

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
"Reunited At The Rapture"

A prominent theme throughout 1st Thessalonians is the coming again of J.C. It's amazing, the amount of doctrine that Paul was able to communicate *to* them only being w/them for a few weeks... & It would seem that one the main things Paul sought to anchor new believers in was the reality that Jesus will come again & that He will establish His kingdom upon the earth to rule reign for a thousand years.

Today, it's a topic we don't touch on too often. It seems that we concern ourselves w/various principles that help us to live the *practical* Christian life. However; truth be told, if we lived our lives w/the true understanding that Jesus is coming again & *it could be today...* That would solve a lot of struggles & questions we confront ourselves with. Because our mindset would shift into, "How do I want to be found when He returns?" "What do I want to be about?" It would impact my attitude, my actions, my decisions, my conversations, the way I conduct myself in the secret, & everything else.

The reality of the return of J.C. is what we might call a "purifying hope". The apostle John (in regard to the revelation of J.C. wrote this), "*Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, (when He returns) we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*"¹

So the principle that Paul would teach is, "Hey, live your life like Jesus could come again *today*, because He could!" Look, when Jesus I comes, I don't want to be found in a place where I'm not really serving Him in any way, my attitude is tweaked, my relationship with Him is suffering, I don't invest in His kingdom... I want to be found well pleasing in His sight. Because the reality of His return isn't a matter of "if", it's only a matter of "when".

But it seems that sorrow had filled the hearts of some of the Thessalonians. Because evidently a few of the saints had died since Paul had last been with them. Uncle Alexander was no longer with them (figuratively speaking) & so they were saddened that he was going to miss out on the glorious return of Jesus for His church. *But Paul assures them here that far from missing out or being left behind, they'll actually be called 1st! Then those of us who are alive & remain will be "caught up" (raptured) to reunite w/them in the air & so shall we ever be w/the Lord...*

Vs 13

Notice the terms that Paul uses to describe what he would spare them. He doesn't want them to be "ignorant", "sorrowful" or "hopeless". Now, he's not saying that sorrow is wrong. Listen, when someone dies, sorrow is natural. But he's saying, "Let's not sorrow as others who have no hope." That is, those who don't *know* the Lord or haven't placed their faith *in* the Lord.

When he speaks of those, "who have fallen asleep", it's simply a N.T. way of acknowledging the death of the believer. You remember when Lazarus was sick & Jesus & His disciples were down by the Jordan river & word came to Him that Lazarus had fallen ill, but He waited a couple of days before He began His 2 day journey to Bethany where Lazarus lived. & Then He said, "Let's go on up to Judea". & He shared w/them a little bit, then He said, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up." & They were all, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he's probably getting better, we should probably just let him rest." & Then He said plainly, "Lazarus is dead."

But Jesus spoke of his passing as "sleep" rather than "death" because what happens to a *believer* when *they* pass is different than what happens to an *unbeliever* when *they* pass. Now; what happens to the body is essentially the same for everybody. But what happens to the spirit of an individual can be vastly/dramatically different. Jesus said (when speaking to Martha, Lazarus' sister) "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?*"² You see? Your answer to that question determines everything when you pass from this life. "He who *believes in Me* though he may die, he shall live. & whoever lives & believes in Me shall never die."

So we have to ask, "What did He mean by that?" Because countless millions who believe in Him throughout the centuries have lived, believed in Him, & died. Therefore we have to conclude that He couldn't have been talking about the body... The bible actually uses 2 definitions to constitute death. One is the separation of a man's consciousness from the body.

When Jesus cried out upon the cross, "It is finished!" We read, "*And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.*"³ There was a separation of His spirit, His consciousness from His body, He died. As James said, "*...the body without the spirit is dead,*"⁴ & This is the definition used today.

² *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Jn 11:25-26). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Jn 19:30). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Jas 2:26). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

When a person's consciousness is separated from their body, there they are on life support, the EEG is hooked up monitoring electrical signals creating brainwaves & so long as the waves are being made they can remain on life support. But once the line goes flat, they remove the life support system & say that the person is clinically dead. This is obviously *not* what Jesus was talking about when He said that if a person lives & believes on Him they would never die.

The other biblical definition of death is the separation of a man's consciousness from God. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins,*"⁵ In reference to those who are truly widows, when writing to Timothy Paul said, "*But she who lives in pleasure is* (Notice) *dead while she lives.*"⁶ & This is why Jesus said that we've got to be "born again". There has to be a spiritual birth. That which is born of flesh is flesh, that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

So when Jesus says, "He who believes in Me shall never die." The reference is to the *spiritual death*, the separation of your consciousness from God. He's saying, "You'll never be consciously separated from God."

