

Truth for Today

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

Hope

Hope! What a need there is for this in these days! This is our subject today!

The church of the Thessalonians was made up of Christians who were young in the faith. This does not mean that they were young in years, but it was not long since they had heard the gospel preached by the Apostle Paul and had believed. Now they were suffering because of their faith. It was a great encouragement to Paul to hear that they were standing firm in the faith. Added to their persecutions other events troubled them, causing them sorrow. The whole of our passage today was to be the answer to this difficulty.

Sleeping

1 Thessalonians 4:13 says: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."

The Thessalonians' concern was that some of their fellow believers had died. It should be noticed that Paul does not say they had died, but describes them as "being asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). This way of describing death is used in other parts of the New Testament, and refers only to Christians. It is never said of unbelievers.

When we go to bed at night, we go to sleep expecting to awake in the morning. Someone might even have to wake us up!! To the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ death is but sleep. The Christian will be wakened out of that sleep. In the John 11:1-44 we read of a man called Lazarus who died (John 11:14). He was the brother of Martha and Mary (John 11:1-2). This family was very dear to the Lord Jesus. When Jesus told His disciples of the death of Lazarus, He said, "... Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." (John 11:11). This awakening refers to resurrection, of which more will be said as the passage before us, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 unfolds. The sorrow of the Thessalonian Christians was not because of any fear of death. On the contrary, they knew that the Lord Jesus whom they had trusted, had through His own death and resurrection triumphed over death. For every believer the sting of death has been removed. The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians says, "O death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

The second coming of Christ

Paul had spent only a short time at Thessalonica (Acts 17:2). Happily, there were many who had responded to his preaching and had believed the gospel (Acts 17:4). He had taught as much as he could to those who had believed. The words, "will God bring with Him" (1 Thessalonians 4:14), are similar to those at the close of 1 Thessalonians 3: "the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The Thessalonians already knew of this aspect of the Lord's coming. It had evidently seemed important to the Apostle to instruct them as to the 'second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ'. There was nothing new as to this teaching. The Old Testament prophets wrote about that day with all its glory. Even Enoch, who lived before the flood, prophesied of that occasion, using almost the same words as the Apostle Paul: "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, 'Behold the Lord cometh with ten thousands of His saints'" (Jude 14). In other of the epistles of the Apostle Paul, as also of Peter and John, reference is made to the second coming of Christ. It is an event Christians look forward to with gladness because then the Lord Jesus will have His rightful place. We must not forget that He was not given His rightful place when here the first time. One more scripture may suffice from the pen of the Apostle Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:8, he writes, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing." These Thessalonian believers knew of this hope; they thought of little else.

Missing out?

What was the cause of their sorrow? As they thought of the Lord coming with all His saints, they were concerned in case those who had fallen asleep would miss that day. Paul, therefore, was writing to allay their fears.

His words gave them much assurance. These Thessalonians had believed that, "Jesus died and rose again" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). They had no doubt about it! It was upon this basis that they were now Christians. There was great certainty as to this truth. It was just as certain that God would bring those believers who had fallen asleep, with Christ at His coming with all His saints.

It is in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 that much help is given to comfort and encourage these believers. This passage is of such value that we will read it in full: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18).

A mystery

Paul writes here of truth he had received "by the word of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:15). It had not been revealed to him by any human means. This truth had never been told in Old Testament times. In 1 Corinthians 15:51, writing upon a similar theme, he says: "Behold, I shew you a mystery...." In the Bible, the word 'mystery' always refers to a secret not known previously, but now revealed. There is nothing mysterious as we use the word today, about it. More will be said about this chapter in 1 Corinthians later in our talks.

A promise given by the Lord Jesus

An earlier indication of the coming of the Lord for His own is given by the Lord Jesus just before His crucifixion in John 14:2-3. His words were these: "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

These words of the Lord have been a great encouragement to believers throughout the history of the church. It is a promise which shall surely be fulfilled. It was addressed to troubled disciples. The Lord had told them He was going away (John 14:2). How glad they were to be told, "I will come again" (John 14:3).

Coming for His people

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 more detail is given by the Apostle Paul. This coming is to be 'a coming for His saints'. It is to be distinguished from His 'coming with His saints'. He will come to raise the sleeping believers, so that they will be with Him at His coming with all believers.

Paul then introduces us to "we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Some will be alive on earth when the Lord comes for His own. The outstanding concern of the Thessalonian believers was regarding those who had "fallen sleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Paul assures them that they will have precedence over those who are alive at the Lord's coming. He writes, "we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent (i.e. go before) them which are asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:15b). The real heart of our subject is here in 1 Thessalonians 4. Reference has already been made to "the coming of the Lord **for** His saints." Well, this is it! It is for this every true believer waits. Let the words sink into our hearts, **He is coming again!**

The Apostle writes: "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Truths like this have inspired many a hymn writer, so that we gladly sing:

*"The Lord Himself shall come
And shout a quickening word;
Thousands shall answer from the tomb;
'For ever with the Lord.'"*

(James Montgomery 1771-1854)

The Lord will not entrust this task to anyone else. Not even an angel. It is to be the Lord Himself. What a value He puts upon all who know Him as Saviour. It is not altogether surprising, remembering the price paid to make us His own. All those who compose the church are also His bride, to be His consort when He comes to reign.

