

May 13, 2001 by Steve Brandon

The Return of Christ - In Relation to Those Who are Dead

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1. Pastoral Concern (4:13)
2. Comfort from Jesus' Resurrection (4:14)
3. Comfort from Sequence of Future Events (4:15-17)
4. Comfort from One Another (4:18)

Tonight, in our continuous exposition of 1 Thessalonians, we come to a passage which I have been anticipating for quite some time. I am speaking of 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4, verses 13 and following.

Of all of the texts we have come to, I come to this text with an interesting perspective. On the one hand, I feel like I am better prepared on this passage than I have been on any other. In the past few months, I have read two books pertaining to matters of eschatology (the end times) and have been thinking about this passage as it relates to Christ's return. On the other hand, I feel like there is so much to understand that I am only beginning to understand this whole area fully.

I feel like I am a physician, who has been studying blood cells intensely, who doesn't quite understand how the blood relates to the lungs or to the muscles. I know a lot about blood cells, but the whole is difficult. However, with that said, let us press forward into the passage before us this evening.

As mentioned in weeks past, we are in the second half of Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians. In chapter 4, Paul turned the corner and began to get real practical with those in Thessalonica. We have seen already in chapter 4 that Paul instructed them in the area of

- (1) sexual purity (verses 1-8)
- (2) love for the brethren (verses 9-10)
- (3) discipline for living (verses 11-12)

In this next section, Paul will continue to do so. However, with the particular section before us, Paul isn't addressing an ethical issue (sexual immorality, love and discipline) and exhorting them to live properly. Rather, He is addressing their misunderstanding of a theological issue (particularly the return of Christ). However, Paul's correction has very practical results: it was intended to comfort the Thessalonians.

Look at the flow of Paul's argument. In verse 13, he identifies why he wrote this section to the Thessalonians, "but we do not want you to be uninformed brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest, who have no hope." They had a theological misunderstanding - they were "uninformed." In verses 14-17, Paul corrects their understanding concerning the return of Jesus Christ. And in verse 18, Paul gives them the conclusion, "therefore comfort one another with these words."

At this point, I must mention that this is **always** the context in which the Bible mentions prophetic events. There is **always** a moral implication to it. Now, the implications are different, depending upon who hears them. Those who study prophecy and keep it only in the theoretical realm have missed the intent of the prophetic passages in the Bible.

Think about the news of the Lord's return to earth. For some, it is the greatest news of all for "their redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28). For others, it is the worst news of all. The Bible says that the unrepentant will "go into caves and rocks and into holes of the ground, before the terror of the LORD, and before the splendor of His majesty" (Is. 2:19).

We know how one message can have two responses. Like just this weekend, the first place Chicago Cubs have been playing the St. Louis Cardinals. When the news comes, you will see me, a Cubs fan, have a very different response than will a Cardinals fan. When we hear of the Cubs winning, I will say, "Yes!" while the Cardinals fan will wag his head in shame.

"The execution of justice is joy for the righteous, but is terror to the workers of iniquity" (Proverbs 21:15). Those who have united with Him and long for His glory will only rejoice at His coming! But, those who have rebelled and rejected Him can only have terror when He comes to judge the world.

So also, here in 1 Thessalonians. Paul, though he deals with eschatological details, his purpose isn't to describe everything that is going to happen in the future for these Thessalonian believers. His purpose is to relate eschatology to ethics. He wants to show how the future events affect their lifestyle today.

Throughout history, people have always been fascinated by prophecy for its own sake, rather than understanding the ethical implications of

the truth. Iain Murray describes this beautifully.

"It has to be admitted that an interest in unfulfilled prophecy is not always conducive to Christian piety. The Christians at Thessalonica were only the first among many in the course of Church history whose witness was marred by a feverish and misguided expectation upon this subject. In 1620 Elnathan Parr complained of 'certain foolish prophecies dispersed that the world shall end within these twenty years,' while two centuries and a half later C. H. Spurgeon had still to bewail the influence of 'twopenny-halfpenny prophets all crying out as one man that He will come in 1866 or 1867' [The Life and Work of C. H. Spurgeon, G. H. Pike, vol. 3, p. 141]. It is plain that attention to prophecy, instead of producing a moral and sanctifying effect, can merely promote speculative curiosities and intellectual pride. Towards the end of his life Richard Baxter made the pithy observations: 'We find it so easy to possess men with a fervent zeal for Millenary Opinion, and so hard to make them zealous in holy love to God and man, and in heavenly conversation, as make us suspicious that both sorts of zeal have not the same original' [The Glorious Kingdom of Christ, Described and Clearly Vindicated, p. 11]. Puritan pastors were alive to this danger and took steps to prevent aberrations developing in their own congregations. When they dealt with unfulfilled prophecy it was not as a 'special subject' of peculiar importance -- as became the fashion in the nineteenth century -- rather, their treatment almost invariably occurred in the ordinary course of expository preaching, and both by this example and by precept the people were warned of the danger of giving to prophecy a place disproportionate to its importance" (The Puritan Hope, pp. 85-86).

