

A Study of First Thessalonians 4:17

Amillennialists and premillennialists use First Thessalonians 4:17 to teach that, in the future, Jesus will materially appear in the sky in such a way as to be visible and physically "rapture" the saved from the planet to meet Him in the air, and then to be materially changed and taken to Heaven. So...

Our question for today is this: Is this what Paul meant when he penned this verse within this context? Let's read **First Thessalonians 4:13—5:11** together before we attempt to answer this question.

First Thessalonians 4:17: Then [after the dead in Christ rise, v. 16] **we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.**

The phrase "caught up" comes from the Greek *harpazo* which means "to seize" (Strong's, Thayer's, Bauer's, et. al.; cf. Septuagint of Lev. 6:4 & Jug. 21:21 & 23), and Vine's and Bauer's specifically says that a "suddenness" is involved in the term. (A twinkling of an eye [1 Cor. 15:52] kind of suddenness you think?) An examination of *harpazo* reveals some interesting information:

It's derived from the Greek term from which we get our word "heresy"—the term *hairesis*, which Vine's says refers to "'a ... choice' (from [the verb] *haireomai* [meaning] 'to choose')." Strong's says that *haireomai* means "to take for oneself, i.e. to prefer—choose" (cf. Bauer, Mat. 11:12); i.e., so it's a choice based on one's preference. But wait! There's more:

The Greek term *harpazo* also carries with it the idea of "oneness," i.e. making those things or ... people ... which a person prefers and chooses one with himself, implying of course that they are or become one with each other in the process. Let's illustrate with a couple of biblical examples from the Septuagint (the Greek version of the OT):

1. In Job 24:19 *harpazo* is used of assimilation of water and sinners: As drought and heat consume the snow water, so the grave consumes those who have sinned. Likewise...
2. In Genesis 37:33 *harpazo* is used in Jacob's statement about what he believed happened to his son, Joseph: A wild beast has devoured him. (Cf. also Eze. 19:3 & 6 and 22:25.) So...

Harpazo does indeed carry with it the idea of assimilation, of gathering or making two or more things into one. **[Eventually do a study on *harpazo* in relation to Judges 21:21-23 to the wedding.]** Now...

Combining these two ideas (viz. making a choice and making one), that's what I believe Paul was talking about here in First Thessalonians 4: Not only did He unite dead saints and living saints together in one body with Him, but, by fulfilling His promise of coming against the Jews (wiping out over a million of them, as well as their precious temple and city), He also clearly made a choice concerning who made up true Israel (the remnant that accepted Jesus as Messiah) and who didn't.

In Ephesians 1:10 Paul wrote God would gather all (*panta*) together in one in Christ, the very thing Jesus prayed for in John 17:15a, 21, & 23? I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but ...that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us ... I in them and You in Me, that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You ... have loved them as You have loved Me.

In Matthew 24:31 Jesus said that His angels would gather together His elect; incidentally, the verse immediately before this one (Mat. 24:30) speaks of the trumpet blast, just as the verse before our text here in First Thessalonians 4:17—verse 16 speaks of the trumpet blast. How can we be consistent and say that Matthew 24:30-31 is AD 70, but First Thessalonians 4 isn't?

In Hebrews 10:25 Paul wrote these apostatizing Christians, encouraging them to not forsake or abandon our gathering together, and so much the more *as you see the day approaching*.

The only other place where this exact same Greek phrase is found is in the next reference, both of which I now believe refer to the "gathering" of Matthew 24:31.

In Second Thessalonians 2:1 Paul wrote the coming of the Lord and our gathering together to Him. Speaking of the word "together"...

There are two other pieces of important information in relation to *harpazo*:

1. The term *harpazo*, without a suffix such as *ano* (away), *para* (from), *pros* (toward), *kata* (down), or *ana* (up), doesn't imply a direction, merely a seizure as in claspings or enfolding, which leads to number...
2. If we retain the word "caught," what Paul more accurately said was "caught *together*," not "caught *up*," for *hama* means "together or at the same time"; in fact, in this very context (5:10) he used this same term again when he wrote of how the saints would live together with Christ when He came, regardless if they were dead or alive at the time. Besides...

Even if we leave it as "caught *up*," haven't you ever gotten "caught up" in something without being physically moved from one place to another? Certainly you have. And by the way...

