

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Answers The Coming of the Lord

Introduction: When a believing loved one dies, we are comforted with the knowledge of his presence with the Lord in heaven. However, the believers in Thessalonica somehow did not have this comfort. Their problem was ignorance, sorrow and hopelessness. The apostles taught that Jesus might return within their lifetimes, but were forced to leave before they could give full teachings on these things. The problem was that some believers had already died since the apostles left and before Jesus' return. *Where were they? What happened to them? Would they miss the Second Coming?* They misunderstood death and the Second Coming.

******What encouraging words did Paul offer concerning deceased church members (4:13-18)?**

When Jesus returns He will have with Him all those Christians who have already died. Furthermore, they will be reunited with their rejuvenated bodies (**Joke:** Unless of course they were Gentiles, in which case they will be reGentilenated instead of reJewvenated).

This is called the "blessed hope":

ESV **Titus 2:13** . . . waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ . . .

The Big Picture: Since there may be a lot of discussion and dissention over today's passage, it might be helpful to give the big picture of what Paul wrote would happen. Overall it is very simple: Christ returns, the dead are raised and the living are raptured.

1. According to 4:13, why did Paul write this paragraph? *See ahead to 4:18 also.* He did not want them to grieve over the fate of deceased brothers from the church. A lack of information led to incorrect conclusions. Getting an education is expensive, but ignorance costs a whole lot more!

How did Paul describe the dearly departed in 4:13? He described them as those who are asleep.

2. Why did Paul describe the deceased as being asleep (4:13)? *Compare John 11:11-14.* Sleep was a widespread metaphor for death in both Judaism and paganism in the ancient world (Best, p. 185). This euphemism obviously comes from the resemblance between a sleeping person and a deceased person. Jesus also used the metaphor of being asleep to describe those who are dead. Even today we speak of the sleep of death. One tombstone I saw read, "He is not dead. He is only asleep."

3. Since Paul described the dead as sleeping (4:13), are we to conclude they are unconscious? Why? *See Philippians 1:18-23, 2 Corinthians 5:8.* Paul were merely using a common metaphor for death, not giving a teaching on soul sleep. Other Scriptures make it clear that to be absent from the body is to be conscious and present with the Lord. The body sleeps but the soul is alive with Jesus in heaven.

ESV 2 Corinthians 5:8 . . . we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

According to 4:13, who has reason to grieve over the dead? Those who have no hope grieve over the dead. Certainly Christians grieve over the loss of loved ones, but it is different grief than those who have no sure hope of life after death.

4. How would you define biblical hope (4:13)? The English word often denotes wishful thinking. The Greek (*elpis*) is stronger; it is a confident expectation (as in, I hope the sun comes up tomorrow). Because of Jesus we have a confident expectation of life after death.

5. Why would the believers in Thessalonica be tempted to inappropriately grieve over deceased believers (4:13)? It is because they had not yet been taught the particulars about what happens after a person dies. Maybe they feared that those who died before Jesus' return would not be in heaven for a long time or would be left out at the Second Coming.

6. Based on 4:14, what future event is just as certain as Jesus' past death and resurrection? Compare 3:13. Jesus will come again and will bring with Him all who have fallen asleep in Jesus. When Jesus comes, He won't be alone.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:13 . . . the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Paul used something supernatural (the resurrection of Jesus) to help explain something else supernatural (the return of Jesus with his saints).

What did Paul declare to them by a word from the Lord in 4:15? Those who are alive at the coming of Jesus will not go ahead of those who have died in the past.

7. In what sense will the living not precede the dead (4:14)? It is not explained. Obviously the original readers knew what he meant. Perhaps the Thessalonians had the false idea that the dead will miss out on second coming activities.

What did Paul mean when he said his declaration was a "word from the Lord" (4:14)? This was information given directly by Jesus to Paul.

8. Why should the "we" of 4:15 not be taken to mean that Paul expected to be alive when Jesus returned? If Paul by writing "we" Paul was teaching that he and his readers would certainly still be living at the time of the Second Coming, then Paul was wrong and the Bible has error in it. Admittedly, it would have been clearer had Paul written "those" instead of "we". Paul clearly believed Jesus could have come before he died. It was a possibility. He probably even expected Jesus to come within that generation, but that is not the same as teaching Jesus certainly would come in the first century.

In this context, there are only two types of believers: dead and living. Paul naturally wrote "we" because he and his readers were among the living. In that sense, the "we" also includes us today, as least for as long as we are alive!

