

“Jesus Will Return”

October 29, 2017

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

I. Introduction:

As you all remember, Paul’s stay in Thessalonica was cut short by persecution. In the short time he was there, he was able to introduce many topics, but, it would seem, that some were left incomplete. Paul must have taught them about end time events including Christ’s return to gather believers to Himself. Jesus had talked about His return—turn to [John 14:1-3](#). The disciples had received a similar message after Jesus ascended into heaven—in [Acts 1:10 & 11](#) we read that as the disciples “were looking intently up into the sky as he, i.e. Jesus, was going ... suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”

It seems that after Paul left, the Thessalonian Christians came up with some questions which troubled them. In today’s Scripture, Paul answered one of them, “*What happens to those who die before Jesus returns?*” Paul wrote this section to do away with the Thessalonians’ grief and confusion. He didn’t want them “to be ignorant, i.e. uninformed, about those who fall asleep.” Since he was writing to comfort Christians who were concerned about those who died before Jesus returned, Paul didn’t go into great detail describing the Rapture itself.

Paul used the word “sleep” for those believers who had died. Jesus used the same expression in [John 11:11-13](#) when He talked to His disciples about Lazarus who had died. However, Paul wasn’t saying that the soul went to sleep at death. Actually, he made it clear that the soul of the believer went to be with the Lord—in [verse 14](#) he wrote, “We believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Jesus cannot bring those who have died with Him when He returns unless they

are with Him already. “*Soul sleep*,” the false teaching that the souls of the dead are in a state of unconscious existence in the afterlife, is unbiblical. In [2 Corinthians 5:8](#), Paul wrote that I “**would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.**” In [Philippians 1:23](#) he wrote “**I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.**” In [Luke 23:43](#) Jesus told the thief on the cross, “**I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise.**” These statements all teach that believers go consciously into the Lord’s presence at death.

Paul wrote so that the Thessalonians would not “**grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.**” For the unsaved world, i.e., non-Christians, there is no hope; death is a frightening thing. In [Ephesians 2:12](#), Paul described unbelievers as “**without hope and without God in the world.**” For unbelievers there is an awful, terrifying, hopeless finality when a loved one dies—there is deep sorrow; there is no hope of reunion. Christians may cry at a funeral—there is nothing wrong with tears—the loved one is going to be missed. But Paul is saying that we aren’t to grieve as those who have no hope; Christians have hope--“**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.**” To help give the young Thessalonian Christians hope and comfort, Paul discussed Jesus’ return. He began with justification for Jesus’ return.

II. Justification for Jesus’ Return

A. Jesus’ Death Paul wrote, “**We believe that Jesus died.**” Following Jesus’ death, certain things logically follow. Jesus’ death satisfied the demands of God’s righteousness, holiness, and justice by paying in full the penalty for believer’s sins; [2 Corinthians 5:21](#) says, “**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” Christians have been made acceptable to God and thus able to be gathered into His presence. Peter wrote in

1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” By experiencing death for us, Jesus transformed death into sleep for believers.

B. The 2nd justification is Jesus’ Resurrection. Paul went on to write, “Jesus ... rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Romans 4:25 says, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” The resurrection of Jesus Christ proves that the Father accepted His sacrifice. Jesus’ resurrection proves that He conquered sin and death, and became the source of resurrection life for every Christian.

To help put away the concerns of the Thessalonians, Paul reassured them “that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Their fellow believers who died will not miss out on the Jesus’ return but, instead, will return with Christ in glory. Whether we Christians live or die, we have nothing to fear, because Jesus will come either *with us* or *for us*. The fact of His return was to be a comfort to their hearts.

C. God’s Word The 3rd justification of Jesus’ return is: “According to the Lord’s own word”—what Paul was writing concerning Jesus’ return was a direct revelation from God—this was God’s Word. This was a new revelation which had been alluded to by Jesus, but now the mystery of Jesus’ return was about to be revealed in part. Jesus’ return isn’t some speculation or hope; it is justified by the death, resurrection, and revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then there are . . .

III. The Participants

Two groups of people will participate in Jesus’ return: those “who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord” and “those who have fallen asleep”—Christians who are alive and Christians who are dead. Paul used the pronoun “we” to indicate that he believed that Jesus’ return and the Rapture, i.e. Christians “being caught up ... in the clouds,” could happen in his lifetime. He

accepted Jesus' words in [Matthew 24:36](#), “No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Later, in [Matthew 25:13](#), Jesus had said, “Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” Not knowing when, Paul didn't try to guess a date, nor did he push the return of Christ into the distant future. As Jesus taught in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in [Matthew 25:1-13](#), Paul lived in constant expectation of Christ's return.

The Thessalonians didn't have to worry about those Christians who had died. Those who are alive will be caught up but so, too, “those who have fallen asleep.” Also, the living “will not precede” the dead. The living Christians will not take precedence over those who have died or gain an advantage over them. All Christians will participate in the Rapture.

