alive and remained **alive** until the *Parousia* would be "snatched away" or "caught up" **together with them** (v. 17) into the air/aer (the spiritual realm where the angels were active) where Christ had just "descended" (v. 16) with His angels. It says that Christ would "descend from heaven" and meet them "in the clouds" and "in the air." There are three very clear indicators here that the meaning of "aer" is the atmosphere around us where the angels often appeared, and where Satan was the ruler before AD 70. It was that spiritual realm where the angels and demons had their activity.

It wasn't always visible to mere mortals. That is what a "Theophany" is all about. God had to make that spiritual realm visible to us. Only prophets and "seers" like Elijah and Elisha could "see" into that realm normally. Everyone else had to have their "eyes opened" to see those events. Or God had to "roll the clouds back like a scroll" so that a window was opened up for people on earth to see into the spiritual realm "above."

Josephus (Wars 6.5.3) says they saw the angelic armies "aloft" above ground (in the air) running about among the clouds (of the air). He even gives the **exact day** (Iyyar 21) and **the hour** (just before sunset) of this event. He says it was documented in some historical narratives of the day. This was **the sign** that Israel was about to be judged by Christ and His angelic armies. It was the time to raise the dead, reward the righteous, and judge the wicked.

This is Theophany (God appearance) or "cloud coming" language. In the OT when God came on the clouds it was not always visible to humans. Usually only designated "seers" (prophets) were allowed to see these "appearances" of God and His angels. But make no mistake about it, He was there in the spiritual realm doing His redemptive work, regardless of whether we humans could see into that realm or not. Elijah and Elisha were seers who were allowed to see into that realm. Paul was caught up into that realm as well. And so was John who saw the Apocalypse.

Christ ascended (up) into heaven in a cloud. The Glory Cloud received Him out of their sight. The cloud rose up into heaven. There is upward directional language here. He left in the same way He was to return. He **ascended** with the clouds and His return was to be a **descent** with the clouds. This **ascent** and **descent** are both directional indicators. So, I have no hesitation in preferring the directional translation of "*harpazo*" here in the 1 Thessalonian 4 context.

"together with them" (v. 17)

This is another crucial phrase in this context. Many of these phrases taken by themselves could be interpreted in significantly different ways. But when we connect the words and phrases in this context, "the whole is more than the sum of its parts." There is a clear influence upon the meaning of these phrases by their use in close connection with the other words and phrases. The precise connotative meaning usually cannot be determined any other way than by seeing how the context shapes its meaning. This is such a phrase. Notice how the following excerpts from lexicons and commentaries clarify this for us. (boldface emphasis is mine):

- *Commentary on the Greek Text* (John Eadie, p. 169) on 1 Thess. 4:17 – "... [Gr.] *hama* may mean *simul*, **at the same time**, or all in one company. But as *sun autois* follows, **the temporal meaning of *hama* is to be preferred**, and it also implies that the one event, though behind the other in time, is **in close proximity** to it. ...The resurrection precedes, and though the dead are prior in resurrection, the living are not posterior to them in this rapture, but **both simultaneously are lifted up in one band to meet the Lord.**"
- *Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (James Moffatt, p. 104) on 1 Thess. 4:17 - "Paul's conception of the second stage of the *Parousia* would seem to be that the resurrected dead and the living, now **a great company of saints assembled** on the earth, are seized by Divine agency and **taken upwards together**, as it were on a chariot of clouds, until they reach the spot between heaven and earth where the Lord in His descent has arrived. It is not clear from the description how much of verses 16 and 17 takes place simultaneously. It is, however, **all part of one connected act, presumably with no hiatus.**"
- *New International Commentary* (Leon Morris, p. 144-145) on 1 Thess. 4:17 – "It is only after the faithful departed have been raised that the saints on earth will "be caught up with them" to meet the Lord...**the Lord's people will be united** at the *Parousia*. **The reunion** with those who have died is sometimes overlooked in the exposition of this passage, but to Paul it was clearly important. He stresses that **they will be together**, and mentions it before saying that they will be caught up. [footnote] He does not say simply *sun autois* (with them) but *hama sun autois* (**together with them**), and he places the expression early, before the verb...in our writings it stresses the "togetherness." It is a very precious thought, especially to those who have been bereaved, as apparently had some of the Thessalonians."

