

## 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

### What Happens After You Die?

The apostle Paul addresses the question, what is the fate of those who die “in Christ” before He returns?

The believers in the Greek city of Thessalonica knew that Jesus was risen from the dead and alive and that He would return. They had been taught to expect Christ to come as an unexpected thief from heaven. His resurrection from the dead was a prelude to the resurrection of His people.

It would appear that some of the believers had died recently and some members in the church were wondering if those who had “died in Christ” would miss out on some participation in the glory at His appearing.

Death is a fact of life. Death is not an accident; it is an appointment. We all have an appointment with the death angel. “It is appointed unto men to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ brings hope to those who believe on Christ as opposed to those who are without God and without hope. The pagans were hopeless in the face of death. How tragic when Christians do not place their faith in the hope of this Gospel as an inward living conviction. The hope of the resurrection is based on the assurance that Jesus died and rose from the dead. We also have the witness of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11) and the indwelling Christ (Colossians 1:27).

F. F. Bruce suggests that the apostle Paul had already taught these Thessalonian believers the basic truths regarding Christ’s return including the following points:

This tradition speaks of the coming of the Lord as His Parousia (cf. Matthew 23:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2: 1, 8) and represents it as taking place from or in heaven (cf. 1:10; 2 Thess. 1:7; Matt. 24:30), with clouds (cf. Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7), accompanied by angels (cf. 3:13; 2 Thess. 1:7; Matt. 24:31) and announcement by a trumpet blast (cf. Matt. 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52). . . manifestation of power and glory and the execution of judgment on the ungodly (5:3; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; 2:8) (*Thessalonians*, p. 95).

Believers in the early church had a daily expectation that Christ would return. They did not set any dates for the return of Christ, but they were looking for His return in their life–time. There was daily expectancy of His return. They were looking for Christ to come any moment and take them home to glory with Him, not in death, but in a visible personal coming for Christians. They were looking for Christ to come and take them home to glory without dying.

The blessed hope of the Christian is that when we die there is a glorious, unending existence for us in the presence of God. What a joyful reunion when we are joined with Christ and our loved ones in Christ who have gone to heaven before us.

We are therefore not like those who have no God and no hope.

It is important to keep in mind that nothing is said here of the resurrection of those who are not in Christ. We find that in other passages such as Acts 24:15; John 5:28, 29.

“On Paul’s principles, any resurrection of unbelievers would be different in character from the resurrection of believers. The resurrection of believers was their participation in Christ’s resurrection, and this could not be said of the resurrection of unbelievers. It is precarious to draw inferences from Paul’s silence about his views on the nature and timing of the resurrection of those not in Christ” (Bruce, p. 105).

Neither is Paul concerned in this passage about *when* Christ will come.

Paul’s resurrection hope is grounded in the saving work of Christ. Since Paul does not know when Christ will return he therefore does not know if he will be alive or not when it will actually take place. However, he does know that he will be a part of that grand event. This is what matters to Paul. Paul did not have any problem with the “delay of the *parousia*.” His conviction was simply Christ is coming again, maybe morning, maybe noon, maybe evening, but surely it will be soon. Christ is coming again and that should give us great comfort (John 5:24; 6:50-58; 8:51; 10:28; 11:25, 26; Romans 8:1, 38, 39; Philippians 1:19-21; 2 Corinthians 5:8; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Psalms 23:4).

The believer in Christ already has eternal life; and by his departure from this earth, he takes possession of it in a greater measure. Even his body will be raised up at the last day. Why therefore, fear an experience that simply brings us closer to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Death is gain for the Christian because it brings us into the presence of Christ.

Every since His resurrection and ascension Jesus has taken with Him into heaven the believers who have died. The children of God are brought at the very instant of their death into the presence of the Lord. The apostle Paul declared that when a Christian dies he is “absent from the body” and “present with the Lord.” This gives the Christian hope when our loved ones are taken away from us in death. There is no hope in the future life apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

The emphasis the apostle is making in our text is a message of hope. “For the believer who arrives victoriously to the port, there is nothing more to worry about: the battle is won, and he is at the entrance to glory. What Christian, about to depart into the presence of his God, would prefer to begin his life’s course down here all over again? And who would want to call back a loved one who has just entered into the presence of the Lord” (Rene Pache, *The Future Life*, p. 45).

This hope of eternal life will sustain us until that moment when all tears shall be wiped away from our eyes. The death of a believer in Christ is not a permanent loss, but a temporary separation until we are all gathered into the presence of our Lord. This grand reunion at Christ’s return will rob death of its sting (1 Cor. 15:54-58). These words give us a confident hope in anticipation of a future promise by the Lord.