IV. The Plan

Having reassured the Thessalonians that their departed loved ones will not miss out on Jesus' return, Paul then gave a brief step-by-step description of that event. **Step 1: The Lord Himself will return** for His church—He will not send angels for it. **Step 2: Jesus will come down from heaven**, where He has been since His ascension—[turn to Hebrews 1:1=3](#). **Step 3: He will come with a loud command.** The Commander is calling His troops to fall-in. Perhaps this will be like when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead—in [John 11:43](#) we read, “When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”” **Step 4: He will come with the voice of the archangel.** Perhaps this is the sound of Jesus' voice or perhaps this is an archangel who adds his voice to the Lord's shout of command—either is possible.

Step 5: He will come with the trumpet call of God. The Jewish people were familiar with trumpets; among other things, trumpets were used to declare war, to announce special times and seasons, and to gather the people for a journey ([Numbers 10](#)). In the Roman Empire, and even today, trumpets were used to announce the arrival of a great person. The trumpet call of God serves to

assemble God’s people and to signal the arrival of a great Person—Jesus Christ. **Step 6: The dead in Christ will rise first.** For those who were concerned that their deceased loved ones would miss out, Paul pointed out that they “**will rise first,**” their glorified bodies joining with their glorified spirits to make them in the image of Christ—turn to [Philippians 3:20-21](#).

Step 7: Those believers “who are still alive and left will be caught up together with them, i.e. the saints who have died, in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The words “**caught up**” imply a strong, irresistible, even violent act; it implies that the action is quick or forceful. It is from this word that we get the word “*rapture*.” Five years later, Paul wrote about the “Rapture” to the Church in Corinth—turn to [1 Corinthians 15:51-54](#). **Step 8:** The final step in the plan of the Rapture is the blessed, comforting truth that after Christ returns to gather us (believers) to Himself, “**We will be with the Lord forever.**”

The Bible doesn’t reveal all the details of the reunion of all the saints. But on the Mount of Transfiguration in [Matthew 17:1-5](#), Peter, James and John knew and recognized Moses and Elijah. It would seem likely that the saints will know each other in glory, including believers we have never met—[1 Corinthians 13:12](#) says, “**Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.**”

Paul closed this section by reminding his readers that he didn’t write about the return of Jesus and the Rapture of Christians to fill the gaps of the end times. He wrote about the return of Jesus Christ so that the persecuted Christians in Thessalonica could encourage each other. There was no need for them to grieve and sorrow over their fellow believers who had died. As Paul would write to Titus in [Titus 2:13](#), the return of Christ is “**the blessed hope**” for all Christians.

V. Conclusion

In our modern world, scientists have investigated the experiences of people who claim to have died and returned to life again. They have also studied occult phenomena, hoping to find a clue to the mystery of life after death. Paul solved the problem when he wrote, “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you” (1 Thessalonians 4:15). Christians don’t need to wonder about death or life after death, for we have a revelation from God in His Word. Why substitute human speculation for divine revelation?

Death is a fact of life. The only way we can escape death is to be alive when the Lord Jesus Christ returns. Death is not an accident; it is an appointment—Hebrews 9:27 says, “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.” If you should die today, where would your soul go? Christians have wonderful assurance and hope because of the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ and His promise to return for them. Do you have that hope today? Which way are you going?

While Paul’s subject was the fate of believers who had died, his readers were believers who were alive, and his last word to them was: “Therefore encourage each other with these words.” Paul clearly expected the information he shared with the Thessalonians to affect their attitudes and behaviors. If the assumption of some of them that death is the end of everything were true, then the approach to life of “*Let us eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die*” would be appropriate. But there is life after death and we can--must look forward to the resurrection of the dead. With that in mind, we must not live for the moment but with an eye to the future. How we live now should be shaped by the anticipation of Christ’s imminent return.

Suicide bombers, tragically convinced that they will enter Paradise when they die, willingly give their lives for political or religious causes. Jehovah’s Witnesses labor in hope that they might be found among the 144,000 who qualify for heaven; Mormons strive toward extraterrestrial rewards. If mistaken beliefs such as these can have such an impact on those who hold them, should the beliefs of

Christians, based as they are on the death and resurrection of Jesus, have any less impact? Sadly though, many Christians are indistinguishable from their neighbors in how they live their lives and on what they choose as being important or critical. Afraid to take risks and concerned for their security—physically and socially, they seem unwilling to risk much of anything, let alone their lives, for the sake of the Gospel. What if Jesus had had that same attitude? What about you, do you live your life with the expectation that Jesus could return at any time? Turn to the Parable of the Ten Virgins—[turn to Matthew 25:1-13](#). Don't be one of the Foolish Virgins; be ready for Jesus' return.