Nearly a year ago, I told somebody of our plans to study through Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians and this person responded, "Oh, a little eschatology, huh?" But 1 Thessalonians isn't about eschatology. It is all about a pastor's concern for these people. Sure, within this letter, Paul points the Thessalonians to the future events, but it always has a context of how it affects those to whom he writes.

In 1:10, Paul tells the Thessalonians to wait for rescue from the wrath to come. This comes with an attitude of dependence in our salvation. In 2:19, Paul expresses joy at the transformation of these believers and what it will mean on the final day. In 3:13, Paul was praying for blameless believers in the coming of our Lord Jesus. In 5:23, Paul prays for the Thessalonians to be sanctified entirely, that they might be "without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In this section (4:13-5:11) it is no different. In 4:18, encouragement is the result. In 5:6, the practical exhortation comes, "So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober." In 5:11, encouragement [i.e. comfort] is the result. So, before we even dig into this section, we need to remember that this was written because of a pastor's concern for these people. We are fortunate that Paul clearly sets for this matter which concerned him (in verse 13).

1. Pastoral Concern (4:13)

"We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest, who have no hope" (4:13).

Paul was concerned that they were grieving unnecessarily for some of their members, who had "fallen asleep," which the early church used to describe those who had "died." (See Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36). In our culture, we like to say, have "passed away" or "gone home." Notice that Paul wasn't so much concerned that they were grieving -- only that they were grieving like unbelievers, who have no hope or expectation for life beyond the grave. The exhortation to us isn't that we shouldn't grieve, but that our grieving ought to be done in light of the reality of Christ's return.

Why were they grieving in this way? It may have been that the Thessalonians had not been adequately informed on the issue of life after death. You remember that Paul's time in Thessalonica was cut short (possibly as short as only a few weeks) by the Jewish people, who became jealous and his preaching and started a mob, which incited the political leaders of the day to remove Paul from their city. Perhaps Paul simply didn't have the opportunity to fully expand upon the implications of the Lord's return.

So, apparently, there were some in Thessalonica who had died and the new believers there in Thessalonica responded just like those who weren't Christians -- particularly in their grieving process. Perhaps Timothy had an opportunity to attend a funeral service. Or, perhaps Timothy observed some of them who were continually mourning for their departed relatives.

There is an obvious point of application here for us. Not only should Christians live differently (unlike the Gentiles, who are controlled by their lustful passion - 4:5), but we should also respond differently to each other's death. Our funerals ought to be different. Those funeral directors who attend many, many funerals ought to see a difference in the funerals of Christians. Our remembrance of our fellow brothers and sister in Christ ought to be different.

Just yesterday, I had an opportunity to speak with another man from Rockford. So I told him about the church we are establishing here in Rockford (and my plans to move up here). He responded with lots of religious talk. One of the things that he said was that he was having a memorial mass for his father yesterday. Presumably to relieve some of his years in purgatory. This isn't the Christian way of mourning.

The believer who dies is immediately in the presence of Jesus Christ. As the phrase goes, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." (Though not an actual Biblical quote, it represents Biblical truth, from 2 Cor. 5:8). Paul desired to "depart" (that is, to die) and to be with Christ, for that is very much better." (Phil. 1:23). Jesus told the thief on the cross - "today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43). Stephen called upon Jesus to "receive my spirit!" as his death in Acts 7.

With departed believers, we need rejoice in their current state. We don't need memorial masses to relieve years in purgatory.

Jonathan Edwards described the "departed souls of saints [as being] with Christ, [enjoying] a glorious and immediate intercourse and converse with him. ... And accordingly the souls of departed saints with Christ in heaven, shall have Christ as it were unbosomed unto them,

manifesting those infinite riches of love towards them, that have been there from eternity: and they shall be enabled to express their love to him, in an incomparably better manner than every they could while in the body. Thus they shall eat and drink abundantly, and swim in the ocean of love, and be eternally swallowed up on the infinitely bright, and infinitely mild and sweet beams of divine love; eternally receiving that light, eternally full of it, and eternally compassed round with it, and everlasting reflecting it back again to its fountain" (The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2, pp. 28,29).

How can we mourn for those in this state? In light of the privilege and experience of the believers who are in Christ's presence, it is almost inconceivable. And yet, the Thessalonians did mourn.

