

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 10

The Coming of the Lord

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1. Review 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. What does it mean that the sanctification of the believer is the “*will of God?*” What two (2) specific *things* does Paul encourage the Thessalonians to do?

To say that sanctification is the will of God is to say that it is God’s *purpose* for those he has decreed to save; it is what he has *determined* to accomplish in the elect as they are being “fitted” for his presence. God has not purposed for followers of Christ to simply profess their “faith” in him and then go to “heaven” when they die; he has purposed from eternity past that they would be fully glorified in his sight, in both body and soul. Justification is the declaration by God that a believer is holy; sanctification is simply making that reality work itself out into every *other* aspect of the life of the believer, so that he or she becomes consistently holy through and through. So, Paul encourages the Thessalonians in their sanctification in two specific areas: their sexual morality and their work ethic. In terms of sexuality, Paul encourages them to be sanctified by controlling their bodies, resisting the temptations of sexual sin that characterized all of society around them, under the Christian worldview that sex was specifically designed by God for a designated time and place. In terms of a work ethic, Paul encourages them to do what is required of them to take care of their families, in *anticipation* of the return of Christ being yet far off. Both of these are encouragements to sanctification: for the believer to demonstrate to the world that he or she sees the world differently, through the eyes of Christ.

2. (a) What is the *concern* that Paul addresses in 4:13? What was the “*grief*” that the Thessalonians may have voiced as a concern through Timothy?

The context clearly refers to those who have “*fallen asleep*” (see 3a below), specifically those who have died. Their grief is, undoubtedly, related to the fact that some in the Thessalonian church have died, and this is cause for feelings of loss and mourning amongst them. However, the grief of the Thessalonians is *compounded* by a question: does the death of these saints imply that they are *not included* in the plans of Christ, given that they died *before his return*? This produces a grave concern in them, which Paul proceeds to address.

- (b) What does this concern imply about the *understanding* of the Thessalonians in regards to death? How might this have been a *cultural* misunderstanding (i.e., bringing cultural beliefs into the church)?

Because the church, at this stage in history, is fundamentally *infantile* in its theological understandings, it is highly likely that *cultural* understandings of death may be flourishing in the church. Specifically, the idea that death is the “end” of the individual, or that a person who dies passes into a state of “unconsciousness” until some point in the future (or forever). Many of the pagan religions of the time (including much Greek philosophy) strongly suggested that either 1) a person who dies simply passes into non-existence, or 2) a person who dies is “freed” from his bodily existence to a new life on a different “plain” (i.e., a non-corporeal one in which the person is now a “spirit” being). Although Gnosticism is not yet a major factor in the church, its cultural realities flowing out of Greek philosophy (and Jewish reckoning; see 3a below) may be affecting the thinking of the church in Thessalonica, and the believers may be struggling with how to understand the death of a *saint* in the light of these teachings.

3. (a) Paul describes the dead as those who are “asleep” (see 4:13, 14, 15). What does this imply about his understanding of death?

Jewish theology held that, upon death, the righteous person entered into a state of reward, whereas the unrighteous (or the Gentile) passed away into either a state of non-existence or a state of general punishment. The concepts of heaven and hell are not fully developed in Jewish thinking, and the concept of a resurrection of the body were highly debated amongst the Jewish academics (e.g., the Pharisees accepted a form of resurrection, the Sadducees denied it). It is, ultimately, the teachings of Christ and his apostles that bring “clarity” to these subjects, which is fleshed out more through the Church Age. Paul’s view of death, of course, would come from Jesus, both in the teachings that he received from him, along with the nature of death as Christ himself had experienced. For Paul, then, a proper *anthropology* sees human beings as *immortal beings*, bearing (for a time) a mortal body alongside an immortal soul. Although the body dies and falls back to the dust of the ground, a Pauline worldview recognizes that human beings are only human so long as they are embodied, the soul and body *together*. So, when a person dies, in Christian reckoning, the soul enters the presence of God *in anticipation of a day when the body will be resurrected*, and the soul and body are restored together. This is what Christ himself experienced: although his body was dead and buried, upon his resurrection his eternal nature (i.e., his human soul and divine nature) were restored to a new body, and he retains this eternal nature as the God-man forever. Thus, an individual “falling asleep” is simply a *euphemism* for death; the individual’s body dies (i.e., it gives the appearance of being asleep), but only in *anticipation* of being restored to life and to soul.

(b) Using whatever biblical passages you wish, briefly describe the *intermediate state*: the condition of a person who has died and continues to exist *prior* to the return of Christ.

The New Testament gives little in the way of a description of the nature of a person in the intermediate state, the state in which the soul has been separated from the body in *anticipation* of the resurrection, where the nature of the individual is made “whole” again. Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 gives some hints: the rich man enters into a place of conscious torment, knowing that he was unrighteous in life, while Lazarus enters into a place of conscious bliss, experiencing the reward for his righteousness. However, there are many questions left unanswered: the rich man experiences pain and is able to speak; does this imply that he is “embodied” in some way, given that the soul (by itself) has no such ability? All that we can conclude is that the intermediate state is *not* a state of “soul sleep” where the individual remains in a state of unconsciousness until the resurrection. Jesus seems to imply very clearly that human beings will continue to be conscious of both their surroundings *and* their nature after death. However, any further information will have to be left for our own discovery.

4. (a) In 4:14, to what does Paul appeal as the *hope* of those who have died in Christ?

The obvious hope, and foundation, of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Christ: the *bodily* resurrection of Christ establishes a worldview regarding life and death very different from the world around us. Specifically, the resurrection establishes the *hope* for everyone else who experiences death, namely, that those who are included in Christ will also be raised as he was in order to experience to joy of knowing him face to face. Death is not the end; death is simply a part of the reality caused by the Fall *but overcome by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ himself*.

