

## **Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World**

### **Divine Comfort for Grieving Saints 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

#### **Introduction**

If you live long enough, you go to a lot of funerals. They become more a part of life than we would wish. Ecclesiastes tells us that it's better to go into the house of mourning than the house of feasting. It causes us to stop and think about eternity and our relationship to God. But when death strikes close to home by taking our loved ones, the experience can be more painful than we imagined it could be. The grief does not end when the funeral is over. We carry it with us till our time comes.

Our passage this morning is written to bring comfort and hope to believers grieving the loss of their loved ones.

**13** But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. **14** For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. **15** For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will

not precede those who have fallen asleep.  
**16** For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. **17** Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.  
**18** Therefore encourage one another with these words.

As many of you know, the words "caught up" are the basis of the doctrine of the rapture (Latin word is *raptura*) of believers who are alive when Jesus returns.

The Greek word translated "caught up" pictures a violent seizing, a sudden rescue, like what the Roman Centurion did to rescue Paul from the lynch mob in the temple precincts who were about to kill him.

As you know, there has been considerable debate about the rapture, not whether it will happen, but when exactly it fits among the other events of the last days (eschatology—doctrine of last things). Our text here does not give us that information, so establishing the timing of the rapture requires correctly weaving together relevant cross-references. A challenging task. You have but to read the literature on the topic to come away

impressed with how varied the solutions are. And, as is common in trying to explain what has not happened yet, every proposed solution leaves some questions remaining.

So before I preach on what this text says, let me give some cautions:

First and foremost, we must not to let the questions and the debates distract us from the clear meaning of the passage in front of us this morning.

Second, whenever there is considerable disagreement among born-again, Bible-believing Christians, we do well to **exercise humility** about our own views, especially regarding what has not yet been fulfilled.

Third, we **dare not abandon** the Christian hallmark of **respectful love** for those with whom we disagree on debatable matters. Snide, offhand remarks that assign bad motives or poor intellect for differences of interpretation are foolish and hurtful.

Fourth, we need to **beware ignoring clear statements** in Scripture in order to bolster or protect our preferred systematic theological position. Letting any theological tradition override clear statements in Scripture is dangerous. It tends to obscure the truth, limit growth in understanding, and entrench mistakes. We preachers tend to fall to this

error as much or more than anyone else because of our familiarity with the historic theology, and because we like to be clear and decisive in what we say.

In the interest of teaching what is here without the distractions of debating what is not, I am going to focus this morning on what this passage specifically says, rather than trying to explain multiple passages that deal with related questions, in particular the timing of this event. I know that decision might be a disappointment to you, but I believe we will be better served to focus on what is here and undeniable. To work through all the potentially related cross-references would take more time than we have, and could cause us to miss the treasure we have before us: Divine Comfort for Grieving Saints.

1. Reason for Hope and Comfort in Grief (13, 18)
2. Return of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (15-16)
3. Resurrection of the Dead in Christ (14-16)
4. Reunion of All Believers with the Lord (17a)
5. Residence with the Lord Forever (17b)

### **1. Reason for Hope and Comfort in Grief (13, 18)**

<sup>13</sup> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that

you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

**18** Therefore encourage one another with these words.

“Asleep” (13, 14, 15) = “dead in Christ” (16)

Paul writes what he does here in part so that believers will not be uninformed. *Ignorance of truth creates problems for us, especially in our times of deep pain.* We must beware telling ourselves lies when we are struggling with sorrow and suffering. They only add to our misery. We need truth.

Second, Paul writes so that we do not grieve as those who have no hope. We have a guaranteed future in Christ. There is a connection between gospel doctrine and gospel hope (future certainty).

Paul does not say that Christians should not grieve the death of their brothers and sisters in Christ at all.

We are to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

Jesus Himself was wept at the tomb of Lazarus, even though He was about to call him back to life (John 11:33, 35).

Isaiah prophesies that He would be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

That you may not grieve as others do who have no hope—

Ephesians 2:12

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

The Greek thought dominated the world at the time viewed the body as a prison house of the soul. Death was a release. The body was discarded. No use for it. No hope for it.

Variety of ancient Greek ideas regarding death. Either it was the end of everything, the soul disintegrating once the body died (Aristotle), or a change of existence as the soul escaped the body into whatever lay beyond. Some view it as a better existence (Plato), others (Homer) as worse.

“Death, Burial, and the Afterlife in Ancient Greece.” The Department of Greek and Roman Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003.

“In the Odyssey, Homer describes the Underworld, deep beneath the earth, where Hades, the brother of Zeus and Poseidon, and his wife, Persephone, reigned over countless drifting crowds of shadowy figures—the ‘shades’ of all those who had died. It was not a happy place. Indeed, the ghost of the great

hero Achilles told Odysseus that He would rather be a poor serf on earth than lord of all the dead in the Underworld (Odyssey 11:489-91)."