The Lord Jesus Christ will come; it is only a question of when. Since we do not know when, therefore it is essential that we be prepared. Will there be any disadvantage for the believers who have died in Christ before the rapture? Will they be disqualified from sharing in the glory of that day perhaps because they have sinned in some way? Let’s listen carefully to Paul’s response.

### **WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO ARE DEAD “IN CHRIST” (1 Thess. 4:13-15)**

What happens to believers who die before Christ returns for them? What is going to happen to our loved ones who have preceded us in death?

Perhaps they were thinking Christ would come in their lifetime. Now some of their own family and friends had died since Paul had been there preaching and instructing them. What would be the effects of their premature death at the coming of Christ? Would it be detrimental to their spiritual life? They were quite concerned for their loved ones. Was their death because they were under the wrath of God? Were they being punished for some sin?

### ***Revelation of God is true and accurate (1 Thess. 4: 13)***

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope” (v. 13)

When Paul says, “we do not want you to be ignorant,” he is stating in an emphatic way, “we wish you to know.” It is something very important that Paul wants to emphasize. They need to be aware of this important fact. In verse fifteen he says, “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord” giving emphasis to the authority of God’s Word. God has spoken; we need to listen.

Therefore, why substitute human speculation for divine revelation on such an important subject? We have a sure revelation from God in His Word. We do not have to turn to philosophers, spiritualists or humanism or the occult for answers to the problem of life and death.

Paul will lay aside their fears with a strong affirmation, “by the word of the Lord.” Paul is probably referring to a saying of Christ that is not recorded by the four evangelists in their gospels. There were many sayings of Christ not recorded for us. He could also be referring to a direct revelation from Christ regarding the Second Coming.

These believers still had questions about the fate of their loved ones who had died since Paul had been there and taught them.

Who are these who “are asleep?” The verb *koimaomai* is in the present tense indicating they continue to sleep. “They are lying asleep.” “Sleep” is a beautiful euphemism for “death” of a Christian. The Old Testament writers used the idiom “slept with one’s fathers.” For the Christian it expresses the view that just as a person awakes from sleep the Christian will awake to resurrection life. However, for the pagans in Paul’s day death was a sleep from which they would never awake. Death is the opposite of life, but nowhere do the Scriptures state that men will cease to exist. The truth of God’s Word is the pagan will be resurrected and stand before the Lord God in judgment (Rev. 20:11-15).

We get our English word cemetery from *koimeterion*. The *koimeterion* here are deceased Christians, probably members of the church at Thessalonica. They could even be martyrs who died giving witness to Christ in Thessalonica.

Paul does not want them to be ignorant about the death of believers and therefore sorrow as the pagans who have no hope in the resurrection of Christ. Those who are without God and without hope can do nothing in the face of death but pity one another. The Christian hope is grounded in the historical resurrection and ascension of Christ.

Christ has transformed death. Death has been overcome by the risen Lord Jesus. It is never said that Christ is “asleep” meaning He is dead, though He is the “first fruits of them that have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). Jesus Christ is awake! He is alive; He is not dead.

These deceased believers were with the Lord spiritually (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:20-24), but their bodies were physically “asleep” in the earth. Paul made it very clear that the soul of the believers went to be with the Lord. It is not the soul that sleeps; it is the body. The spirit leaves the body at death, and the body goes to sleep and no longer functions. When Christ resurrects our bodies of decay, disease and weakness that plague us now will be stripped away. When He comes we will have Christ like bodies (1 Cor. 15:50-55; I John 3:2).

Therefore, we do not sorrow as those who have no hope in the resurrection of Christ. For the unbeliever it is an unending sorrow. It is a continuing sorrow. It is an absence of the knowledge of the Lord that leads to this hopelessness. Cf. Eph. 2:12.

A review of the writings of early Christians and the pagans of their day reveals an astonishing difference in their attitudes toward death. Very few pagans had a lofty view of death. The typical attitude of the ancient world to death was one of utter hopelessness. They had no consolation to offer. Milligan said, “The general hopelessness of the pagan world in the presence of death is almost too well known to require illustration.”

The apostle Paul is not counseling stoicism or callous indifference. Without the hope of the resurrection of Christ people must view death only as a sleep from which there is no awakening. Catullus, a pagan wrote, “Suns may set and rise again but we, when once our brief light goes down, must sleep an endless night.” Without the resurrection it is “one unending night to be slept through” (Catullus), or “one unbroken night of sleep” (Aeschylus). Without the living hope of Christianity there is only “hope for the living, the dead are without hope.” What a difference the resurrected Christ makes upon the living and the dead. The Christian hope is in the person of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:55 and Philippians 1:21-23 are refrains of victory, not hopelessness. There is no reason for despair for the believer.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints,” wrote the Hebrew Psalmist. Paul is rejoicing in complete victory which Christ won for us in His resurrection. What comfort to know that our loved ones and friends who have put their faith in Christ have simply fallen asleep in Christ. One joyous day they will awake with Him.