9. What can we learn about the Second Coming from 4:16? 1) The Lord “himself” will descend (it will be personal and bodily). 2) Jesus’ coming will be accompanied by the cry of command and 3) the voice of an archangel and 4) the sound of the trumpet of God. 5) The dead in Christ will resurrect.

10. What did Paul mean when he wrote that the Lord “himself” will descend from heaven (4:16)? Compare Acts 1:11, Hebrews 9:28. Jesus will return in just the way He left (bodily and in person, Acts 1:11). The Second Coming will be of such a nature that Jesus can be seen; it will be the Second Appearing of Jesus (Heb 9:28).

Two Comings of Jesus: Just because you read in the New Testament about the “coming” of Jesus does not necessarily mean you are reading about His Second Coming. There are two types of Jesus’ coming: universal and localized, physical and metaphysical, visible and invisible. Jesus already “came” in localized judgment against unbelieving Judaism in A.D. 70. This localized coming was not in person, not bodily. Jesus “himself” (4:16) did not appear. Instead, Jesus’ agents of judgment were the armies of the Roman Empire. Our passage today seems to be all about the Second Appearing of Jesus, a yet future universal event, when Jesus will again come in person.

11. Three sounds will accompany Jesus’ return: the cry of command, the voice of an archangel and the sound of the trumpet (4:16). What is the point of all these loud sounds? Perhaps it is to symbolize the waking of the dead (as in “That’s loud enough to wake the dead”). There won’t be any missing the Second Coming. It will not be in secret.

12. What cry of command will be given when Jesus descends (4:16)? See John 5:28. We are not told here. Perhaps it is the command of King Jesus for the dead to resurrect.

ESV **John 5:28** . . . for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

13. What sounds will the voice of the archangel be making (4:16)? See Matthew 16:27, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8. Perhaps will be a war cry against the enemies of God.

ESV **Matthew 16:27** . . . the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

ESV **2 Thessalonians 1:6-8** . . . God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you . . . when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Trivia: Who is the only archangel identified in the Bible (4:16)? See Jude 9. It is Michael.

14. What call will the trumpet of God be sounding (4:16)? See 1 Corinthians 15:52. The call will evidently be reveille!

ESV **1 Corinthians 15:52** . . . the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable . . .

Winston Churchill's Funeral: Winston Churchill's body lay in state at Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. A trumpet player played Taps. By his own wishes, when it was finished, a second trumpeter, stationed out of sight high up in the dome of Saint Paul's, played Reveille. This was to reflect Churchill's belief in the resurrection of the dead.

15. What in sense will the dead in Christ rise (4:16)? See *Daniel 12:2, 1 Corinthians 15:12, 20a, 35-44*. When Jesus returns, the bodies of all deceased believers will be resurrected. As surely as Jesus was resurrected so too shall the dead be resurrected. Thus it seems the Bible teaches a form of reincarnation!

ESV **Daniel 12:2** . . . many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

ESV **1 Corinthians 15:12** . . . if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

ESV **1 Corinthians 15:20** . . . Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

16. Confusing: In 4:14, we are told Jesus will bring with Him those who have died. It sounds like they will come down from heaven. In 4:16 we are told the dead will rise. It sounds like they will come up from the grave. Which is it? Down or up? When a believer dies he immediately goes to be with Jesus, leaving his body behind on earth (Phlp 1:21-23). In heaven they are disembodied souls (sort of like ghosts). When Jesus returns, he will bring these souls with him and they will be reunited with their bodies, which will be resurrected and restored.

Joke: *How does 4:16 prove that Presbyterians will get to heaven before Baptists?* The text clearly states the dead in Christ will rise first!

17. With respect to what will the dead in Christ rise first (4:16)? See *4:15b, 17*. Since the final concern is to always be with the Lord (4:17b). Perhaps some feared that those who died before Jesus' coming don't get to be with the Lord.

This is the same idea stated in 4:15b ("we who are alive . . . will not precede those who have fallen asleep"). When Jesus returns, the first thing that will happen is that the bodies of all deceased believers will first be resurrected (4:16) and go up to meet Jesus in the clouds. "Then" (4:17a), immediately after that, all living believers will be "caught up" together with the resurrected in the clouds.

