

The Second Coming of Christ

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then 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. ¹⁸ Therefore, comfort one another with these words.”

There's often an interesting background to what we read in Paul's letters to the young churches he had founded. The verses we have just read are his response to a misunderstanding that had caused grief to the new Christians at Thessalonica. Paul the apostle had personally taught his converts that the Lord Jesus was coming again to gather up His people, His church, to be with Him forever. **What a wonderful truth that was!** What comfort it gave to the little band of Christians living in a hostile world!

After some months Paul had to leave the city to return to Athens and then go on to Corinth in the south of Greece. It was then that a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Second Coming caused the believers some grief. **In the meantime a few of the church members had died. These deaths came as a great shock.** "Oh dear," they thought, "what's going to happen to our loved ones? Are they going to miss the Second Coming? They've died too soon!"

It is clear that they had misunderstood what Paul had taught that they should be ready for the Lord's call or return at any time. But human nature being what it is, they worried themselves sick as

to the fate of their friends who had died. Would they be at a disadvantage to those who were living when Christ returned? **Would their loved ones be lost?** Paul's assistant, Timothy, relayed the story of their grief to Paul. You can imagine how Paul felt! **He had a real pastor's heart and that's how the first letter to his friends at Thessalonica came to be written.** He wanted them to know the full story, the whole truth, of the Second Coming of Jesus. Perhaps the Thessalonian Christians hadn't been listening carefully when Paul was preaching and only got half the story with the result that they misled themselves with unfortunate consequences.

A simple misunderstanding can cause great anxiety. Communication nowadays is so easy with e-mail and telephone, but until the 20th century it was very slow. Two hundred years ago messages were passed over long distances by signal stations on hills. **When the Battle of Waterloo was being fought England anxiously awaited the outcome.** At last the signals began to whirl, the message being spelt out letter by letter: "Wellington defeated ..." The two words came through clearly and then fog covered the hillside. **Quite understandably the people thought they had lost!** The people were plunged into despair. What a catastrophe for the nation! But when the fog lifted they saw the rest of the message: "Wellington defeated...the enemy."

Misunderstandings causing confusion and trouble often happen in daily life if we're not careful. And that's what happened in Thessalonica. It's the work of the enemy to sow seeds of error, confusion and doubt between believers.

Paul responded to their doubts and concerns with words of reassurance. In verse 13 he says, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." Before the revelation of God in the Lord Jesus death in the pagan world was literally the end. A grim epitaph has been found on a tombstone of that time: "I was not; I became; I am not; I care

not." There's no comfort there for those who are left behind. There's no answer to the question, "What is the purpose of this life on Earth?" Of course, death, inevitable as it is, does bring grief through the parting of loved ones. It would be very unnatural, in fact, inhuman, not to mourn when we lose someone near and dear to us. Jesus did at the graveside of his friend Lazarus. What Paul is saying is that the Christian's mourning is not hopeless grief.

Death for the Christian is entirely different from that of the unbeliever because we share in Christ's victory over death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian was martyred for his faith by the Nazis days before the end of the Second World War in 1945, but before he was executed he wrote: "This is the end, but for me the beginning of life." For the believer, death is simply the gateway into the very presence of God.

Therefore, Paul launches out into one of the great fundamental truths of the Christian faith, the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. When Jesus died on the Cross, the vast majority of His countrymen thought they had seen the last of Him, but those who had witnessed His resurrection and ascension knew better. They recalled Jesus' teaching of His coming kingdom and it became absolutely clear to them that the next event in God's calendar was the Second Coming of Jesus in great glory. In Acts 1:11 the angelic messenger had predicted when Jesus ascended, "This same Jesus ... will come back in the same way you have seen go into heaven." No wonder then that Paul writes authoritatively, "We believe ... we tell you that ..." There could be no doubt. It was a statement of fact although still to be realized. It was "the blessed hope" that sustained him in the many trials of life. Paul makes four positive affirmations concerning this great event for the Christian believer.

The first is the Return. Paul says, "The Lord himself will come down from heaven." The Greek word that Paul uses for "come" is the word that was used for a visit of a person of high rank, especially of

kings and emperors, visiting a province. The Second Coming is when Jesus himself *comes*, not one of His deputies or representatives. It will be a personal, dramatic, public and unmistakable coming, the Return of "the Lord."

What Paul is teaching that Christ is going to Return to step back into human history to complete the divine work and plan that God has for all of creation. Mankind has made tremendous progress in terms of knowledge but its flawed nature has become ever increasingly apparent. All the advances made seem to be one step forwards and two backwards, in morality, selfishness and exploitation. **Millions are dying of AIDS in Africa, there's a great movement of refugees from the east to the west, both political and economic, as a result of man's inhumanity to man.** It's clear we can't save ourselves.