"In the face of death the pagan world stood in despair. They met it with grim resignation and bleak hopelessness. Aeschylus wrote, 'Once a man dies there is no resurrection.' Theocritus wrote, 'There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope.' Catullus wrote, 'When once a brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep.' On their tombstones grim epitaphs were carved, 'I was not; I became; I am not; I care not.'" William Barclay, quoted by MacArthur, 126.

Whatever pagan perspective one took, the living had no hope of ever seeing their loved ones in the body again. Some imagined they might somehow get together in the afterlife. But a recovery of physical existence and relationships was impossible.

But the Christian knows better. God made humans integrated beings, body and soul, physical and spiritual. Sin brought the sentence of death on humanity. The Savior from sin removed the sentence of death. Through the redemption of Christ, God rescues both soul and body. Our eternal existence is not just spiritual. It is physical as

well. New heaven and new earth. Sinless. Immortal.

Death separates soul from body, but resurrection will bring body and soul together again.

Encourage one another with these words. That is the purpose of what Paul writes here. Did you notice the "one another" work we need to engage in? *Our brothers and sisters need us to encourage them with these words of hope. The present grief is not final. The best is yet to come. Our loved ones have more living to do, and in a far better world.*

Between the bookends of verse 13 and verse 18, he will give us specific reasons we have comfort and hope in our sorrow over departed loved ones in Christ.

But we do well to consider that if we are not in Christ through faith in Him, we remain without hope. Death ends any hope we have of turning and trusting. We will wait in agony for the final judgment when we are consigned to the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. We sided with Satan, and Satan's fate we will share.

## **Applications**



- What are you doing to ground your thinking in truths the Lord has revealed instead of remaining ignorant of them?
- How are you letting the future certainty of your hope in Jesus shape how you endure sorrow?
- What are ways you can make it a regular practice to encourage and comfort your bereaved brothers and sisters?

## **2. Return of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (15-16)**

<sup>15</sup> For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

This is not the first mention of Jesus' return in this letter. Eager expectation of the Lord's return was part of what marked the Thessalonians as genuine Christians whose lives had been transformed by the gospel.

### 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

<sup>9</sup> For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his

Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The coming of the Lord comes up again in  
1 Thessalonians 3:12-13

<sup>12</sup> and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, <sup>13</sup> so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Our faithful practice of growing love for one another and the Lord's establishing our hearts blameless in holiness are both tied to His coming again.

Paul reiterates this vital connection between our sanctification and the coming of the Lord Jesus as he closes out the letter.

1 Thessalonians 5:23

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord himself will descend from heaven—an emphatically personal return of Christ. Christ Jesus Himself is coming back. His first coming was personal, in the flesh. And so will be His coming again. It is every bit as sure as was His first coming. It will be as much a part

of history as His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are.

The return of the Lord Jesus is a source of great comfort to the saints. On the eve of His crucifixion Jesus calmed the troubled hearts of His disciples with His promise to return to take them with Him to His heavenly home.

John 14:3

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

With a cry of command

Voice of an archangel

Sound of the trumpet

These descriptions remind us that His coming is a royal return, in keeping with the usage of the term coming (Parousia—presence) in the ancient world to describe the visit of a ruler.

*Every generation of kingdom citizens is to live ready for the Savior-King to return. It is the source of our hope and of our accountability to the Lord, empowering our holy living and our steadfast labors.*

That's why Paul includes himself ("we who are alive") among those who are alive at the coming of the Lord. We must all live ready. It is certain. It's not a question of if, but of when.

Matthew 24:36, 42, 44

**36** But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

**42** Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

**44** Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Acts 1:10-11

**10** And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, **11** and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

The followers of Jesus gathered together as witnesses of His ascension into heaven had work to do. They would bear testimony regarding Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. We gather to worship Jesus Christ today in what was then the uttermost parts because of their faithfulness to the gospel mission given them by Jesus Himself.

If you're not in Christ, the coming of the Lord is a terrifying thought. One day the mighty ones of earth will cry out for the rocks and

mountains to fall of them rather than having to face the wrath of the Lamb.

### **Applications**

- How can you make sure the certainty of the Lord's return at any time drives your sense of divine mission through each day?
- How could reminding yourself that the Lord is coming back for sure help you endure grief and disappointment with expectant joy?

### **3. Resurrection of the Dead in Christ (14-16)**

<sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

If Jesus comes back but does not raise the dead to life, what good would His return do them? They could never enjoy entering into their inheritance. Jesus countered the Sadducee's disbelief in the resurrection with

the words, God is the God of the living not the dead.