18. What word is commonly used to describe the event when living believers are caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord (4:17)? See *1 Corinthians 15:51-52*. This is called the rapture of the church (though the word rapture is not found in the English Bible). Rapture is Latin for "caught up" (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 704).

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 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.

A parting some believers use is, “I’ll see you here (later on earth), there (in heaven after death) or in the air (at the rapture of the living). Some Christians will never have a date with the undertaker. Instead, they will be transformed by the great Uppertaker!

Word Study: “Caught up” (4:17) is from *harpazo*. It contains the idea of both suddenness and power. It is the idea of being snatched up violently and immediately (Best, p. 198): *Gone!*

What do clouds have to do with anything (4:17)? See *Exodus 19:16-18, Psalm 97:1-2, Isaiah 19:1, Daniel 7:13, Mark 9:7*. In both Old and New Testaments, clouds are associated with the presence of God.

ESV Exodus 19:16-18 On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled . . . Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

ESV Psalm 97:1-2 The LORD reigns . . . Clouds and thick darkness are all around him . . .

ESV Isaiah 19:1 An oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

ESV Daniel 7:13 . . . behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man . . .

ESV Mark 9:7 . . . a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

19. After the resurrection and rapture we will always be with the Lord (4:17b). Will we stay permanently up in the clouds (playing harps perhaps)? Why? Paul did not give us any more information here — he left us hanging in the air (Best, p. 200)! Based on other Scriptures, many different scenarios have been proposed, but no one knows for sure exactly what will happen. We do know that we will have resurrected bodies and will always be with the Lord (wherever He is).

The popular *Left Behind* series strongly promotes a very specific scenario of end time events, as if such things were without dispute, cut and dried. As Gershwin’s song says, “It ain’t necessarily so!”

Word Study: “Meet” (4:17) is from *apantesis*, a word that had a very technical meaning in relation to the visits of dignitaries to cities. The dignitary would be greeted by a deputation of citizens who had gone out from the city for this purpose and then ceremonially escorted back into the city (Best, p. 199). Paul’s use of *apantesis* may suggest that the raptured saints meet the Lord in the air as He is returning and then come with Him back to the earth.

Perspective: When it comes to end times events, the creeds and confessions do not say much. What they do say and agree on is that **1) Jesus will come back, 2) the dead will be resurrected, 3) there will be judgment and 4) God's people will spend eternity with God.**

Apostles' Creed: He (Jesus) ascended into heaven . . . thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead . . . I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Nicene Creed: He (Jesus) will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end . . . We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Athanasian Creed: He (Jesus) arose from the dead; he ascended to heaven . . . from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all people will arise bodily and give an accounting of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

Westminster Confession:

I. The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.

II. At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the selfsame bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever.

III. The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonour: the bodies of the just, by His Spirit, unto honour; and be made conformable to His own glorious body.

Based on 4:18, what effect were these words designed to have on the church (4:18)? Paul's words on end time events were designed to encourage the church.

20. How would the truth of 4:13-18 be encouraging to the church (4:18)? Paul's point in writing was to encourage the church with the truth that those who die before Jesus' return won't miss out on anything! Only together with them will we all meet Jesus at His coming back to earth.

Teacher's Note: Some preachers do not think this passage is about the Second Coming. They say it is only about the resurrection of the dead and the rapture of the church. They hold that first the church is raptured from the earth, then a great seven year tribulation takes place, then finally Jesus' Second Coming happens. They use 4:18 to help support this scenario, reasoning that there would be no encouragement (4:18) if the church has to go through the great tribulation. They ask, "1 Thessalonians 4 is a message of comfort; is the great tribulation comfort?" They further argue that if the rapture and second coming are co-terminus events, then we would know the exact time of the second coming (7 years after the great tribulation begins). They say if the rapture of the church is post-tribulation, we would stop looking up and start looking around! It is noteworthy that no one ever discovered a seven year gap between the rapture and the Second Coming for the first 1,850 years of the church's existence. It was not until the mid-1800's that this theory was proposed.

So What?

21. What encouragement should we feel concerning the fate of deceased believers? We have the confident expectation that they are with Jesus in heaven and will return with him at His second coming.

22. What can we learn about Jesus' coming from 4:13-18? *Compare 1:10, 2:19, 3:13.* Christ returns, the dead are raised and the living are raptured.

Time permitting, turn to and read 1 Corinthians 15:35-44.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. This is put people's minds in gear and them something to look for as the text is read. It causes focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the ESV.

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