It is no wonder that believers are asking, "When is Jesus coming?" Paul wrote this warning in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2, "But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night." He is simply echoing the words of Jesus found in Matthew 24:36-44, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." **Although the Bible gives us "signs" that point in that direction, it is**

entirely appropriate to say that only God Himself knows for sure. But that hasn't stopped many from predicting a date for Christ's Return. But those dates have all come and gone, leaving many a red face of embarrassment and scrambling for some logical explanation!

Second, there is the Resurrection. Paul simply says, "And the dead in Christ will rise first." Christianity is essentially a religion of resurrection. When a Christian dies, it's not the end. Although it is true the body is laid to rest in the grave, but the soul and spirit live on. The dying but repentant thief crucified with Jesus was assured of being with the Lord immediately when his life ended: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Death is the gateway into the very presence of God. Paul himself testified in Philippians 1:21, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." For him, passing through death would bring him a closer, richer, fuller, experience of Christ than he was already enjoying on earth. This is the Christian hope, in stark contrast to pagan hopelessness. Therefore, Paul makes this promise, "the dead in Christ will rise."

Third, there is the Rapture. He says, "We who are alive...will be caught up..." The word "Rapture" itself is not found in Scripture but is derived from the Greek word that Paul uses for "caught up." The word is "harpazo" (har-pad-zo) and it means "to seize, to snatch away, to take by force." In the physical realm it expresses that moment when I walk over and "snatch" something out of your hand. In the biblical and spiritual realm it expresses that moment when Jesus will "snatch" His church from the hands of this world and bring us to himself. And it is in that moment "the dead in Christ will rise first... and we who are alive...will be caught up" and given our imperishable, immortal resurrection-body.

This is an amazing and supernatural event. It is incredible and unbelievable apart from faith. And the question that springs to mind is, "How is this possible? How is it possible that only believers will be 'caught up' and the unbelievers left behind?" The first thing that we

have to realize is that the power of the resurrected Christ is at work. It was God who raised Him from the dead and, if we believe in the literal resurrection and ascension of Jesus, then we should have no difficulty in believing that the Rapture will take place. It is that same power that raised up Christ that will raise the believers in the Rapture.

There's the objection that it's impossible for a body to rise against the law of gravitation but this overlooks the fact that in the resurrection body of Christ higher laws was in operation. For example, think of a huge 747 aircraft setting on an airport runway. It weighs many tons and is firmly clamped to the ground by the force of gravity. **It cannot possibly fly!** That is until the power of the jet engines are turned on and the laws of aerodynamics come into their own, proving that there is a force which can overcome gravity.

So it was with the Lord Jesus. Just as death and the grave could not hold him when His Father raised Him from the dead in a glorified body, so the Earth could not hold Him when the time came for Him to return to His Father. And so it will be when believers the world over "hear the voice of the archangel...and the trumpet call of God." Ephesians 1:3-14 makes this promise, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who

works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.” **The Bible is simply teaching us that those who have been "born of the Spirit" (John 3:8) have within us the Holy Spirit who acts as a magnetic attraction that will respond to the coming of Christ.** Just as iron filings are seemingly miraculously caught up by a magnet, so will Christians be "caught up" and drawn to Christ!

Paul goes on to say that this earth-shattering event will take place "in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Again questions arise: what's the meaning of "the clouds ... the air"? **There are many references to "clouds" throughout the Scripture - at the Exodus and Mount Sinai when God revealed Himself in clouds, and in the life of Jesus, at His transfiguration and ascension.** But the reference here seems to point to Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:1-3, "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others." **This is a subtle way that Paul has of once more reminding believers of the authority that we have over Satan and his demonic army.** In fact, when the Rapture takes place, we will meet the Lord in the very dwelling place of Satan and exhibit our total mastery over him once and for all. **As one studies the scriptures, there can be no doubt as to the reality that's being portrayed. It's the personal, visible appearing of Jesus Christ and the gathering to Him of all His people, whether dead or alive at the time.**

So, last of all, Paul turns with joyful anticipation to the reunion. He says, "And so we will be with the Lord forever." **This is**

surely the climax of the ages - the descending Lord and the ascending saints being united forever. **This is the heart of the Christian hope.** **This earth is frequently the scene of sad separations but for the Christian it will be a thing of the past, never to happen again.** There, in the presence of the Lord, we will be beyond the reach of evil, pain and suffering. Revelation 5:9 reminds us that heaven will be the place of the greatest reunion of all time, with people "from every tribe and language and people and nation." That's the glorious prospect for the future but we don't know when it will be, so back to the present!

What does the Return, the Resurrection, the Rapture and the Reunion mean to us in the here and now? **Philippians 3:20** reminds us that "our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there." But while we "eagerly await the Savior" we are called on to live our daily lives in constant readiness for our Lord's return. **No one but God knows if it will be in our lifetime.** **Therefore, our present task is to work for the kingdom of God as if the Return of Jesus will be delayed until the next century but be ready if He should return tonight!** But what a prospect! **No wonder John prayed,** "Come, Lord Jesus."