

Clothed, Naked, Further Clothed

Jesus Is Returning

By Bob Vincent

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Corinthians 5:1-8
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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.

This is the word of the Lord.

May we pray.

Lord, help me, your unworthy and inadequate servant, to open my mouth with boldness and to make known the mystery of the Gospel and its practical application clearly and concisely and compellingly and practically for Jesus' sake. Amen.

It dawned on me that I had three sermons left to preach here because I will be gone next Lord's day to the 174th anniversary of our church in Junction City, Arkansas. So with three left, I thought what have I not hit here in a clear compelling and hard way, and it hit me: the Lord's return. So I want to talk to you today and in two weeks and then on the 23rd about the Lord's return and I want to tell you a couple of things before I begin.

First of all, there are several things that are connected to the Lord's return that are hard to put in order. Here they are. The Lord could return today and any scheme that says he couldn't return today is not true to Scripture. But, this is going to sound contradictory, before the Lord's return, there will be a great falling away and there will be a revelation not simply of wickedness but of an individual man who is the consummation of that wickedness. And thirdly before the Lord's return, there will be a great revival and

multitudes of Jewish people along with multitudes of Gentiles will come to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ.

So how do you put that together? I don't know. I think it's important to remember that in the days of Christ and his disciples, they did not know about how two themes of Old Testament prophecy would fit together. What were those two themes? A suffering servant and a reigning king, and they couldn't comprehend how those two things would fit together. It's kind of like opening up a huge jigsaw puzzle but you don't have the box top. Somebody chunked the box top into the trash and it got burned up and so you don't know the big picture. How is this going to fit with that? How is that going to fit with this? And so people in the Old Testament could not figure out how the Messiah would be a suffering servant and also a reigning king, however, we have the cover to the box top. We know exactly how it all fit together in the life of Jesus. It was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and so enter into his glory, but here we are with these three strands of prophecy regarding the return of Christ and how we put them together is in one way impossible to figure out.

Now there are things in the Bible that are paradoxical. Paradoxical doesn't mean that they're contradictory, it means that they seem contradictory but they're not. Think of who Jesus is. Jesus is truly God, fully God. We might say that Jesus is 100% God and Jesus from the time of his conception in the womb of the virgin Mary is truly fully 100% human, and yet Jesus is not 200%, he's only 100%. There's a mystery there. I can't figure it out but I can state the mystery for you and that's what Christians have confessed from the very beginning and those things came to be summed up in the Nicene Creed and the creeds that followed, that Jesus is God, Jesus is human, Jesus is not two persons but one person, distinct from the person of the Father and the Holy Spirit yet one God with them.

So there are these things in the Bible that have tension as we try to wrap our Western logical minds around them, so keep in mind these three strands: Jesus could come today but before Jesus comes, there will be a revelation of great evil that's already around but has not yet, so far as we know, reached its consummation, and there will also be great revival, and I'll speak on those things each Sunday as we proceed. Today we want to look at 1 Thessalonians 4 and verse 13 there on page 987, and we'll look at some other Scriptures as well.

He says in verse 13, "we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep." What does that mean? Does it mean that when a person dies that person's soul goes to sleep and is not awake? No, it doesn't. Let's look at some Scriptures in that regard. Look with me for a moment to the left at Philippians 1. In Philippians 1, Paul is debating with himself out loud in writing to the Philippians and he says this, he says in verse 18 at the top of the page, "Yes, and I will rejoice," he says in verse 19, "for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." Now listen to what he says, verse 21, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Think about it. If your soul is unconscious and completely unaware of anything, if when you die you are as conscious as a dead possum on the side of the road, death is not gain, but Paul knew that death was gain. Listen to what he says further, he says, verse 22, "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me." Then he says, "Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell." Verse 23, "I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart," what's he talking about, departing? What would depart? His inner man. His spirit or his soul would depart from his body and what does he tell us about that? "To depart and be with Christ, for that is better by far."

So what happens when a believer dies? At the moment of death, the spirit or the soul of that believer departs from the body and goes somewhere and where does that person's spirit or soul go? To be in the presence of the Lord. And notice what he says here, he says, "for that is far better." If you know that you know Christ, then you don't have to be afraid of death and you can look forward to it because death means that you'll be with the Lord Jesus. Death means that you will no longer struggle with the things of this life. The book of Hebrews describes heaven as a place where the spirits of just persons have now become perfect. As I stand before you today, I have to confess I am not a perfect person and the person who knows that better than anyone on earth is my wife, just as I know about her imperfection better than anyone else. Turn about is fair play. So I'm not perfect but, you know, one day I'm gonna be perfect, I'm gonna be with Jesus and my spirit is gonna be at peace, I'm gonna have a fullness of joy, I'm gonna worship the Lord without ever worrying about that blank-blank clock. I'm gonna be happy in Jesus and Paul says to leave the body behind and be with the Lord is better by far. Now he goes on and says something else, verse 24, "But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account." So did he really want to die? If it were just up to his personal desires, yes, but he had work to do and until we have finished our work on earth, we need to be about doing that work.