"in the clouds" (v. 17)

This is another key phrase that points directly to the fact that this meeting is "in the air" where the clouds are, and therefore the word "*harpazo*" is correctly translated "caught up" with a directional sense attached to it. Notice what these lexicons and commentaries say about this phrase and its meaning in this text: (boldface emphasis is mine):

- *Commentary on the Greek Text* (John Eadie, p. 169) on 1 Thess. 4:17 – "...[Gr.] *en nephelais* [in clouds] is connected with the verb, and seems to characterize either manner or instrument...**enveloped by them** and **borne up by them**...The phrase **does not mean "into the clouds"** as if 'en' were 'eis,' nor does it, as if it were '*nephos*,' signify in clusters or a great multitude. Clouds are often associated with the divine presence... (Psalm 104:3; Nah. 1:3; Acts 1:9; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; Rev. 1:7)."
- *Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (James Moffatt, p. 105) on 1 Thess. 4:17 - "In the clouds introduces a common motif in apocalyptic writing. The basis is the obvious one of **a bridge between earth and heaven**; something that is at once solid in appearance and yet in fact unsubstantial. Particularly appropriate is the **shrouding, enveloping effect**, contributing to the atmosphere of mystery and awe ... "
- *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (George G. Findlay, p. 106) on 1 Thess. 4:17 – "In" signifies not into, but "**amid clouds**," – **surrounding and upbearing us "like a triumphal chariot"** (Grotius). So Christ Himself, and the angels at His Ascension, promised He should come (Matt. 26:68; Acts 1:9-11); comp. the "bright overshadowing cloud" at the Transfiguration, and the "voice out of the cloud" (Matt. 17:5). There is something wonderful and mystical about the clouds, half of heaven and half of earth, that fits them to be the medium of such events. They lend their ethereal drapery to form the curtain and canopy of this glorious meeting."

- *Ellicott's Commentaries, Critical and Grammatical, on the Epistles of Saint Paul* (Charles J. Ellicott, Vol. 1, pp. 77-79) – [*en nephelais*] "in clouds" ...the clouds forming the element with which they would be **surrounded**, and in which they would be **borne up to meet their coming Lord**. ...The transformation specified in 1 Cor. 15:52-53 will necessarily first take place; upon which the glorified and luciform body will be **caught up in the enveloping and upbearing clouds**.

"meet the Lord" (v. 17)

Several commentaries noted the use of this same word "meet" in the parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25. Moffatt below is just one example of many. E. Tiedtke says it is a "technical term" for important meetings, and connects it directly with the rapture.

- The word used here for **meeting** the Lord (*apantesis*) means a reception – the kind of reception given to royalty. It is the word used in Matt. 25:1, 6 of the wedding guests going out to **meet** the Bridegroom – a parable of the Second Advent... [*Moffatt New Testament Commentary*, James Moffatt, p. 106]
- *eis.apantesin*, to meet, is the technical term for the solemn meeting of important persons. The language is that of contemporary Jewish apocalyptic. Rapture has a similar meaning in Gen. 5:24 (Enoch taken), where death has been eliminated. [Colin Brown's *New International Dictionary of NT Theology* (in the article on "Snatch, Take Away, Rapture" written by E. Tiedtke, p. 601)]

The parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1) opens with a textual variation, which has puzzled some interpreters, since it includes the bride already with the groom when they meet the wedding party. But when one studies the wedding customs of that period, it was common to refer to the **reception upon the return of the groom to his own house with his bride as the marriage or wedding**.

Because the same word is used here in 1 Thess. 4, and it is clear that the groom (Christ) has not yet "received the bride unto Himself" at the time of this descent into the air, many believe the textual variant was incorrect. They use the clearer passage here in 1 Thess. 4 to support the less clear variant reading in Matthew 25. Christ is here descending from the house (heaven) which He has prepared, to go meet the bride. He will **receive her to Himself** and **then ascend with her back to the house which He has prepared.**

Those first century saints were the bride that He espoused to Himself when He promised (John 14:3) that He would go prepare a place for her and then return to receive them to Himself. Christians after AD 70 are the children that were born from that marriage in heaven. They were born of the seed (Word of God) which Christ had entrusted to the apostles, who then implanted it in the hearts of a whole new generation of folks. Those who believed **before** the *Parousia* were a part of the rapture. Those who did not believe until **after** the *Parousia* became the first offspring of the marriage between Christ and his bride.