Primarily, I believe, they mourned because they didn't recognize the hope that we have in Christ Jesus -- particularly as it pertains to those who have "fallen asleep." Somehow, they thought that those who had "fallen asleep," were in a worse state than those who are alive. Perhaps, they even thought that these people would entirely miss out at Christ's second coming, which they knew was going to happen (i.e. 1 Thess. 1:10 - "to wait for His Son from heaven."). I say this, because in the verses which follow, Paul will describe for us how Christ's return will be experienced both by those who are alive at the time as well as by those who have "fallen asleep" before He returns.

At any rate, these Thessalonians were grieving for those who had died as if they were going to miss the return of Christ. We will actually find out that those who have died are in a better state than we, who live to see Christ return. So, Paul sought to comfort them with two truths. The first is from Jesus' resurrection and is found in verse 14.

2. Comfort from Jesus' Resurrection (4:14)

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (4:14).

In other words, Paul simply puts forth for the Thessalonians the simple facts of the gospel: "Jesus died and rose again!" This is part of what Paul said elsewhere concerning the gospel: "For I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." (1 Cor. 15:3,4).

This is the core of what we believe about Jesus....

- that He died to bear our sins on the cross.
- that He was raised to be declared the Son of God with power (Rom. 1:5).

Christ Jesus became a curse for us, by becoming a curse on the cross (Gal. 3:13). Christ Jesus conquered death for us. "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection." (Rom. 6:5). The truth of the gospel is that Christ conquered sin and death and so can we through simple faith and trust in Him.

Catch Paul's line of reasoning, ... "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again," and we do, ... "even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Here is the picture. Those who have died (i.e. fallen asleep) will be with God. In fact, when God returns to the earth, He will return with those who have died -- "God **will bring with Him** those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."

I think that this speaks to the fact that the believers who have died are with God now and are actually in a better condition than we are. As I mentioned before, this is much better (Phil. 1:23).

I think that this is pretty simple and straightforward -- so much so that we don't need to spend much time on it. I only would like to briefly mention that Christ's sacrifice, death, and resurrection were crucial not only for Him, but also for us as well. In Ephesians, chapter 2, we understand that God made us alive together with Christ, raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Him. In some sense, our spirits are already seated and exalted with Christ.

"God lifted me up the heavenly realm,
Where seated with Christ I am free,
I ages to come, He will show me more grace,
So great is His kindness to me."
(James Montgomery Boice)

We continue on to Paul's second truth which ought to comfort the Thessalonians.

3. Comfort from Sequence of Future Events (4:15-17)

Let me read these verses and as I do, I want you to notice how these verses primarily denote sequence (or order) of events. Paul isn't give us any clue as to when these will take place -- that will await until the next section, when Paul writes, "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren."

I read several commentators, who happen to be pretty firm upon when these things would occur admit that these verses don't tell us about when they will take place -- which can only be had by inference. As a result, I don't want to focus upon when, as much as I will focus upon the sequence of these events. For it is the sequence of events which will comfort us, not the timing of when these events will occur. I don't want to lay upon this passage any pre-conceived time-frames, I merely want to explain Paul's meaning to you all tonight.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

"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, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of [the] archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. 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."

Paul describes those who will be alive when Christ returns with 2 descriptive phrases in verse 15: (1) we who are alive and (2) we who remain. This has lead many to conclude that Paul actually thought that he was going to be alive when Christ returned. Personally, I think that they are right. Paul was fully prepared to meet the returning Christ before he died. But, Paul also knew that Jesus said, "of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." (Matt. 24:36). And yet, though he may have been anticipating Christ to return in his lifetime, the manner in which these verses are written give us the freedom to interpret these verses and understanding that it refers to those who remain alive at the coming of Jesus Christ -- it may be our generation, it may be the generation to come. We don't know.

However, there is enough that we do know. And what we do know is that Those alive when Christ returns "shall not precede those who have fallen asleep" (verse 15). In other words, those who are alive aren't going first.

Look at the next verse 16, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise **first**." Here is the emphasis. Those who are living won't go first. But rather, it is those who have died who will rise first.

In fact, (like our last point) they are better off than we are! It is they who will rise first! We get to go next. But it is the dead who are first with Jesus.

Having stated his principle, Paul goes on to give four successive events.

Event #1: The Lord descending from heaven (verse 16a)

"For the Lord Himself [not a delegate, nor a servant, nor an angel], will descend from heaven."

With a shout (with an authoritative call).

This word is used to describe Jesus calling the crowds to sit down, so that they may be fed (Matt. 14:19). Just as the voice came from heaven at Jesus' baptism, "Thou art My Beloved Son, in Thee, I am well pleased." (Luke 3), so the voice will certainly thunder forth for all to hear. Perhaps the non-believing world will think that it thundered.

With the voice of the archangel. The only other place that this word is used is in Jude, verse 9, where it identifies "Michael" as the archangel. We don't know what Michael's "voice" or, more literally "sound" will sound like, but it must be a loud and mighty sound, like the other two descriptions.

With the trumpet of God.

