

## 1st Thessalonians Chapter 4:13-18

*[Please note : English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

During lock-down I am sure you have been longing to be with your family and friends again. That moment will be so special when we see their faces, give them a big hug, and welcome them into our homes. It is one thing seeing them on a computer screen but to be in their company will be so wonderful. Relationships are a real blessing with people that we love, people we trust, people that mean so much to us, are a real blessing. The anticipation of that moment burns brightly in our hearts and keeps us going.

The Bible tells us that the Lord Jesus left His disciples at Bethany to go back into Heaven. The disciples loved the Lord. They were going to miss Him because they had spent so much wonderful time together. But Jesus assured them that He loved them and that He would come again to take them to His Father's house in Heaven. This passage we are studying today, tells us how the Lord Jesus will come Himself into the air to meet every true Christian, and take all of us to His Father's house. The Lord Jesus who loved us, and gave Himself for us, wants us to be near Him forever. This will be a happy day for the Lord, and for the Christian who will never ever be separated from Him. The question must be asked; are you ready and waiting in anticipation for that wonderful day?

Let us read what the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

“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. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive and who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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. 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.”

In the previous verses of this chapter, we learn how we ought to walk as Christians and to please God. We are given instructions on how we should be living our lives as we wait for the coming of the Lord. This requires holiness, love toward fellow Christians, living quiet lives by minding our own affairs, and working with our hands. Enoch in the Old Testament, and the Thessalonian Christians here are good examples of such, as they lived with a sense of anticipation while watching and waiting for the Lord's return.

Paul had told the Thessalonians previously that Jesus was coming again to set up His kingdom on earth. They understood the aspect of Jesus coming as King, but they were troubled. They had

leaped to the conclusion that those who had died before the Lord's return might not share in His kingdom. Paul writes here to the believers at Thessalonica both to encourage them and to assure them that this was not so. The believers who had died had the same privileges as those alive at the time, they would not be forgotten. He re-affirms the truth of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, so they could have clarity and confidence in the hope of the Lord's return.

These few verses are a tremendous encouragement to Christians today. They are often read at funeral services. These verses not only give us hope but they give us a glimpse of the heart of the Lord Jesus as He waits in Heaven for the moment when God the Father will instruct Him to come. The last time the Lord Jesus came into this world He came to die. He had His Father's work to do! This meant He was rejected, despised, cruelly treated, and crucified on a cross at Calvary. Next time, at the first stage of His second coming, He will not come back into this world. But He will come into the air to meet those who love Him, those who have accepted the sacrifice He made on the cross. He paid the debt of our sins, a debt we could never repay and through faith in Him we are forgiven. The Lord Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by Me." Because of what Christ has done we are made righteous, accepted and are suitable for the holy presence of God.

In verses 13, 14 and 16 there are references to believers being asleep or having fallen asleep. This is a very special thought. When a Christian dies their body is buried and returns to dust awaiting the resurrection, and their soul is transported to be with Christ, 2 Corinthians 5 vv.1-8. Death should have no fear for the Christian, it is like falling asleep in the arms of the One who loves you and the One you love. Christ has defeated death, so death has no claim on us, and we have eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord! This sleeping is temporary. The believer's body that has returned to dust will be changed to be just like His own glorious body, it will be made perfect and suitable for the presence of the Lord. Let me remind you of the words of a hymn that brings these thoughts to our hearts.

We are by Christ redeemed:  
The cost – His precious blood;  
Be nothing by our souls esteemed  
Like this great good.  
Were the vast world our own,  
With all its varied store,  
And thou, Lord Jesus, wert unknown,  
We still were poor.

Our earthen vessels break;  
The world itself grows old;  
But Christ our precious dust will take,  
And freshly mould:  
He'll give these bodies vile  
A fashion like His own;  
He'll bid the whole creation smile,  
And hush its groan.

(Mary Bowly (Mrs. Peters) 1813-56)

The assurance of the resurrection gives comfort and hope to the Christian, who should not sorrow like others who do not have this hope. This does not mean a Christian shouldn't grieve and feel the loss of a loved one deeply. They should, for even the Lord Himself was moved at the death of His friend Lazarus, and He wept.

Verse 14 - Paul puts himself alongside the believers. "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep." There was no doubt in Thessalonica, they believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do you believe this? You did not witness the death and resurrection of Jesus so you must believe by faith. Resurrection is one of the foundational truths of Christianity, the key to salvation and hope. The resurrection of Jesus on that third day is the guarantee of the resurrection of the Christian. God raised Jesus from the dead so, through Jesus God will raise every true believer from the dead. Thank God for everyone who believes! Do you? God will not forget anyone who has fallen asleep in Jesus over the ages, no one will miss out. God will bring everyone with Jesus our Lord and Saviour. This precious assurance given to us is because of what Jesus did for us. Can I read a hymn that is a real comfort for Christians facing death?

Asleep through Jesus, blessed sleep  
From which none ever wakes to weep;  
A calm and undisturbed repose,  
Where powerless is the last of foes.

Asleep through Jesus, oh, how sweet  
To be for such a slumber meet,  
With holy confidence to sing  
That death has lost its venom'd sting!

Asleep through Jesus, peaceful rest,  
Whence waking we're supremely blest;  
No fear, no woe shall dim the hour  
That manifests the Saviour's power.

Asleep through Jesus: Yes, to be  
From every earthly hindrance free,  
While, in the consciousness of love  
The spirit lives with Christ above.