Once Christ received His bride, He took her back to the reception in His Father's house in heaven for the wedding (Ref. 19:5-9). "The door was shut." No one could get into that "meeting," especially after He ascended back to the dwelling place He had prepared for His bride. This meeting (1 Thess. 4:17) occurs "in the air" after His **descent** and before His **ascent** back to His Father's house in heaven.

"in the air" [Gr. eis aera] (v. 17)

It is appropriate that much fuss has been made over the meaning of the "air" here. Modern interpreters have not always been aware of how this word was used and understood in the first century. Consequently, and not surprisingly, there has developed some divergence of opinion about its meaning. We can know right up front, however, that whatever the "air" is, it is **not** "heaven," since it says in verse 16 that Christ "descends **from** heaven" **into** this "air" where He will meet with both His resurrected and living saints who were "caught up" together into this meeting. So we know that the "air" is **not** heaven, but what is it? The following excerpts from various lexicons and commentaries will help answer that:

- Commentary on the Greek Text* (John Eadie, p. 170-172) on 1 Thess. 4:17 – "[Gr.] *eis aera* [into the air] ...**not to be regarded as the heaven of believers ... not in heaven as He leaves it, nor on earth ... but between heaven and earth in the air...** The fellowship of the saved with the Savior is this unending spring of blessedness. It is plainly implied in these words that **those who survive till the second Advent do not die.** ...But the apostle in 1 Cor. [15:51ff] gives us a glimpse of the truth – 'we shall not all die, but we shall all be changed.' **A sudden and mysterious change** passes over the living – **the change of their earthly body into a spiritual body**; this is supposed to have taken place at the point where the apostle says, 'We who are alive and remain shall be caught up.' ...The dead are not lost, and they forego no privilege by dying before the Advent; the living obtain no advantage over them, for these words tell that the dead rise first [out of Hades], and that the living being suddenly changed, **both are simultaneously snatched up to meet the descending Lord**, to whose merit and mediation all those hopes and glories are owing, and with Him shall they be forever."
- New International Commentary* (Leon Morris, p. 146) on 1 Thess. 4:17 – There may be significance in the meeting place being "in the air." In the first century the air was often thought of as **the abode of demons** (Satan is described as the "**ruler of the kingdom of the air**," Eph. 2:2). That the Lord chooses to meet His saints there, on **the demons' home ground** so to speak, shows His complete mastery over them."
- Arndt and Gingrich's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, says this about the meaning of the Greek word for "air" in 1 Thess. 4:17 – *aer, aeros*. "air," with the sun, Rev. 9:2; as an element with fire and water. **To indicate the direction "up"** (Jos. Ant. 7, 327). Throw into the air, Acts 22:23. *harpazesthai eis aera*, 1 Thess. 4:17 ...beat the air, from the language of the arena, of a gladiator who misses a stroke ... talk to the wind... of space ... **of the kingdom of the air, in which spirit beings live...** the ruler of the kingdom of the air, i.e. Satan, Eph. 2:2 ... " [Walter Bauer, trans. by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. 2nd ed. Revised by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. pp. 19-20]

- *Werner Foerster, in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, one of the top Greek lexical works in the theological world, says this about the word "air": (emphasis mine) – "According to the ancient conception of the earth, **the sphere of the air reaches to the moon, where the ethereal region of the stars commences**. The Greek made a distinction between **the impure element of air** and the **purier ether**, thus finding in the former a place of abode for imperfect spirits. Like all animism, popular Greek belief peopled the air with all kinds of spirits, who had to be taken into account. Later Judaism sharply distinguished between angels and demons, and found in the air the abode of the latter. In line with early Christian thinking, Paul links with this the idea of **an organized Kingdom under the single ruler Satan...** (Eph.2:2)... Because of its middle position, the air in 1 Th. 4: 17 ... is the sphere where believers will meet Christ on His coming..." [Kittel, Gerhard, editor. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964. Vol. 1, pp. 165-166]

"always be with the Lord" (V. 17)