This is how we know that when our spirit leaves our body, we go directly into the presence of God. Your soul doesn't go into some state of suspended animation as you await a resurrection unto consciousness. The bible doesn't teach "soul sleep". To the contrary it *refutes* it. Paul was clear when he wrote to the Corinthians saying, "*We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.*"⁷ To be present in the body is to be absent from the Lord. To be absent from the body is to be present w/the Lord (as a believer). In writing to the Philippians he spoke of how he was torn because he recognized that being here (in the body) was helpful for them (he could instruct them). But he said, "I'm hard pressed..." "*having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.*"⁸

Now. For the unbeliever, they remain separated from God in outer darkness. In hell, where there is weeping & gnashing of teeth (Matt 13:41-42). But for the believer, death is nothing more than shadow that crosses your path as you enter His presence. Ps 22, "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*"⁹ & Again, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And* (then what) *I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.*"¹⁰

⁵ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Eph 2:1]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁶ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [1 Ti 5:6]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁷ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [2 Co 5:8]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁸ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Php 1:23]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Ps 23:4]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹⁰ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Ps 23:6]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

So when a loved one dies who knows the Lord. We don't sorrow as those who have no hope. We sorrow for our loss, but we're confident in the fact that they are w/the Lord. Therefore, we can be assured that the day is coming when we will see them again.

Vs 14

2 Things here. #1 In Jesus we have more than an optimistic wish of resurrection. In *His resurrection* we have an amazing example & promise of our own! Jesus died & rose again & in so doing became the 1st fruits of the resurrection. Anyone else who ever died & was brought back to life, came back only to die again. Not so w/Jesus, He was raised in His resurrection body never to taste death again! & As He is, so we shall *be* (when we see Him we shall be like Him! 1 Jn 3)

The 2nd thing we see here is another affirmation of being instantly in the presence of Jesus when our spirit leaves this body. Because in order for Him to "bring" them, they have to be *with* Him. I can't bring someone to you who isn't with me. I can meet them where you are, but I can't bring them unless I'm w/them. (Make sense?)

So their questions about those who'd died in Christ missing the return of Jesus was just put to rest. Paul says, "No, they won't miss it, they're currently in the presence of the Lord & they will return *with* the Lord."

Now; let me say this. I want you to notice that Paul doesn't use the word "sleep" w/regard to the death of Jesus. Why? Because what Jesus experienced, & what we will experience are 2 different things. Jesus tasted death (the penalty of sin) "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" so that we might have everlasting life. **There was nothing soft, nothing peaceful, nothing restful about the death of Jesus. He endured the worst that death can possibly be. He bore our punishment that we might share in His reward. He was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**

But this is our hope (our guaranteed expectancy). Because Jesus died & rose again, we will live forever *with* Him through faith *in* Him.

Vs 15-16

It's interesting that from ancient times (well before the time of Christ), mankind has tried to solve the riddle of, "what happens when we die?" Philosophers wrestle w/the question of immortality, mediums have tried to speak w/those who've passed on. **Scientists have investigated claims of people who've died & come back to life... Paul solved it all when he wrote, "This we say to you *by the word of the Lord*..." You don't have to wonder. God has given us the revelation. Why substitute human speculation for divine revelation?**

& As it pertains to the rapture, Paul says, no one is missing out on that. Whether you're alive at the return of Christ or have gone on to be *with* Christ, either way you get to partake in this glorious experience.

As a matter of fact, he says, those who are alive & remain have zero advantage over those who've already gone on to be w/the Lord! We won't "precede" or lead the charge in it all. To the contrary, the "dead in Christ" will rise 1st!

He says, "For the Lord *Himself*", Jesus won't send a representative to receive His bride, the church from the earth. It won't be an archangel, perhaps a leading apostle, no, the *Lord Himself* will descend from heaven... (Man, let *that* soak in for a second).

...with a *shout*. The idea is that of a *commanding* shout, there is a ring of authority & a sense of urgency to it. – What will the shout be? I don't know. Perhaps (as we read in the 1st Vs of the 4th Ch of the book of Rev) the Lord will simply cry out, "Come up here!" Or rather than, "Lazarus, come forth!" It will be, "Family, come forth!" I'm not sure, but He's going to shout & the of every believer spirit is going to respond...

People wonder if there will be 3 distinct sounds, the Lord will shout, the voice of an arch angel will ring forth & the trumpet will blast... Or is this perhaps a way that Paul is seeking to describe one incredible indescribable sound... I'm not sure. Again, in Rev 1:10 & 4:1 John described the voice of the Lord like the sound of a trumpet... So I'm just being honest w/you, I'm not altogether certain. However, what I *am certain of* is that you won't confuse it, & you'll hear it & you *will* respond to it.

Will the whole world hear it? I don't know. If they do, they probably won't understand it. I envision like the baptism of Jesus or the salvation of Paul when the Father spoke from heaven, or Jesus spoke to Saul, but those who were around, though they heard a sound, they couldn't understand what was going on... It'll be mass chaos & confusion upon the earth when suddenly there are millions of people just gone. Literally there one second, & the next second people all over the world simply vanish...