This again, is most certainly, a loud blast from heaven announcing the coming of the Lord. This imagery of a trumpet blast is used often. Before God came down upon Mount Sinai, "there were thunder, and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled." (Ex. 19:16). In Revelation, there are trumpet blasts announcing judgment upon the earth.

These are probably not so much 3 events which happen one after the other as much as it signals one great call of God before His return upon the earth.

Event #2: The dead in Christ shall rise first (verse 16b)

The "dead in Christ" are certainly those referenced earlier (in verse 13) as "those who have fallen asleep." Now, at this point, you may notice a problem. How is it that the dead in Christ are rising at the return of Christ, yet, in verse 14, those who have fallen asleep in Jesus will be brought with the Lord?

Most theologians describe this by explaining that when we are with Christ, it is our spirits (or souls, or the immaterial part of us) that are with Him. Our bodies are dead and decaying. When Christ returns, we will receive our imperishable bodies. That is, **all of us**, those living as well as those who have died. As Paul writes elsewhere, ...

1 Corinthians 15:51-53

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall **all** be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

Event #3: The living will be snatched away (verse 17a)

"Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

This is the verse that many of you, I am sure have been just waiting for me to get to. (I hope that I don't let you down). This verse describes what happens to living, breathing believers when the Lord returns to the earth. They aren't dead, so they don't need to be resurrected. They have bodies and need to be translated to heaven, so they must be changed somehow. As we read earlier, 1 Cor. 15:51-53 is the best description of this event.

Paul writes that those who are alive will be "snatched away" (as the NASB says) or "caught up" (as the NKJV, KJV, NIV, RSV all say).

The Greek word is φαρπάζω(harpazo) - "to seize, catch up, snatch away, carry off by force." In Latin, this word is rapturar, from which we get our English word, "Rapture." The best way to grasp the meaning of a word is to see it used. Here are a few of the references in which this Greek word is used...

- John 6:15 - the crowds were intending to φαρπάζω (harpazo) Jesus, to make Him King (i.e. taking by force).
- John 10:12 - The wolf φαρπάζω (harpazo) the sheep.
- John 10:28 - "I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall φαρπάζω(harpazo) them out of my hand." (:29) "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to φαρπάζω(harpazo) them out of the Father's hand."
- Acts 8:39 - The Spirit of the Lord φαρπάζω(harpazo) Philip away. He found himself at Azotus, some 20 miles away.
- 2 Cor. 12:2,4 - Paul was φαρπάζω (harpazo) into the 3rd heaven.

You can picture this word like this. Suppose my little one year old sees a ball and begins to go after it. But, when she toddles over to it and stoops down to get it, I snatch it from the ground before she can get it. That is what this word pictures.

I have been trying to figure out exactly what this will look like. I fear that too much of our theology much of the time can be greatly influenced by our media. Though I have never seen it myself, I have heard people say how they are influenced in their views of Moses by how Charlton Heston portrayed him. I have heard others speak about Joseph and his Technicolor Coat, or Jesus Christ, Superstar, or the Prince of Egypt, or Bible story books, where they don't get it quite right. In this case, with the rapture, it is the Left Behind series.

In some sense, these are very good, because they cause us to think about things that we might not quite think about. But there is also a danger in these things, because they can warp our theology. I have tried to come as blank-slate to this text as I possibly could to protect myself from pre-conceived notions of what this event will look like.

Those who are alive will be "snatched up." Somehow, those who are alive will be removed from the earth to join those believers who have already died. Paul doesn't mention exactly what this will look like or when it will occur. So, I leave these matters silent.

Event #4: We shall always be with the Lord! (verse 17b)

That is an encouragement. Both to the Thessalonians and to us. O, to be with the Lord always!

How did Paul know all of this? In verse 15, he said, "by the word of the Lord." This week, I found amazing parallels between this passage and John 14:3. Look at them below....

John 14	1 Thessalonians 4
Verse 1, "Let not your heart be troubled"	Verse 13, "Don't grieve"
Verse 1, "Believe in God, believe ... in Me"	Verse 14, "If we believe Jesus died and rose again"
Verse 3, "I will come again"	Verse 16, "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven"
Verse 3, "I will receive you to Myself"	Verse 16b, the dead in Christ will rise first, Verse 17a, the living will be snatched away to be with the Lord.
Verse 3, "Where I am, you may also be."	Verse 17b, "we shall always be with the Lord."

It appears as if Paul simply took what Jesus said and repeated it using different words. The teaching of Paul is the teaching of Jesus.

4. Comfort from One Another (4:18)

In John 14:27, Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled." This is how Paul ends this section, "Therefore comfort one another with these words."

I exhort you as well, to comfort those in our congregation as well. Speak with one another and remind each other of the realities of the return of Jesus Christ. Let's be a constant encouragement to each other of these things.

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