The shout

“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a **shout**”. What kind of shout will this be? As Christians we know the Shepherd’s voice (John 10:27). We learn to recognise His voice and follow Him. However, here it is rather the shout of command. It is a military word. He is the commanding officer. It is the shout that follows ‘stand at ease’. This raising of the sleeping believers will be after the pattern of the Lord’s resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15:20 says: “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept”.

Out from among the dead

The resurrection of Christ was “out from among the dead.” This will be the case when believers are raised. There were some who were raised out from among the dead during the Lord’s life, such as Lazarus, of whom we read in John 11:1-44. They would die again. Others will remain in their graves until the judgement of the great white throne (Revelation 20:11-15). In New Testament teaching there is no such thing as a general resurrection. Christ as firstfruits is the pledge of the resurrection of all believers (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). It is never said of the Lord Jesus that He fell asleep when He lay in the grave. In Hebrews 2:9, it says of Him, “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that He by the grace of God should **taste death** for every man.” The Lord Jesus suffered death in all its intensity, and triumphed over it in order that we who are saved might never know its terror.

The voice of the archangel and the trump of God

Returning to our verse in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, not only does the Lord come with a **shout**, but also with **the voice of the archangel and the trump** of God. The only angel in the Bible who is called an archangel is Michael. In Jude 9, we read “Michael the archangel.” In the Prophecy of Daniel, this angel is linked with the nation of Israel (Daniel 10:21). When the Lord comes to raise believers who have died there will be many Old Testament believers out of Israel raised also. The “Trump of God” is wider still. Many Gentile believers from those past ages will be raised, for example Abel and Noah, and many others. What a wonderful gathering unto Him it will be! The writer closes this verse by returning again to the concern of the Thessalonian believers as to those who had died and says, “And the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). This was to reassure their hearts.

Caught up

Referring again to the believers who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, they will be **caught up** together with those who have been raised out of their sleep (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Therefore all will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Caught up! Some have used the words, ‘snatched up’. It will be sudden. Referring again to 1 Corinthians 15:52, the Apostle writes, “In a moment, in the twinkling of the eye...” Who can measure this?

Believers in the Lord Jesus have become accustomed to the term the ‘Rapture’ when referring to the coming of the Lord for His own. It is not difficult to relate this to being ‘caught up’.

Words with a similar meaning to ‘caught up’ are used on other occasions in the New Testament, one of which is well known. In John 10:28, the Lord Jesus was speaking of His sheep and He said, “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck [or ‘snatch’, as some translations have it] them out of my hand.” How safe are His sheep. How striking it is that none can snatch the believer out of the Shepherd’s hand, but He will, when He comes, snatch every believer out from this poor world.

It is astonishing that believers alive at the ‘Rapture’ will not die. Although the teaching was new to the Thessalonians there were two men in the Old Testament who never died. One was Enoch (Genesis 5:24, Hebrews 11:5), the other Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). They may be pictures of what will happen again, but instead of individuals, there will be thousands. It is said about Enoch in Hebrews 11:5, “By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; **and was not found** because God had translated him”.

Today?

There is no event to take place before He comes. The coming of the Lord for all who are His is **imminent**; it can happen at any time. Every Christian should be on the tip-toe of expectancy for Him. The Person who is coming

should attract our hearts. However, this is a solemn matter for those who do not know the Lord Jesus as Saviour; the gospel call is urgent, "Be ye also ready..." (Luke 12:40).

Watching and waiting

To all who believe it will be an unspeakable joy, but believers are to be busy while waiting for Him. The Lord's word is "Occupy till I come" (Luke 19:13). The story is often told of a fishing village where the fishermen were away at sea. When it was time for their arrival home one wife was **waiting** for her husband in the warmth of her home. Another was out at the end of the pier, maybe in the cold, **watching**.

The Lord Jesus said on another occasion. "Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching" (Luke 12:37). Are we only **waiting**, for Him or are we rather **watching**?

For ever with the Lord!

Finally, the verses considered tell that the living believers will be "caught up together with them in the clouds, to **meet** the Lord in the air and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). At this meeting all believers will, for the first time, see the Saviour's face and be "**forever with the Lord.**"

Other scriptures tell us that all will be made like the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 3:2, for example). Two lines of another hymn will close our talk on this wonderful theme!

*"He and I in that bright glory
One deep joy shall share;
Mine to be forever with Him;
His, that I am there."*

(Gerhardt Tersteegen 1697-1769)

"Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

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