Foundation—the historical realities of the physical death and physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Apart from the resurrection of Jesus there would be no Christianity at all.

1 Corinthians 15:16-22

**16** For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. **17** And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. **18** Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. **19** If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. **20** But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. **21** For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. **22** For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep  
We who are alive . . . will not precede those who have fallen asleep  
The dead in Christ will rise first.

They will not miss out. When we think of those we love most who have died, we can feel they are missing out—seeing children and

grandchildren grow up, graduations, weddings, other occasions where we feel their absence keenly. But we know that to be away from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), which is better by far than anything we can experience here (Philippians 1:23). And when Jesus comes He will break the bars of death for everyone who is in Him. Death cannot hold them prisoner anymore than it held Him. They will come alive never to die again, immortal and sinless, citizens of His eternal kingdom, body and spirit joined forever in the new heaven and new earth.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52

<sup>51</sup> Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup> 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.

If you're not in Christ, a resurrection is coming for you too—one that the Scriptures describe as a resurrection to shame and contempt. To stand before Jesus whom you rejected as your Judge, and hear Him say, "Depart from me, you worker of lawlessness. I never knew you."

## **Applications**

- How can knowing that all the dead in Christ will be raised to life when He returns change how you think about your loved ones who are asleep in Jesus?
- How can the certainty of the resurrection help you process your own aging, illnesses, and eventual death?

#### **4. Reunion of All Believers with the Lord (17a)**

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,

Caught up together with them

Part of our grief is the separation. It can be a shock at first, but as the years pass, we feel the distance keenly and desire reunion.

We have comfort in the hope—the future certainty—of our being reunited with our loved ones in the Lord.

We who are alive will not remain earthbound, unchanged. We will be changed and we will rise with the dead in Christ to meet the Lord in the air. What a celebration that will be!

But if you're not in Christ, there will be no reunion with loved ones for you. Only eternal separation—what the Bible describes as being



cast into outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.

### **Applications**

- If you are bearing the weight of grief for your departed loved ones in Christ, let God's promise that you will be reunited with them comfort your heart as you anticipate that day.
- If you do not value fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ, how do you expect to enjoy eternity with them?

### **5. Residence with the Lord Forever (17b)** and so we will always be with the Lord.

This is not like one of those events you look forward to with great anticipation, and then once it comes it passes, and you crash back down to earth.

It is not the end. It's the beginning of the best that is to come. We are already on that journey if we are in Christ. Our destiny is the forever kingdom where we will be with Christ forever.

Psalm 23:6

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

But if you're not in Christ, your eternal residence will be the lake of fire, not the house of the Lord.

## **Conclusion**

Comfort one another with these certainties.

1. Reason for Hope and Comfort in Grief (13, 18)
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*Though the dark is overwhelming  
And the brightest lights grow dim  
Though the Word of God  
Is trampled on by foolish men  
Though the wicked never stumble  
And abound in every place  
We will all be humbled when we see Your face*

*And the demons we've been fighting  
Those without and those within  
Will be underneath our feet  
To never rise again  
All our sins will be behind us  
Through the blood of Christ erased  
And we'll taste Your kindness when we see  
Your face*

*We will see, we will know  
Like we've never known before  
We'll be found, we'll be home  
We'll be Yours forevermore*

*All the waiting will be over  
Every sorrow will be healed  
All the dreams it seemed  
Could never be will all be real  
And You'll gather us together  
In Your arms of endless grace  
As Your Bride forever when we see Your face*

### **Summary of Applications**

- What are you doing to ground your thinking in truths the Lord has revealed instead of remaining ignorant of them?
- How are you letting the future certainty of your hope in Jesus shape how you endure sorrow?
- What are ways you can make it a regular practice to encourage and comfort your bereaved brothers and sisters?
- How can you make sure the certainty of the Lord's return at any time drives your sense of divine mission through each day?
- How could reminding yourself that the Lord is coming back for sure help you endure grief and disappointment with expectant joy?

- How can knowing that all the dead in Christ will be raised to life when He returns change how you think about your loved ones who are asleep in Jesus?
- How can the certainty of the resurrection help you process your own aging, illnesses, and eventual death?
- If you are bearing the weight of grief for your departed loved ones in Christ, let God's promise that you will be reunited with them comfort your heart as you anticipate that day.
- If you do not value fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ, how do you expect to enjoy eternity with them?

### **Additional Discussion Questions**

1. In what ways can knowing your forever home is with the Lord help you bear up under the sorrows and disappointments of life on earth?
2. Given what Paul has taught us in this passage (Reason, Return, Resurrection, Reunion, Residence), how could you explain "the hope that is in you with gentleness and respect" to a person who does not know Jesus yet?