(Mrs. M. Mackay 1802-87)

Verse 15 - Paul tells the Thessalonians that believers who are alive when the Lord comes will not go before those who are dead. There is no doubt that a Christian's desire is to be alive at the coming of the Lord. Although we have said that death should have no fear for the Christian, death is a terrible thing. Sometimes our bodies grow weak, our minds lose their clarity, and often we die in pain. The sense of loss of a close human relationship brings emptiness and loneliness. The Bible speaks about us going through the valley of the shadow of death. But the Christian is told not to fear death because the Lord will be with him. The Bible speaks about us "being with Christ, which is far better." It will be far better for the one who falls asleep in Jesus, but their passing brings grief to others. The hope of the believer is to be taken alive, but this is out of our control and either way we will be with Christ. I heard the story of one man who looked up every morning and said, 'Lord are you coming for me today?'

Verses 16-17 gives us the practical details of the coming of the Lord. We begin with another precious thought; "**the Lord Himself will descend.**" In Acts 1 vv.10-11 we have the scene where the Lord ascended back into Heaven.

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

In the authorised version of the Bible, it says “this same Jesus.” The disciples had witnessed the ascension of Jesus, the One who they loved, the One they had relied upon and lived alongside for a few years. They were told to expect the same Person to come back one day. The Lord will not send another for us, He will come Himself. Does this not show you how precious we are to the Lord Jesus? The Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us will come back Himself for us. He will not trust another to bring His beloved ones safely home.

Instantaneously as the Lord descends there will be three notifications of His return. “**a cry of command**” the “**voice of an archangel**” and the “**sound of the trumpet of God.**” The archangel in the Old Testament relates to the Jewish people in a special way. So, the voice of Michael the archangel will be heard at the same time the Lord gives the awakening shout. All those who belong to Christ from this age and from past ages will be included. When the trump of God sounds, then “the dead in Christ shall (literally) stand up first.” Millions, whose bodies are sleeping will hear His voice. Their graves will be opened, and the sea will give up the dead that is in it. Every believer from Adam until the Rapture will rise. Abraham, Joseph, David, Ruth, Rebecca, and Esther their bodies will spring to life along with every believer throughout the ages. The Lord went to the tomb of Lazarus and cried “Lazarus come out”, who then literally ‘stood up’, he sprang back to life. It is often said that if the Lord had not called Lazarus by name the tombs would have given up all the dead that were in them. Can you imagine what it will be like?

The Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 v.52 that everything will happen so quickly,

“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.”

People in the world will not be aware of this happening, it will take place so quickly. Only those who have accepted the Lord Jesus as their Saviour will respond. I remember my father speaking at a Sunday school prize-giving about the Lord’s return. As an illustration he bought plastic soldiers and in some of them he had put a piece of metal. In front of the children, he put the soldiers on the table, and then he took a large magnet and hovered it over them. As he moved the magnet some of the soldiers responded and they were caught up by the magnet whilst other soldiers just stayed where they were. The children were able to understand that only some will respond to the call, only those who have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit after belief in Christ for salvation.

Dear friend, this is serious, you need to listen and take heed. The Bible tells us that if you hear the voice of the Lord speaking to you that you must not harden your heart, because now is the acceptable time of salvation. Can you put your head on your pillow and confidently know that if the Lord returns tonight you will respond to His cry of command? Remember that night in Egypt when the destroying angel passed by each house to check if the blood had been painted on the door posts. Today, it is the blood of Christ, God’s son that cleanses us from all sin. If you have accepted this, you can be assured that the Lord is coming for you.

Paul assured the Thessalonians that dead believers will rise then, together with those alive will be raptured, that is, caught up to meet their Lord. The expression ‘in the clouds’ is an interesting one. I do not think this means that the Lord will come into the atmosphere where we can see the clouds. I rather think it refers to the vast numbers of believers who, when they rise to meet the Lord, look like clouds. The Lord will meet us so He can take us into to His Father’s presence and to His Father’s house. What a welcome we will receive! John 14 gives us a glimpse of what the Father’s house will be like. The Lord Jesus assured His disciples He was going away to prepare Heaven for His Own beloved ones. I am so glad that I was brought to salvation. What a wonderful hope the believer has. I use the word hope, which does not mean it is not a certainty, **IT IS** a sure and certain hope, thanks be to God.

Verse 17 - finishes with the words “so we will always be with the Lord.” Remember we started this talk thinking about lock-down experiences. Families unable to meet, hug each other, spend time with each other. As I write this talk in May, we are being told that we will soon be able to be with each other and to go into each other’s houses again. How wonderful that will be for many. However, we may have lock-down again and separation may occur once more. Maybe you have lost loved ones during the pandemic of Covid-19, and you will not physically be with them ever again. How sad! The Bible tells us that Christians will never ever be separated from the Lord Jesus, the One who loves them and the One who gave Himself for them. We will be with Christ forever, which will be far better. We can only relate to things of time, and it is difficult for us to comprehend eternity. The Lord Jesus came to tell us about His Father. A God who is good, who is rich in mercy, who loves, who forgives, who is patient, who is kind, who was prepared to give His only Son to pay the penalty for sin that you and I deserve to take. I am happy that I will be always with my Lord in His Father’s house.

Paul finishes this section by telling the Thessalonian Christians to encourage each other with these words. Over the generations these few verses have been a real blessing and encouragement to many. The Lord is coming soon He said it Himself on two occasions; “surely I am coming soon and behold I am coming soon.” Let me finish with the words of another lovely hymn.

What a day that will be,  
When my Jesus I shall see,  
And I look upon His face,  
The One who saved me by His grace;  
When He takes me by the hand,  
And leads me through the Promised Land,  
What a day, glorious day that will be.

There will be no sorrow there,  
No more burdens to bear,  
No more sickness, no more pain,  
No more parting over there;  
And forever I will be,  
With the One who died for me,  
What a day, glorious day that will be.

(Jim Hill 1930-2018)

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on 1st Thessalonians chapter 4:13-18 talk number T1208.

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