This "gathering together" was something which occurred spiritually, i.e. invisibly; in Luke 17 when Jesus was speaking once again about His AD 70 coming, He said that the kingdom (that into which all would be gathered and made one with God in/through Christ, Eph. 1:10) would come without observation (v. 20), leading to the next word of our text to consider:

What about "clouds" (no definite article)? Well, consider how the following corresponds to this text.

Using the Bible to interpret the Bible, we go to the Old Testament to discover that clouds, when associated with the Lord in a positive manner as in our text, are a symbol of His Shekinah (Hebrew for "presence"). [Clouds, when associated with God in a negative manner, are a symbol of judgment (e.g., Egypt in Isa. 19:1, Nineveh in Nah. 1:3, & Jerusalem in Zep. 1:14-18); Exo. 14:20 is a case of God's cloud being both negative (for the Egyptians) and positive (for the Israelites).]

As long as sin was between God and mankind (Isa. 59:2), man could not be allowed into the presence of God; or, to put it another way, he couldn't have a face-to-face or eye-to-eye relationship with God (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8-12). So...

In order to accomplish His scheme of reconciliation for mankind, and at the same time keep Himself separated from mankind, God hid Himself in a cloud (Exo. 13:21f, 14:19f, 16:10, et. al.), allowing only the High Priest, once a year to approach this cloud over The Mercy Seat in The Most Holy Place (Exo. 19:13ff).

Consider these key occasions: (A) When God dedicated the tabernacle in Exodus 40, He did so by means of a cloud so that not even Moses could enter it (vv. 34-38). And (B) when God dedicated the temple in First Kings 8, He did so by means of a cloud, a cloud that kept the people away, i.e. a cloud that they weren't allowed into (vv. 10-12). So...

1. Clouds represented (hidden) Deity among men, so men weren't allowed to enter it. And...
2. Clouds were used when Deity dedicated the tabernacle & temple of God. Now, however...

In First Thessalonians 4, Paul wrote of a time when those who accepted Jesus as God's Messiah would be allowed to enter into the cloud of the Christ of God! Why? Because they were the (spiritual) temple of God's dwelling among men, dedicated by the perfect blood of His own Son. We'll get into a little more information as regards clouds when we get to the word "air" after the word "meet" in this text.

The word "meet" (from *apantesin*) is actually a great follow-up of our discussion on clouds, because it carries with it the very condition of two or more people coming face-to-face (so says Vine)! However, what I want to consider with you about the term is just about as interesting:

Moulton & Milligan's Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament says of this term that it "seems to have been a kind of official welcome of a newly arriving dignitary—a usage which accords excellently with its NT usage" (and Chrysostom, who lived in the AD 300s, supports this); i.e., this term pictures meeting a VIP either at the entrance to the city to receive him in or meeting him just outside the city to escort him in; in fact, in the only other two passages this term is used we find perfect conformation of this meaning:

In Acts 28:14b-16 we read, We went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum & Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. [Then] we came to Rome. So certain brethren from Rome met Paul a ways before he arrived in Rome and accompanied him the remainder of the way. And...

In Matthew 25:1 & 6 we read, Then the kingdom of Heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.... And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!" So what were they expecting to happen once they met him on the way? Were they expecting him to turn around and take them back with him from whence he came? Or did they rather expect to meet him in order to escort him on the remainder of his way to the wedding feast, his destination from whence they came? Obviously the latter is true. [Cf. The Diaglott's great illustration. There are also numerous OT passages like these; here are a few: Jud. 4:18, 1 Sam. 18:6, 30:31, 2 Sam. 10:4-5, 19:15-16 & 24-25, 2 Kgs. 4:25-26, 8:7-9, 9:17-21, 10:15, 1 Chr. 12:16-17, & Jer. 41:5-6.] By the way, two other relevant things here:

1. Just a little food for thought: I believe there's a direct correlation, a type/anti-type situation here between Paul's *apantesis* and the "holy convocation" (i.e. assembly or meeting) on the Sabbath-Rest Day in the Old Testament (cf. Heb. 3:17—4:1-10). And...
2. I don't believe the Bible anywhere teaches that Jesus' coming was to be "with saints"; the only two places this idea can be found are in Jude 14-15 (which I'm convinced are speaking of the holy angels [*hagios* meaning merely "holy ones," cf. Mk 8:38 & Mt. 25:31]) and First Thessalonians 3:12-13 (which I'm convinced simply mean that Paul wanted the Thessalonian saints to be found holy along with the saints in all other places when Christ came to gather His people together, which corresponds to Paul's wish for them in First Thessalonians 5:23: may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved ... at [or 'until,' NLT] the coming of our Lord). So...