The anxiety of the believers for the dead loved ones is put to rest by the strong affirmation made on the authority of the risen Lord Himself. When He comes “the dead in Christ” will be raised first and then those who have not died but remain alive will be snatched away with them to join their Lord, and will be with Him forever. Both those who are alive and those who have died will fully share in the experiences of that blessed event. Neither will suffer any disadvantage when Christ comes.

W. E. Vine says, “The object of the metaphor is to suggest that as the sleeper does not cease to exist while his body sleeps, so the dead person continues to exist despite his absence from the region in which those who remain can communicate with him, and that, as sleep is known to be temporary, so the death of the body will be found to be. Sleep has its waking, death will have its resurrection” (*Thessalonians*, p. 128).

The body alone is in view in this metaphor, never the soul. Also in the New Testament the resurrection is used of the body alone.

What happens at the death of the believer?

“When the physical frame of the Christian, ‘the earthly house of our tabernacle,’ 2 Cor. 5:1, is dissolved and returns to the dust, the spiritual part of his highly complex being, the seat of personality, departs to be with Christ, Phil. 1:23. And since that state in which the believer, absent from the body, is at home with the Lord, 2 Cor. 5:6-9, is described as ‘very far better’ than the present state of joy in

communion with God and of happy activity in His service. . . . it is not intended to convey the idea that the spirit is unconscious” (Vine, pp. 128-29).

The victory will be complete when we receive our resurrected body (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

The resurrection of unbelievers (John 5:28-29) cannot be described as a hope. They are not “in Christ” and therefore are without God and without hope. The pagan Lucretius said, “No one awakes and arises who has once been overtaken by the chilling end of life.” How sad, but true.

### ***Return of Christ is sure (vv. 14-15)***

“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep” (Heb. 4:14-15).

### ***Since Christ died and rose again***

The words “if we believe” state a fulfilled condition. A better English translation would be “since we believe.” Paul’s statement is beyond dispute. The reference to their believing points to the certainty of their faith.

Christ is never said to be sleeping. He died and in His death He bore the wages of our sins. He died the worst death possible. Death has not been final in His case, however. He is alive. He is awake! Jesus took away the horror of death for the Christians. It is because Jesus died that we no longer need to fear death.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ separates Christians from all other world religions. Just as God raised Christ, so in due time He will raise all those who are in Christ. The resurrection of Christ is our guarantee of eternal life.

As 1 Corinthians 15:17 tells us the resurrection of Christ is the critical issue upon which Christianity rises or falls. Paul states, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” Jesus is the “first fruits of them that are asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). The implication of these first fruits is there will be later fruit. Just as Christ has risen and is alive we can rest assured that we, too, will rise from the dead (1 Cor. 15:22; Col. 1:18).

Because of what Christ has done the Christian “sleeps” and does not undergo the horrors of the second death which is eternal separation from God in hell. Death is the consequence of sin. Jesus suffered a death that we can never experience. He experienced the full wages of sin as our substitute dying in our place bearing the full punishment of our sins.

### ***“God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.”***

Literally Paul writes, “God them that fell asleep through Jesus will bring with Him.” The word “God” is at the beginning of the sentence in the place of emphasis. God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Christ. Their faith is in God who raised Jesus from the dead and who will also raise believers in Christ.

The apostle Paul has in mind the *Parousia*. Jesus will bring with Him the faithful believers when He returns. Their death does not mean they will not share in His coming. Paul is certain the event will take place.

“Death,” says Vine, “when used of man, and not merely of his body, may be defined as conscious existence in separation from God. All out of Christ are dead, all in Christ live, or have eternal life, Jn. 6:47; Col. 3:4. But all, whether living or dead, equally exist and are equally conscious of existence (cf. Luke 16:19-31)” (*Thessalonians*, p. 134).

1 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Cor. 4:14; Rom. 6:3-8 all emphasize the same truth that just as God raised up Jesus He will also raise the believer in Christ. Through the risen Christ God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. If Christ has not risen then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished (1 Cor. 15:17-18).

Milligan notes, Jesus is “the mediating link between His people’s sleep and their resurrection at the hands of God.” Note the attendant circumstances of their death. “They were in a certain relationship with the risen and living Jesus when they died.” They were as the New English Bible reads, “those who died as Christians.” They died in fellowship with Christ. They died as believers in Christ.

The place we must begin is at the cross of Christ. Jesus Christ died for our sins and it is there that we had a substitute who died in our place as a sufficient sacrifice for our sin. The stamp of certainty of our salvation is

the fact that Christ rose from the dead. Our ground of hope is the reality that Christ died for us and rose from the dead. We have no Christian hope unless we are absolutely certain concerning the death and resurrection of Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus is the direct result of the power of God (1 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 1:20). God raised Him from the dead. When used in a literal sense the resurrection always refers to the body.