(b) In 4:15, what “*word from the Lord*” does Paul reveal? What is his *point* regarding the priority of those who are alive versus those who have already died?

Paul reveals a truth that he has received *directly from the Lord*, something taught to him by Christ himself. This would be, therefore, a *transcendent truth*; something established within the very fabric of the universe by the eternal decree of God in his purposes for creating the world and rescuing a people from it. Specifically, Paul reveals that the *priority* will be, on the day that the Lord returns, that those who have died will *precede* those who are still alive. Namely, that those who have died will be *resurrected* first and drawn into the presence of Christ before those who are still alive. Numerically, of course, over thousands of years (something Paul could not have known), the count of the dead in Christ would *far* outnumber those still alive. They will be the first to see the glorious face of Christ with new, resurrected, and glorified bodies. Those who are still alive will also see Christ by being glorified in body, but they will not precede those who have died. In other words, Paul *assures* the Thessalonians that their loved ones who died with faith in Christ *will* see the glory of Jesus at his return, even going so far as to say that they will see him *first*.

5. (a) Describe the *event* of 4:16-17. List the various *elements* of it and what each represents.

The event in question (i.e., the general resurrection; see 5b below) will have the following parts: 1) Christ Jesus will step down from his eternal throne at the right hand of the Father and appear upon the earth, 2) a loud command, booming forth from the voice of an archangel and a trumpet, will be heard throughout the earth announcing this appearance of the Christ, 3) the dead *in Christ* (i.e., the saints of all generations) will rise from their graves to be resurrected, and 4) the faithful elect still alive will join Jesus and these resurrected saints to receive their new bodies. This will result in a grand “reunion” of all of the elect with Jesus, to be with him forever. Unmentioned here is the resurrection of the wicked, but since it is Paul’s intention to discuss the fate of *the saints who have died*, it makes sense that Paul would skip over that point. However, it is clear that the reprobate will also be raised at some point (probably at the end), in order to come before him in judgment.

(b) What *is* this event? What is its *intention*? *When* will it occur? What will it *usher in*?

This event is the general resurrection of the dead. Its intention is to complete the process of glorification of all the elect and to establish the kingdom of Christ upon the earth in eternal union with his faithful saints. It will occur at the end of the present age, when the full number of the elect has been drawn forth from every tribe, tongue, and nation, satisfying the decree of God as to the number that he has set aside to himself. It will usher in a day of judgment, where the reprobate will be judged for their acts of rebellion and cast away from the presence of God’s grace into eternal torment. And, it will usher in the eternal kingdom of Christ, ruling over the whole world alongside his own.

(c) Some see these verses as a reference to the *Rapture* of the Church, a “snatching away” of believers before (or during) a time of great tribulation. Do you *agree* with this assessment? Why or why not?

The concept of a rapture, developed in the 19th century, interprets this event as a *precursor* to a general resurrection, a “snatching away” only of the church from the world before a time of great tribulation. Because Paul makes no mention of the wicked being resurrected, the proponents of a rapture suggest that this is simply Christ removing his own from the world, to protect them from harm, such that the living who trust in Christ simply “disappear” from the world for it to carry on in sin. However, there is scant evidence in the rest of the Pauline corpus (or the New Testament) to suggest that an “initial” resurrection of only the elect occurs first, with a later resurrection occurring which would include both the wicked (in general) and those who might come to faith *after* this event. The more *likely* explanation is that this is simply Paul referring to the general resurrection at the end of the age in a way that would help to calm the fears of the believers in Thessalonica. Specifically, Paul speaks of the resurrection of the dead in this way to demonstrate that the fear of the church that their loved ones who trusted in Christ are lost forever is unfounded; they will be *the first part* of this great resurrection of the entirety of the human race, which would give the saints in Thessalonica assurance in the face of death.

6. Why is the resurrection of the dead a *vital* element of Christian theology (see 1 Cor. 15:12-19)? List some *reasons* why it is often “deemphasized” in the church today?

The general resurrection of the dead is a vital element of Christian theology because it is *fundamental* to the objective reality of what it means to follow Christ. If Jesus himself had *not* been raised from the dead, then there is no Christian faith; there is nothing *objective* to point to as a solid *basis* for our faith (as Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15). The coming forth of Jesus *alive* after his death establishes him as all he said he was, and all of the promises of God are now established in the fact that Christ *linked* his death and resurrection to them. Thus, we are able to *truly believe God* because we see the “evidence” of his trustworthiness in bringing Jesus back to life in a glorified state. The resurrection also gives us hope into the future: although we, too, will die, we can look “beyond” our death to know that Christ will raise us up again, that we will be reestablished *body and soul*, and that our human existence will continue forever *just as his does*. The reason why the resurrection is often diminished today, in my opinion, is because the Christian church has failed to properly understand what it means *to be human*. In many circles, Christians are told that the *best* that can happen to them by faith in Christ is that they “escape” the confines of the body and live as spirit beings. But, this is *utterly inconsistent* with a biblical worldview of what it means to be human: we are *only* human when we are both body and soul! The resurrection is the hope that, although our bodies may die, we will be embodied again, and (this time) perfectly and gloriously, without sin and death to rule over us. To teach that we are nothing more than “imprisoned” spirits (i.e., the essence of modern Gnosticism) is to deny the importance of what God created *first* when he formed Adam, and to lose the very nature of what it means to be human. It also “undercuts” the reality of the resurrection of Christ himself; if Christ is simply a “spirit being” now, then for what purpose did he die and for what purpose was he buried, details very clearly emphasized in the gospel accounts?