Paul does not say here in this text (1 Thess. 4:17) that these "raised and caught up" saints ascended back to heaven with Christ after their meeting at the *Parousia*, but we know they did from other texts, since heaven is the final home of the faithful. Jesus indicated the same in John 14:3 where He said that He would return and "receive" (meet) them and take them to be with Him in the heavenly realm where He had prepared their dwelling places. Paul **does** say here that these saints will be with Christ forever from that point onwards. This sounds like the passage in Revelation (14:4) which says "they follow the Lamb wherever He goes." I thought these comments from Matthew Poole were very much on target:

- ... some will be found alive at His coming, and will be caught up, or snatched up, to denote its suddenness, it may be in the arms of angels, or by some immediate attractive power of Christ; and it will be **together with them** that are now raised from the dead; they shall all **ascend in one great body**, and it will be in the clouds; as Christ Himself ascended in a cloud, Acts 1:9, and so will return again, Matt. 24:30, He making the clouds His chariots, Psa. 104:3. To meet the Lord in the air:

- 1. To congratulate His coming, when others shall flee and tremble.
 - 2. To put honor upon Him; as the angels will also attend Him for that end.
 - 3. To receive their final discharge.
 - 4. **To be visibly joined to their Head.**
 - 5. **To be assistants with Him in judging of the world, and to reign with Him...but after this Christ and His saints shall never part.**
- Their first meeting shall be in the air, and their continuance will be **with Him while He is in this lower world**, and **after that they shall ascend with Him into heaven**, and so be **forever with Him**. Augustine imagined that the saints that are found alive shall in their rapture die, and then immediately revive, because it is appointed to all men once to die; but the apostle saith expressly, ***We shall not all die, but we shall all be changed***, 1 Cor. 15:51. [*A Commentary on the Holy Bible. Matthew Poole, Volume 3: "Matthew-Revelation," comments on 1 Thess. 4:17, pp. 745-746*]

RAPTURE – (“Caught up”):

Besides this 1 Thessalonians 4 text, which clearly teaches a “catching up” of the living and remaining saints at the *Parousia*, there are other texts which either assert or imply a rapture. **Here’s another example - John 14:3.**

- “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

Notice that Jesus promises to return to them after He has prepared a place for them in the heavenly realm (John 14:1-3). He says He will come back and “receive [them] to Himself,” so that where He is (in heaven), they would be also. Matt. 16:27-28 leaves the possibility open that some of the twelve apostles might still be alive at Christ’s return (“some of those standing here”). Matt. 19:28 says that “in the regeneration” (after the resurrection at the *Parousia*) all twelve of them would be seated on thrones with Christ and judge the twelve tribes. Notice that it says all twelve of them, not just the ones who had already died by that time. This implies that any of the apostles who were still alive at the *Parousia* would be “caught up” or “received unto” Christ at the *Parousia* to sit on the twelve thrones alongside Christ and the other resurrected apostles.

Doesn’t this sound like the same thing Paul was talking about in 1 Thessalonians 4? From whom did Paul claim to get these ideas? Was it not from Jesus Himself? (See 1 Thessalonians 4:15 “For this we say to you by the **word of the Lord**”). Compare this with John 14:3 (“receive you to myself”) and Matthew 24:31 (“gather together the elect”).

If Jesus didn’t come back and “receive the living and remaining ones to Himself” then there were not twelve occupied thrones in the period (AD 66-70) when Christ was “present” in His *Parousia* judging the twelve tribes for their covenantal unfaithfulness. John 14:3 (along with Matthew 19:28; John 21:22-23 and Matthew 16:27-28) forces the issue on this.

RAPTURE – (“Caught up”): When Did This Occur and How Do We Label It?

So where does this place the rapture chronologically, and how do we classify the timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation? I see the rapture as occurring in AD 66, at the time the Jewish war with Rome was shaping up. This was the time when Christ appeared, raised the rest of the dead out of Hades, raptured the "living and remaining ones" and began His three and a half year **presence** (*Parousia*) from AD 66–70.

There is no absolute necessity for the rapture to be placed at AD 66. Some who believe in a literal rapture place it in the range of AD 68-70 "immediately after the tribulation." But they do not designate the same three and a half years of "tribulation" upon the church (AD 62-66) as the "tribulation" immediately after which the "gathering" occurs (Matt 24:29-31). While some time between AD 68-70 is certainly a possible placement for the rapture, which needs to be kept in mind, I prefer the AD 66 date for it, as I will explain below.

