

November 8th, 2020

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 “The FOMO Factor”

I learned a new term a couple of months ago. “FOMO.” I learned it from my kids. I had no clue what it meant. The context didn’t make sense. They said something like, “I don’t know, I think so-and-so might be feeling a little FOMO.” “Foh-Moh?” I thought I did a fair job at keeping up with the cultural vernacular. I wasn’t going to be one of “those” dads who had to constantly ask his kids, “What does that mean?” whenever they spouted the latest slang. Come to find out it’s an acronym. FOMO means, “Fear Of Missing Out.” Out of what? Whatever’s going on that a person wishes they were a part of but may not have time for. FOMO. Fear Of Missing Out. Like me when I feel like I’m not keeping up with the current cultural vernacular. Or in a different context, when someone thinks they are missing out on the latest “thing.”

The scripture Mary read this morning comes from Paul’s first letter to a church in Thessalonica in Greece. This passage of scripture is responsible for 200 years of FOMO in the Western church starting in England with a Puritan preacher named Cotton Mather and settling comfortably in America in the 1800s. I need to back up and clarify something though. I really shouldn’t blame this passage of scripture. I think it’s better for me to say, “The *misinterpretation* of this passage is responsible for 200 years of FOMO.” This scripture is where we get the term “rapture.” The rapture refers to a time when, according to some evangelical traditions, faithful Christians will be suddenly and unexpectedly raptured up to heaven. This rapture is what starts a chain of events that will lead to the end of the world. In most accounts of the rapture, believers go straight to heaven, while nonbelievers are left behind to undergo a period of political chaos and personal torment.

If you’ve ever read Hal Lindsey’s *The Late, Great Planet Earth* or Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series, you’re familiar with “rapture culture.” At best, rapture culture causes some Christians to feel anxiety. “Do I get to

be one of the lucky ones who meet Jesus in the air, go to heaven and avoid all the chaos and torment back on earth? Or is there some rogue forgotten sin in my life that I haven't repented of that's going to cause me to be left behind?" Now *there's* an incentive to be good! Come to church, write your checks, be a moral and upstanding person and you'll be in. Maybe. And that "maybe" makes the world of difference in how Christians navigate life. Are you going to live in fear, or are you going to live in hope? Late in 2017, some Twitter users started using the hashtag #RaptureAnxiety. Feeling like you're missing out when I say that? Don't feel bad. I stay away from Twitter like the plague. Too many people saying some really ugly things from *very* high places. Twitter, for those of you who aren't familiar, is a social media platform where you can create posts (called tweets) up to 280 characters long about whatever's on your mind. Like any social media platform, it can be used as a tool for positive and supportive ideas, or it can be used for negative and destructive purposes. The way you follow particular threads of information or conversations when you're on Twitter is to use "hashtags." What's a hashtag you might ask? It's a character that all of us are familiar with, but its meaning has changed recently. Here's an example of what a hashtag looks like. One of my kids was on the phone with our bank's customer service, and he said, "They're asking me to enter my passcode followed by the pound sign. What's that?" I said, "Hashtag. Enter your passcode then press the hashtag key." "Got it!"

Now do you know what a hashtag looks like? Great! I don't want you to feel like you're missing out! If you were to follow #RaptureAnxiety, you'd be able to read tweets about what it's like to be a Christian who lives with the fear and trauma of possibly being left behind in the rapture. One contributor to the hashtag recalls that the anticipation of the rapture led some people in her community to max out their credit cards, believing that the rapture would come before payment was due. Another recalls the terror she felt as a child when her parents forgot to pick her up from soccer practice and she became convinced that they had been raptured, leaving her behind to face the tribulation alone. Another tweeted about how she never made college plans, as she was

convinced the rapture would come before she turned 16. I knew a person who believed that global warming was a “real thing” and that we humans are for sure responsible for it, but she didn’t think we needed to do anything about it because Jesus was going to take people away in the rapture and leave all of the “bad people” behind to watch the world burn.