Now look with me at one other passage and that's 2 Corinthians 5. Now it's interesting because this really helps us understand what we've read in 2 Thessalonians. Page 966. He says, "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed." What's he talking about? He's talking about the thing that you need to take Aleve or Advil or aspirin or Tylenol for. He's talking about those joints that don't feel as good as they used to feel and that experience pain and strain. He's talking about your body. He says,

1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Now notice what he says in verse 2,

2 For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.

What's he saying? He's saying while we live in this body, we are groaning, longing to put on our heavenly body.

Let's read a little further, verse 3,

3 if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.

What is he talking about being found naked? Well, being found naked is that you leave this body behind without being clothed with immortality. Your spirit goes to be with the Lord as a naked spirit, a naked spirit, a naked soul, and that's not what he wanted but he wanted that more than to live in this life. Think about it for a moment.

Then he goes on and he says, verse 4,

4 For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened--not that we would be unclothed,

In other words, Paul looked forward to something more than he looked forward to death. We're about to find out what that is. Not that we would be unclothed, he says,

but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Listen to what he's saying. I want you to imagine, I used this sermon illustration years ago and got terribly criticized for it, anyhow, I hid my robe under the pulpit and I came in preaching in a suit and I illustrated it this way: to die, I pulled off my suit coat and cast it aside, and I said, "That's death. You cast off your body. You go be with the Lord." But what Paul's ultimate ambition is not to be unclothed, that is to lose his suit coat, but at that point I put my suit coat back on and I reached under the pulpit and grabbed my robe out and put it on on top of my suit coat. But further clothed, in other words, there's coming a time when if we're alive when Christ returns, we won't have to put off this earthly body, this earthly tent, rather we will find this earthly tent, this earthly body clothed with immortality. What that means is that without dying at all, without taking off the coat, we will be clothed with immortality meaning that our body will become immortal while we're still wearing it. We'll see a little more of that in a moment.

So let me reread that. He said, verse 2 again, "For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened--not that we would be unclothed," I really don't want to die, folks, he's saying, though death is preferable to life because it means I would go be with Jesus. But what I really want is for the Lord to return because when the Lord returns, this mortal body will become immortal because without my taking off this body, I will clothe it with immortality. He said, "not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." Think of it, my suit coat which I'm not wearing right now, I'm wearing a shirt, but anyhow, I'm not here with a suit coat under my robe but the illustration was that death is taking off the jacket but what Paul really wanted was to see the suit coat clothed with immortality.

Let's read it a little further. Verse 5,

5 He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

What does he mean? He means the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is the deposit guaranteeing our full salvation. We don't have full salvation yet. That's not saying we're not really saved, it's saying that ultimately salvation is that the soul and the body experience glorification just like Jesus' body.

Now notice what he says in verse 6,

6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body [that's me wearing my suit coat] we are away from the Lord,

I'm away from the Lord in that sense. My inner man, my spirit or soul, is not with the Lord in an absolute way. What's it like to put off the body and be with the Lord? It is to be in his presence fully and absolutely and totally where we are absorbed with the vision of who God really is and never again, ever struggling with sin.

Notice what he says, verse 6,

6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Now turning back to 1 Thessalonians 4 just a short distance to the right, we see there something of the significance on page 987 of what he means by those who are asleep. It has to do that when a believer dies, that believer's body is disposed of, it may be by means of cremation, it may be by means of burial at sea, it may be by burial in the earth, but this is the truth, whether we are talking about cremains or remains, the body is put to rest and is as if it were lying in its bed because it's gonna get up. Everybody here, I think as I look over everybody, woke up this morning. You put your body down last night and your body slept and you got up this morning. So we think about those who are asleep as those who have died, whose spirits or souls are with the Lord Jesus Christ and we refer to them as asleep because we are speaking confidently of the resurrection of the body. The body lies in the grave or scattered with cremains, or dispersed in the ocean in burial at sea, while the spirit or soul is with the Lord Jesus Christ.