If our thought-process is accurate so far, we have Paul informing and encouraging these suffering Christians by reminding them that they (note his usage of first person pronouns throughout this paragraph), those who'd be alive when Jesus arrived (evidently Paul believed such to be possible, as did Jesus [John 21:22]), along with the saints who were dead, would be made perfect.

How? In a face-to-face, Shekinah-meeting with Deity—the Lord's Christ—when He returned from His work of smearing His blood on the once-for-all, eternal, heavenly Mercy Seat in the true Most Holy Place with salvation complete (cf. Heb. 9:24-28). And as you know, the sins of the people under the old covenant weren't considered moved forward until the High Priest returned from within the tabernacle (Lev. 16:15-24). One more thing:

What we've said here so far corresponds again with words of Jesus in John 14 (vv. 3b & 23b): I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am you may be also... [And where was He? In His Father, v. 20.] Verse 23b: My Father and I will come to him [who loves Me and keeps My word] and make Our home with him, which then perfectly leads into our consideration of the next word in this text: "air."

The Greeks had two primary words for "air": *ouranos* and *aer*.

The term for "air" here in First Thessalonians 4:17 is not from *ouranos* found 284 times in the New Testament; *ouranos* is the name of the Greek god for the celestial part of space above the earth—the part containing the stars—and is correctly translated as "heaven" or "heavens" every time in the ASV (e.g., cf. Mat. 24:29 → "stars will fall from heaven"). Rather...

The term for "air" here is from *aer* found only 7 times in the New Testament; *aer* is the name of the Greek god for the terrestrial part of space immediately above the ground—the part containing that which we inhale. Supporting this background for this term...

Thayer defines *aer* as "the lower air" as opposed to "the higher air" or the atmospheric region—*ouranos*; and Strong says it's from the verb *aemi* which means "to breathe." In fact...

We get our word "aerobic" from *aer* combined with the Greek term *bios*; "aerobic" refers to the oxygen or *air* required by *bio*-logical organisms to live. As an interesting side-note...

The god *aer* was also called *khaos* from whence we get our word "chaos" and actually refers to "a gap," such as a gorge, ravine, or chasm; as a matter of fact, in the Septuagint, *xaos* is the Greek term for "valley" in Micah 1:6 and Zechariah 14:4 and is the root behind the term *chasma* in Luke 16:26 for the "gulf" between the blessed Abraham and the tortured rich man.

This breathe-able region was called "a gap" because it made up the second heaven in Greek mythology—the region between the place of darkness under the earth for the unseen spirits of the dead and the place of lights for the unseen spirits of the gods (bringing to mind, of course, the picture in Luke 16:19-31; in fact, as you've likely already deduced, our word "chasm" finds its roots in *chaos*).

"Chaos" today refers to disorder, confusion, and madness. Why? Because a valley, gulf, gap, or chasm is produced by division; and my MS Word thesaurus gives such synonyms as "break" and "discord" for the word "division" ("Division" isn't always a totally negative thing, for, as they say, you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet; John 7:43 tells us that even Jesus caused division among the people.) Anyway...

Out of the other six verses in which *aer* is found, the only one which seems to have any bearing on our text here is Ephesians 2:2 about which Bauer says, "the kingdom of the air in which spirit beings live ... the ruler of the kingdom of the air [being] Satan"; likewise, the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says, "In line with early Christian thinking, Paul links with this the idea of an organized kingdom under the single ruler Satan... (Eph. 2:2)." So, in the light of letting the Bible explain the Bible as much as possible, let's consider this passage also written by Paul.

Paul, clearly trying to picture to humans something of a spiritual nature, wrote about what first century Christians were doing with or in Christ during that time: even though they had to suffer much physically for it, they weren't fighting against physical enemies, but against spiritual ones through Christ their captain (cf. Heb. 2:10 in the KJV).

Ephesians 2:1-2 have him saying, You Christ has made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked ... according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience. Then...

Ephesians 6:11b-12 have him saying, ... stand against the wiles of the devil. For we don't wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, ... powers, ... [and] the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. So...