Josephus (*Wars* 6.5.3) says they saw the **angelic armies in the clouds** in AD 66 **just before the war began**. He even identifies "the day and the hour" of this event: Iyyar 21 in the hour just before sunset (early May on our calendar, a month after Passover and about two weeks before Pentecost). This is confirmed by Tacitus (*Histories*, Bk. 5, "The Jews," sect. 13), Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.*, Bk. 3, Ch. 8) and the Talmud Bab. (*Yoma*, folio 39b) also mentions these same kinds of things happening at this time.

The faithful saints, the true believers (not the mere "professors" or "sleepers" who were left behind) were "caught up" to accompany Christ and His angelic armies during the time when their persecutors (the Jews) were being destroyed (AD 66-70). This was the three and a half year *Parousia* (presence) of Christ to judge the Jewish nation for their covenantal unfaithfulness and vindicate the Church. Here's the chronological sequence I'm suggesting for the rapture:

1. AD 62-66 (Satan released for short time - the Great Tribulation on the Church)
2. Mid-AD 66 (the Return of Christ, Resurrection, Rapture, and the beginning of the 3 ½ year judgment on Israel)
3. Mid-AD 66-70 (Christ's continued presence for Wrath and Judgment)

Notice that there is an approximate seven-year period here. The rapture occurs in the middle of that period after the **great tribulation** on the Church, but before the **wrath** is poured out upon the Jewish nation. This would be classified as a "mid-trib" or "pre-wrath" position, depending on how the "tribulation" is defined. If both the tribulation on the Church and the wrath outpouring on the Jewish nation are included in the definition of the "tribulation" then the rapture would be "mid-trib." If we define "tribulation" as being just the tribulation on the Church, and the wrath outpouring as a separate period after the tribulation, then my concept of the rapture would be called "post-trib, pre-wrath." But since I define the tribulation as the whole period including both the tribulation on the Church and the wrath outpouring, I would classify this position as "mid-trib, pre-wrath, postmillennial, and Preterist." That's a mouthful. I realize there are Preterists who place the rapture at AD 70 "immediately after the tribulation" which they reckon as only the period from AD 66-70. That is a possible interpretation, and would be labeled "post-trib, post-wrath" in contrast to my "post-trib, prewrath" AD 66 position.

I understand the ***Parousia*** to have been a three and a half year ***presence*** (Mid-AD 66-70) in which He judged the Jewish nation for "all the blood that was shed on earth from the blood of Abel" (Matt. 23:32-35) until AD 66. Christ came in AD 66 to begin that judgment. He resurrected the dead out of Hades (in the unseen realm) and "snatched away (raptured)" His living and remaining true saints to Him in the heavenly realm. The twelve apostles sat on thrones next to Him as He rode the heavens with His angelic armies to judge the Jewish nation (Matt. 19:28). They all accompanied Christ in the unseen heavenly realm and watched their vindication and avengement upon the Jewish nation.

The concept of rapture taught today by futurists is a Hollywood-style distortion, which has made the idea of a rapture even more repulsive to Preterists, postmillennialists, historicists and amillennialists. We instead need to discover what kind of rapture the Bible promises to its saints who endured the tribulation. We need to let the Bible define what the rapture was supposed to be, not Hollywood or modern premillennialists. Then it won't be as hard to understand and accept. It was an **instantaneous change** from the **physical/visible realm** to the **spiritual/invisible realm** "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." It was not the prolonged visible ascent into the sky that popular fantasy has imagined. Like Enoch's departure, one second he was here; and the next second "he was not, for God took him." (Gen. 5:24)

We have historically credible testimony "at the mouth of two or three [credible] witnesses" saying that the angelic armies were seen surrounding the cities of Israel just before the war with Rome began (Mid-AD 66). Since this testimony was given to ***Josephus*** by more than one witness, and since ***Tacitus*** also records it, and ***Eusebius*** quotes it as accurate, there is every reason to believe that it really happened. It fits the way God worked in past Theophanies, and is exactly what we would expect at the final redemptive Theophany of God to reward His servants and destroy His enemies. He had snatched His servants out of tribulation before, so this is not something totally new. It fits His character and the pattern of His dealings with man throughout Biblical history.

- We will look into the study of the rapture in more depth in our next Study Series 14 Lesson 4.