Pew Research polls reveal that up to 65% of evangelicals believe in some form of Premillennial Dispensationalism, which is a fancy way of saying they believe that the rapture will happen in their lifetime followed by 1,000 years of tribulation. One of the many narratives that #RaptureAnxiety highlights is how political that kind of theology is. When you run into folks who are obsessed with Jerusalem needing to be the capital of Israel rather than the existing capital of Tel Aviv, they are likely Premillennial Dispensationalists who live and promote Rapture Culture. These folks pay extra close attention to news about foreign affairs and global catastrophes, both natural and human-made. Not only are they not worried about social upheaval and global catastrophes, they see them as *welcome signs* of the coming “rapture.” Hard core Premillennial Dispensationalists will often do things to speed up the apocalyptic timeline. I mean, Jesus coming back is going to be great, right? And the world is kind of like a runaway train right now, so you might as well try to derail that train sooner than later so Jesus will come get you before the actual train-wreck.

Author Tony Weber wrote this about the early Premillennialists - ,

“(They) made much of the current problems of society and interpreted them as “signs of the times.” Political corruption, pornography, alcohol abuse, the rise of monopolies, labor unrest, the desecration of the Lord’s Day by immigrants, worldliness in the church, liberal theology, international conflicts, forest fires, earthquakes, the rise of cults, polio and influenza epidemics, changing weather patterns, the rise of Zionism, the sinking of the Titanic, the partitioning of Europe after World War I, radio, — these and countless other events and trends were seen as proof that

premillennialism was correct and the end of the age was rapidly approaching.”

Sound familiar? You probably thought, “Oh, he’s talking about current events” until you heard “polio epidemics, the Titanic, and World War I!” To this very day, people who are steeped in Rapture Culture will do just about anything and vote for just about anybody who they think will bring Jesus sooner to take them away. Kind of explains some things and some people doesn’t it? So, Pastor, are you going to just go on griping about toxic Rapture Culture, or are you going to address what you laid out on the table 12 minutes ago? “The misinterpretation of this passage is responsible for 200 years of FOMO.” Tell us how this passage is misinterpreted because Paul sure sounds like he’s making a good case for Rapture Culture in this scripture!

I’m happy to talk about how this passage has been misinterpreted, because I believe that in the Kingdom of God ... in the Culture of Christ, we are called to live in hope rather than fear. For 1800 years, the church stood by a hope-filled *resurrection* theology that is now being overshadowed by 200 years of fear-filled *rapture* theology. Why? Because of one Greek word that was misunderstood when it was translated to English. And that word is, “Parousia” which we often translate as “the presence” or “the coming” which some folks refer to as “the second coming.” But the modern-day equivalent to the word “Parousia” is “parade.” In ancient Greek culture, a herald would come to a town and sound a trumpet that let folks know that a very important person was coming, like a King or a big political leader. That’s when the people would leave the gates of the city and line up along the path where the important person traveled so that they could greet them and welcome them *into their presence*. Paul was saying this is what it will be like when Christ returns. Since Paul says that Christ will be coming from the heavens, then logically it makes sense that we would go to where he was to meet him and greet him. Does Paul say that Christians are going to meet Christ “in the air?” Yes. Does Paul say that Christ is going to *take us away* into heaven? Is there *anything* here that states that we are going

to *leave* this world? Nope. Sure, it says that those who are caught up will be with the Lord forever. But again, there is *nothing* here about leaving the world. There is a *lot* here about welcoming Christ *into* the world during his return and welcoming the new Kingdom that he will *bring with him*.

The early Christian communities believed that Christ was coming back soon ... as in *their lifetime*. And remember, Paul was writing this around 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. So yeah, the Thessalonian church had some concerns. They were asking, "What about our loved ones who've just died? Have they missed out? Did they miss their chance to be a part of God's Kingdom?" Paul reassures them – "No, you *haven't* missed out. Those people have gone on before us and they are a part of that most honored group that will receive Christ when he comes in his Parousia or 'parade.'" There is so much good news here in this passage for the Thessalonian church. And for us too! Especially during a pandemic. When we are surrounded by fear, sickness, and sometimes even the death of a loved one, we may ask the same questions the Thessalonians did. "Where are they now? Have they missed out?" And in these moments where it seems like death has won, these words from Paul tell us that death does not have the last word, and death does not separate us from God. "Therefore encourage each other with these words." *Encourage, not scare the living daylights out of*. Not "use fear to manipulate people's behavior."

Again, this text is not about the select few of God's obedient people fleeing the earth before it's obliterated. I don't know about you, but that sure sounds like sin and death win in the end. I believe that this text points to a hope-filled future where God comes to us, dwells with us, and ushers in God's Kingdom ... a reality completely free from sin and all of it's effects. No more death. No more sickness. No more global pandemics. No more fear. By this we can say, "Thanks be to God."