What does *aer* refer to here? The spiritual realm. And what was the desire of the devil or Satan? To maintain ... to maintain control ... to maintain a hold on sin-death—spiritual and eternal separation from God due to sin, which in turn found its strength in the law (1 Cor. 15:56) that which he was consequently also striving to maintain. So...

When Jesus returned to put a final end to the law and allow for full and complete reconciliation, He thereby effectively annulled the power of Satan and therefore the fear of "sin and death," i.e. eternal, spiritual separation from God (Heb. 2:14-15, cf. 1 John 3:8). (By the way, the word "destroy" in 1 Cor. 15:26 means "to render powerless," translated as without effect or made of none effect in other passages.) So the point here is that...

At Jesus' coming many *visible* events transpired to demonstrate the truth and fulfillment of events prophesied that would be *invisible* to the human eye (cf. Luke 17:20); i.e., the demise of Jerusalem and Judaism, which perfectly fulfilled the prophecies of the prophets and Jesus, was tangible proof of at least two things:

1. Jesus had won the victory in the spiritual realm over sin & death or sin-death. And...
2. He had fulfilled His promise of (spiritually) returning to Earth (*aer*), gathering all His of saints—Jew and Gentile alike, restoring them to fellowship with Deity in a face-to-face meeting in His Shekinah—the glory-cloud of presence now within *their* air, the reach and which corresponds perfectly with Luke 21 & Revelation 21. Notice:
 - a. Luke 21, in the context of Jerusalem's destruction, has Jesus speaking of the powers of heaven being shaken (v. 26) and the sign of the Son coming on a cloud with power and great glory (v. 27), around which time He said that redemption (v. 28) and the kingdom (v. 31) would arrive, fulfilling all promises and prophecies (v. 22) within their generation (v. 32); this meant that, while their heaven and earth would be removed, His new heaven and earth would arrive and never be removed (v. 33, cf. Isa. 9:7, et. al.). Then...
 - b. Revelation 21 speaks of this consummation of all things as the time when a new heavens and earth (a new administration, v. 1), a New Jerusalem and holy city (v. 2), and a new tabernacle (v. 3) came down out of heaven from God, resulting in God dwelling among men (v. 3). Verse 10 tells us that the angel showed John the great city, the holy Jerusalem (called the church in Heb. 12:22-23, the kingdom that they were in the process of receiving, v. 28) descending out of heaven from God, having the glory (or presence) of God. Then...
 - c. Revelation 22 went on to inform its readers of how that (a) within this new city of God they would see His face, i.e. be in fellowship with Him (v. 4), and (b) within it would flow a river of life for the healing of the nations (vv. 1-2), meaning (as v. 15 teaches) that those who murder, etc. are outside this city.

A quick interesting side-note is the apparent connection God made between this air and covenanting; notice a comparison between Exodus 19:4b-5a and 1 The. 4:17b: to the Israelites He said, I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will ... keep My covenant, you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people. To the Thessalonians He said that they'd be caught out from among others to meet His Son in the air and would thus be found with the Lord.

One more short side-point about *aer* here: If, as recent tradition holds, the universe, along with its "air" (combustible oxygen) will be literally burned up, then how can we always be with the Lord in that air? Well, we can't; so the air here must be figurative of His kingdom coming to and existing on Earth ... spiritually. After all, Jesus was supposed to receive His kingdom (Luke 19:12) then come in it (Mat. 16:27 & 1 Tim. 4:1). Well...

With reference to timing, that which *must* be considered in order to determine a correct interpretation of any given end-times passage...

Let's not leave this verse without focusing on Paul's usage of the first person pronoun "we."

When Paul, who lived in the first century, wrote this letter, who was he addressing in the mid AD 50s? Paul answered this in his introduction: verse 1 says, Paul ... to the church of the Thessalonians; then, throughout the letter he used the pronouns "you," "us," and "we" numerous times, referring, of course, to them and him. He wasn't addressing folks 2000 years later. Interestingly...

Numerous, probably even most, scholars, commentators, et. al. agree that Paul, due to his usage of the first person pronoun in First Thessalonians 4:17 (as well as other places), expected Jesus to return in his generation; but, instead of denying what Paul was clearly expecting and saying, as most amillennialists do, they just say that he, this inspired man, was mistaken! That's terrible!

Preterists, however, instead of denying what Paul said or accuse an inspired apostle of being in error, believe that what he predicted came to pass just as he meant to indicate. Well...