But we won't precede those who've died in Christ, the dead in Christ will rise 1st! What's that mean? Resurrection. It's my understanding that to be present w/the Lord currently is to be apart from your resurrection body (though maybe not in the sense of the eternal now, it's all wrapped up & over) but according to our linear current existence (marching through time). Your spirit will go to be w/the Lord. But at the rapture, you receive your resurrection body.

Now, it's not a *reconstruction*, it's resurrection. This mortal must put on immortality.

In 1st Cor 15:35-58 Paul speaks of this same event & brings into focus the resurrection of the body. Sown in dishonor, raised in glory. Sown in weakness, raised in power. Sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body fit for heaven. Our physical body is like a seed, the resurrection body is like the flower that rises up from that seed. There's continuity, but they're not exactly the same.

So there is order to the resurrection, & it *begins* w/those who've died in Christ. We won't rise w/out them, we will rise to *meet* them, to *reunite* w/them. Notice.

Vs 17

What a fantastic & dramatic scene this will be! & This is our classic passage on the rapture of the church. Some people contest, "The word '*rapture*' isn't in the bible!" But they're wrong, they're just reading the wrong language. You might want to draw special attention to the 2 words in Vs 17, "caught up". It's the Greek word, "Harpazo". It means to be snatched away violently, to be taken forcefully, snatched or plucked eagerly. When the Greek was translated into Latin, they used the word "Rapturus" from which we get our English word, "Rapture".

If it makes you feel better to refer to it as the "Harpazo" of the church, or the "catching away eagerly, snatching away violently" of the church. You're free to do so but I kinda like the ring of the "Rapture" of the church. It's the same word that was used in Acts 8:39 when the Spirit of the Lord "caught Philip away" after he baptized the Ethiopian.

The parallel passage to this is found in 1 Cor 15, "*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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*"¹¹ You see? It happens fast! Don't blink, it'll be over. The dead in Christ will receive their resurrection body & then all who are alive & remain will catch air! We will fly upward into the heavens to reunite w/them in the clouds & meet the Lord in the air! (Somebody tell me that the Lord doesn't know how to kick off a party! 😊)

It's so fantastical that if it weren't so plainly stated it would be hard to believe! But it's right here! & I suppose it's no harder to believe than God becoming a baby, born of a virgin, living a sinless life, dying a sinner's death & rising 3 days later from the dead... For w/God, nothing will be impossible!

Death brings separation; but Jesus brings reconciliation, a reunion (we will meet them in the clouds)... & then what makes heaven, heaven "& thus we shall always be w/the Lord."

¹¹ *The New King James Version*, (1982). (1 Co 15:51-52). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Family, it's not so much about *the place* we will be as it is *the Person* we'll be there with... We will forever be w/the Lord...

Now; I know that there are questions that surround the timing of this event. It's not my aim today to develop the *timing* of this event so much as the simple *fact* that it's going to happen. (Perhaps we'll discuss the timing a little bit in the next week or two).

You've got to do quite a bit of allegorizing, symbolizing or making of metaphors to explain this event away. The plain teaching of scripture is clear. The day is coming when we will be reunited w/our loved ones who have gone before us, the Lord Himself will descend from heaven w/a shout, w/the voice of an archangel, w/the trumpet of God... The dead in Christ will rise 1st & we who are alive a remain will be caught up together w/them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be w/the Lord.

Vs 18

Notice he doesn't say, "Take comfort". But the implication here is that we're to *give* comfort. To encourage one another regularly w/this reality of the return of Jesus & the eternal union we will all share w/Him & w/one another.

As we close, I would say that there's no better time than now to examine our hearts to see if we're truly ready to meet the Lord. Do we eagerly await His coming or are we hoping it's not today?

Maybe it won't be today, maybe it will. But apart from His return, death will come for us all. The bible is clear (Heb 9:27) that it's appointed for men to die once, but after that the judgment. Which way would your soul go should today be your departure date?

You don't have to wonder... Jesus is the resurrection & the life, if you believe on Him, though you may die, you will live & to live & believe on Him is to never die... Let me urge you, implore you... believe it.

Prayer Points:

Father we thank You for the comfort of Your word. Words of reassurance, of resurrection & of reunion. Jesus, we would hasten the day of Your return, that where You are, there we may be also. And may we live our lives in the light that You could come today, that it might impact every nuance of our lives for the glory of Your name.

Is the Lord knocking on the door of your heart today? If you've not surrendered to the Lord, then why not today. Give God your life, turn from your sin, trust in Jesus. He'll forgive your sin & make you new. You can leave here forgiven & free, the choice is yours.