So he's saying here in verse 13, "I don't want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." What does that mean? Does he say we should not grieve when we lose a loved one? No, not at all. We should grieve when we lose a loved one because we've lost someone for a time, but we don't grieve as those who have no hope. There's a vast difference between the grief of the

world which has no hope of life after death or ever seeing a loved one ever again, and the grief of a Christian who says, "It's just as if they've gotten on a bus and are taking a short journey and I will soon join them and see them again." So we do grieve.

Notice again he says don't grieve as those who have no hope. There's nothing sadder than going to a funeral for people who are atheists who don't believe in life after death because for them, death is it. It's over. There's nothing left. No hope at all. But for the Christian, there's this great confidence that we will see one another again. Though parted for a season, we will see one another again. So he doesn't say don't grieve, he says don't grieve as those who have no hope.

Then he says in verse 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." Now think about it in light of the two passages we read, Philippians 1 and 2 Corinthians 5. Where are those people? Well, their bodies are in the grave or scattered, they are with Jesus here and now. I shouldn't say here. They are with Jesus now.

And notice what we're told. He says that Jesus is going to bring with him those who have died. What's gonna happen? Well, here we're told, "For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord," verse 5, "that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep." So here's what's gonna happen. It could happen on the second day of June in the year of our Lord 2019. It could happen at 12 o'clock today, and if it did, we would hear something like this [trumpet sound]. We'd hear the trump of the Lord. We'd hear the archangel shout, "Get up!" The cry of command. And the Lord will return but as that happens, something amazing happens and that is our loved ones whether their ashes have been scattered to the four winds or their remains are in the ocean, all over the place, they're going to come back together again and they're going to rise from the dead and their bodies are gonna be like the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. They're gonna be able to do amazing things, things that are unimaginable, things that we read about in the Gospels of the resurrected Christ.

That's going to happen and so here we are while we are on earth, it's going to happen but it's going to happen really fast so you wouldn't be able to see it happen unless you happen to be walking in a cemetery at the moment it happens, but if you are walking in a cemetery the moment that it happens, you would see tombstones falling over. You would see people coming up out of the earth. You would see caskets and vaults broken open and you would see those people not weak and sickly the way they were when they died, but vigorous and full of life. That beautiful color of blood coursing through the veins that lets us know this person is fully alive, more alive than we can ever imagine, and that's what's going to happen first.

Then Paul says that we will not precede them. We won't go before them, they'll go before us. So then he says in verse 16, "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice," and that was that cry of command. I can say it louder, but anyhow I won't, "the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first." They'll rise. Their souls and their bodies will be

reunited. What is death? Death is never secession of existence. Death is separation. Death is when we in the garden of Eden become separated from God, and physical death is when the spirit or soul of a human is separated from that person's body.

So what happens is the Lord himself descends and the next sentence, and the dead in Christ will rise first, then verse 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words." Now there's one more Scripture that is worth looking at before we have the Lord's Supper and that is found in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul describes it this way. He says in verse 50, page 962, "I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." What's the perishable? My body is perishable and I learn that every year a little more.

Body is perishable, but then he says in verse 51, "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep." What's he saying? We'll not all die before Christ returns, some of us will be alive and it could happen right here at Grace Chapel this morning, in this very building. We would be able to go through the ceiling with our bodies without ever having known death and that ceiling will be no barrier between us and the Lord because the body that we will be clothed with, the heavenly body clothing the mortal body, we'll be able to do supernatural things. It'll be even greater than in the old Star Trek with, "Beam me up, Scotty."

He says, "I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." If you're alive, that mortal body is gonna be clothed with immortality and if you have died, your body's gonna be raised from the dead also clothed with immortality. He says, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, " [trumpet sound]. The last trumpet. As you read in the book of Revelation of these trumpets, the last trumpet is the trumpet when death is finally defeated, when the Lord Jesus returns for his saints, with his saints with him, and the saints that are with the Lord Jesus right now will first go into the cemetery and get their bodies and have them clothed with immortality and we'll all be with the Lord.

"For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'" If we turn just for a moment to a passage about the Lord's supper we read these words in 1 Corinthians 11, and he says this, he says in verse 26 of 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Jesus is coming and it may be today and whatever scheme you have been taught about the return of Christ, if it does not allow you to believe that Jesus could come today, it isn't true and we're reminded of the truth of the Lord's return every time we observe the Lord's supper. Have you ever thought of that? The Lord's supper points back in time to the suffering of Jesus on the cross. The Lord's supper is also a present reality where we have

communion with Christ by the Holy Spirit. And the Lord's supper also points us to the future, a wonderful future that Christ is coming, he will return and we will be caught up to meet him in the air just behind our loved ones who have been clothed with immortality.

May we pray.