LET'S MOVE ON TO SOME ADJACENT CONTEXT:

First Thessalonians 5:4: You [the Thessalonians], brethren, are not in darkness so that this day should overtake you [the Thessalonian brethren] as a thief.

Who didn't have an excuse of being overtaken by the day of the Lord? The Thessalonian Christians. Why? Because they not only knew the signs of Matthew 24, they *believed* in the Lord who spoke them, meaning that they had no reason to let anything bother them (cf. 1 The. 4:13) or cause them to believe the critics, scoffers, and persecutors (cf. 2 The. 1:6-7 & 2:1-3).

If the Lord wasn't expected to come in their generation, what was the point of these letters?

First Thessalonians 4:15: This we say to you by the word of the Lord.... I.e., it sounds to me as if Paul was saying that the subject-matter of this passage was something that Jesus Himself spoke of. And where do we have a record of His speaking of such? In Matthew 13, 16, 24, 25, 26, et. al., many of which we'll consider now. So...

LET'S MOVE ON TO THE REMOTE CONTEXT, mainly by merely reading various passages and noting how well they correspond to what we've noticed about First Thessalonians 4:17 in particular. Let's read the positive ones first:

In Matthew 8:11 Jesus said that many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (*ouranos*).

In Matthew 24:30-31, just before he said that these things would be fulfilled in His generation, He said, The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth [*ges, land*] will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send out His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

In Matthew 25:1, right after He spoke the words above, He likened the kingdom during that time to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom (cf. v. 6 & 22:2-10).

In John 11:51-52 the high priest that year prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.

In John 14:3 Jesus told His disciples, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am you may be also; likewise, in His prayer to His Father in John 17:24 He said, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me.

In John 17:15a Jesus even prayed for the opposite of what many say today: I do not pray that You should take them out of [or rapture them from] the world.

In Ephesians 1:10, a verse that I look at as a summary of concerning all things eschatological, tells us that in the dispensation of the fullness of times God gathered together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on Earth—in Christ.

In 2nd Thessalonians 2:1 Paul wrote of the coming of our Lord ... and our gathering together to Him.

In [Hebrews 10:25](#) Paul warned those who were falling away to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhort one another, and so much more as you see the day approaching. (Note: 2 The. 2:1 is the only other place this exact same Greek phrase is found, and just as "day" is singular, "assembling" is singular, meaning that there were just as many assemblies as there were days under consideration; for perhaps as long as 2000 years [cf. Heb. 11:8-10 & 13-16] they were looking forward to this gathering on this day.)

Now here are some more negative ones:

In [Matthew 3:12a](#) John the Baptist spoke of the positive and the negative sides of Jesus' coming: He'll thoroughly purge His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn. Speaking of the same idea...

In [Matthew 13:31](#) Jesus said, I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into My barn." Then in [verse 41](#) (just before He referred to Daniel 12:3, a prophecy about the things that occurred in the first century), He said, The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend and those who practice lawlessness. Lastly in [verses 47-48](#) He said that The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.

With all these passages in mind, we can add First Corinthians 15 into the mix by considering the following chart in conclusion.

Are 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4, and Matthew 24 the same event?

1 Corinthians 15	1 Thessalonians 4
15:23 - are Christ's at His coming	4:16 - the Lord Himself shall come
15:51 - sleep	4:14 - sleep
15:52 - the trumpet shall sound	4:16 - trump with a shout
15:52 - dead shall be raised	4:16 - dead in Christ shall rise

Matthew 24	1 Thessalonians 4 & 5
24:27 - coming (<i>parousia</i>)	4:15 - coming (<i>parousia</i>)
24:30 - clouds	4:17 - clouds
24:31 - sound of a trumpet	4:16 - trump with a shout
24:31 - gather together	4:17 - caught up together
24:36 - day or hour	5:1 - times and seasons
24:43 - a thief	5:2 - a thief
24:8 & 39 - took them all away	5:3 - sudden destruction
24:42 - watch	5:6 - watch

1 Corinthians 15	1 Thessalonians 4	Matthew 24
at His coming	Jesus' coming	Jesus' coming
last trump	trumpet	trumpet
dead saints raised	dead saints raised	angels gather saints
living saints changed	living saints caught up	angels gather saints
	coming in the clouds	coming in the clouds