

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

September 4, 2022



SCRIPTURE

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

COMMENTARY

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13. Paul was about to clear up some misunderstandings regarding death and the coming of Christ that were causing the Thessalonians a good deal of anxiety. Evidently these young Christians felt that those who died before the return of Christ would miss out. They must have thought there was a special advantage to being alive at Christ's return. This meant, in their minds, that there was a disadvantage for those who did not make it. Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians quit sorrowing and grieving like everyone else around them. People outside of Christ have no basis for facing death with hope. In the pagan world death was grim and full of despair. In our own time it is a mystery many people ignore. Consequently, deep anguish and sorrow were often expressed for the dead person. It was this kind of sorrowing that Paul wanted the Thessalonians to stop. The death of a Christian is something very different from the death of an unbeliever. The difference is the hope, the assurance, of resurrection. To straighten out their thinking and calm their fears, Paul went on to describe the coming of Christ and the place of the living and the dead in that magnificent event.

4:14. First Paul made an assertion of faith—that Jesus died and rose again. This is the bedrock of our faith. Paul then tied the truth of Christ to the unknown future. Whatever Christ does, His people follow. Wherever Christ is, His people are there. Christ died and rose again. Christians who die (fall asleep) will rise again. Christ will return again. Those who have died will return with Him. All of this is carried out by God's power.



4:15. Paul next introduced something new, a special revelation according to the Lord's own word. He received direct word from Christ about what followed. Paul's primary concern was not to teach an eschatological lesson but to assure and encourage the young church at Thessalonica. He did this by stating with the authority of Christ's words that everyone who is alive on earth at the time of Christ's coming will not go before those who have died. Paul was pointing the believers away from grief toward hope regarding those who had died

4:16–17. Paul then handed the readers a program of sorts, an order of service. Christ is coming, and this is how it will occur: The Lord, Christ himself, will come down. There will be a lot of noise. The dead believers will rise first. Christians who are still alive on earth will rise next. Everyone meets together with Christ in the air. Eternity begins! The Lord himself will come down: The rapture of believers is a very personal affair. Christ Himself will be there in His great and shining glory. With a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God: It is debated whether this describes one great sound, or whether two or three distinct sounds will occur. The "shout" or "loud command" could signify the shout of triumph expressed by Christ, the conqueror of death, as He descends from heaven. Whether it is one or more sounds, the coming of Christ will apparently be a noisy event. It is also debated whether unbelievers will be aware of His coming. This is not clarified. It could be that, like those who accompanied Saul on the road to Damascus, something will be heard, but the source or significance will not be comprehended. The dead in Christ will rise first: The dead believer is still in Christ.

Nothing can separate us from Christ once we belong to Him—not even death. Yet, though their souls are with Christ, they are to receive resurrected bodies. It is this rising that Paul spoke of. God will bring with Jesus those who have died (v. 14). The first order of business is their resurrection to glorified bodies. After that, we who are still alive will be caught up: There is probably no great time span implied here, for everything will happen in "the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52). There will be people from every nation on earth when Christ returns, and these will be "caught up." The word can be translated "snatched, swept up, carried away by force." The Lord literally "snatches" the bodies of the living, and they are transformed and their bodies glorified. These two groups, the living and the dead, will join Christ in the clouds. This is a great company. All believers back through the centuries will join those who are living at that moment, forming the church united with its head, Christ. And then we will be with the Lord forever.

4:18. Paul's conclusion: Therefore (in view of this) encourage each other with these words



MAIN POINT

The second coming of Jesus gives Christians hope and assurance until that day.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Where would you turn for comfort if you suddenly lost a loved one?

Where would you turn if you found out you were terminally ill with only a few months or weeks to live?

How would you counsel a friend who experienced the death of a close friend or family member?

How would you comfort a friend who lost someone who was not a follower of Christ? How is this different?

Death is universal reality of living in a fallen world. This is a cycle that will continue until Christ comes back. When death happens, we all seek some measure of comfort. Our non-believing friends do not have the comfort provided to believers. Neither the reality of heaven nor of Jesus' second coming can assure them of being reunited with loved ones. Jesus' return gives all believers assurance in the present and hope for the future.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

- HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-14.

Paul describes Christians who have died as being “asleep.” What does this imply about the Christian’s death?

How is the grief of Christians different from the grief of non-Christians?

Grief is a normal response to death. Notice that Paul did not tell the believers not to mourn in the face of death. Even Jesus grieved at the death of His friend Lazarus (John 10:35). Rather, Paul exhorted them not to grieve as others do. By “others,” he meant “the rest of humanity.” The pagan culture that thrived in Thessalonica would have offered these young Christians no hope in the death of friends. Not content for the Thessalonians to be uninformed, Paul wrote to instruct them on the Lord’s return.



How do discipleship and personal spiritual formation help us respond in a Christlike way in difficult situation like the death of a friend or family member?

As believers, how can our response to death and loss be a witness to the gospel?

Paul taught that those outside Christ have no hope in the presence of death, but Christians have much to be hopeful for. Our response to death illustrates our belief about death. When brothers and sisters in Christ die, they are not gone, but “asleep.” The return of Christ gives perspective to our loss and grief and helps us to apply the gospel to a painful situation. Our grief is not without hope.

Why did Paul stake so much on the historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection?

How important is it for today’s Christians to believe Jesus literally rose from the dead?

What is the relationship between the resurrection and second coming of Jesus? Why do you think many people are confused about Jesus’ return?

Paul believed in Christ’s bodily resurrection and based many truths on this certainty (1 Cor. 15:14). In this verse he staked our hope of seeing again the Christian dead at Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ followers in every place and in every age have confessed this truth and have it in common. In fact, to deny our Lord has conquered death is to deny the essence of the gospel message (1 Cor. 15:1-4). Paul goes on to explain that at Christ’s return, He will bring all those who have fallen asleep with Him. The gospel assures us we will see and be with our deceased brothers and sisters again.

- HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:15-18.

What five statements about the return of Christ does Paul make in verses 15-17? Of these, which impacts you the most? Which surprises you the most?

In verses 15-17, the apostle made several prophecies that he affirmed were from the Lord Himself. Whether Jesus had taught these things during His earthly ministry or whether this was later revelation He gave directly to Paul is unknown. 1) The Christian dead are at no disadvantage to those still alive at the Lord’s return. 2) Christ’s descent will be accompanied by incredible sounds. 3) The Christian dead will rise. 4) Christians still living at Jesus’ return will be caught up alive, meet the Lord in the air, and join the resurrected Christian dead. 5) One day all believers will be fully united with each other and with the Lord forever.

Consider verse 18. What should be our primary response to thinking about the Lord’s return?



How can you take seriously Paul's exhortation to encourage with these words? Could you use these words to comfort a friend?

How do these verses reorient the way we grieve as Christians?

Would you like for Christ to return in your lifetime? Why or why not?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What grieving Christians do you know whom you could comfort through these verses? How else could you encourage them?

Did any part of this study challenge you to adjust your thinking about Christ's second coming? If so, which part and why?

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He instructed them to pray "your kingdom come." Do you pray for Christ to return?

PRAAYER

As you close in prayer, thank God for the hope He offers in Christ's return. Pray for those in the church who have recently lost Christian friends. Ask that God would comfort them with the expectation of His return. Thank God that He has not left us without hope.

LOOKING AHEAD

Encourage your group to look ahead to next week's scripture passage as we continue our study of 1 Thessalonians:

September 11, 2022 --- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