It is those who have “fallen asleep in Jesus” that He will bring back with Him. This “sleep” in verse fourteen refers to the bodies which are laid in the grave. John Walvoord correctly states, “As far as our souls and spirits are concerned, we go immediately into the presence of God, into the conscious enjoyments of heaven, for ‘to be absent from the body’ is ‘to be present with the Lord.’ We believe in the sleep of the body, but we do not believe in the sleep of the soul. Those whose bodies are sleeping in the grave, according to this Scripture, will be resurrected when Christ comes back” (*Thessalonians*, p. 62). Therefore, “Our loved ones who are asleep through Jesus go to sleep in the certain hope of waking.”

Paul’s formula is simply “since we believe”—“we also believe.” Since we believe Jesus rose from the dead we also believe we, too, shall rise from the dead. The same gospel that gives us the great assurance of the death and resurrection of our Lord, also gives us the great assurance of the resurrection of all who believe on Christ. His resurrection is the pledge of our resurrection (1 Cor. 6:14; 15:16, 20).

Believers are never said to be “in Jesus,” but always “in Christ” expressing intimacy in our relationship with the risen Lord.

The Gospel message is that “Jesus died and rose” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Note that Christ is not asleep. He is nowhere said to have “fallen asleep” because of the mention of the resurrection which follows immediately. Christ “died” stressing the full impact of His death and therefore the divine miracle of His resurrection.

F. F. Bruce stresses, “His people’s resurrection is corollary of His, and therefore their death can be described as ‘falling asleep’ in the new Christian sense of that figure, but there was no precedent for *His* resurrection. ‘If we believe that Jesus died and rose again,’ the fullness of Christian hope follows. The continuing life of his people depends on, and is indeed an extension of his own risen life (cf. Rom. 8:11; also Jn. 14:19, ‘because I live, you will live also’)” (*Thessalonians*, p. 97).

Since God acted in the past to raise Jesus from the dead He can be depended upon to “bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.” Cf. 1 Cor. 15:23; Acts 3:15; Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 1:20; Col. 2:12; 2 Cor. 1:9).

We now “sleep” and will “awake” only because Jesus endured the full fury of God’s wrath against sin (Rom. 6:23). He has spared us of the “wages of sin” which is spiritual death and eternal separation from God in hell. Our death has been swallowed up in His victory through His death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:54). Christ is our propitiation, and therefore turns away the wrath of God from us.

### ***We do not have an advantage over the deceased***

“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess. 4:15).

The Thessalonian believers were worried that their deceased loved ones would not share in the *Parousia*. They were longing for the coming of Christ. That is the characteristic attitude of believers in every generation. They were not afraid of death which may come first. Paul sometimes associates himself with those who are waiting Christ’s coming and at other times with the dead in Christ. He is comfortable with both possibilities. He looked forward to and expected the *Parousia* of the Lord Jesus. He prepares us for unflinching courage in the face of death.

Many scholars stress that the Greek here does not affirm that Paul expected that he would still be alive when Christ would come back for the redeemed. Paul states that he does not know when Christ will return (1 Thess. 5:2, 3). It is only natural for Christians in every century to anticipate that Christ will come before they die. However, Paul does not say so here. In 1 Cor. 6:14 Paul placed himself with the believers who will be raised when Christ comes.

### ***“Shall not precede those who have fallen asleep”***

The word for “precede” or “prevent” is variously translated “gain an advantage over,” “precede into His presence” or “have any advantage at all over” or “shall not come before.” The word *phthano* implies both the gaining of an advantage as well as priority in order. There will not be any advantage or disadvantages because

we will all be full participants along with all believers in Christ. Neither will miss a moment of glory in His coming on that day. The living will not have the advantage “to come before” another. Paul uses a strong double negative in the original, *ou me* to mark his emphasis.

The important thing Paul is stressing is that those who are alive when Christ returns will not have any advantage over those who have already died in Christ. Paul underscores his point by saying emphatically “in no wise.” Believers who die will not be at a disadvantage when Christ comes.

On the other hand, Paul says those who are living and who survive to the day of Christ will not be at an advantage over the dead in Christ. Probably Paul did expect to be alive, but we do know that he had a strong living faith in the second coming of Christ. Paul expressly states that he does not know when Christ will come. It is only natural for Paul and us to put ourselves in the category of those who will be alive to see it happen. One vital thing is sure. I am not going to be left out! The important thing is that we are ready when He comes. His coming will be unexpected, just when we least expect Him He will appear.

By the time Second Corinthians was written Paul definitely associated himself with those who would die before the *Parousia* and would have to be raised from the dead (2 Cor. 4:14). The LORD God who raised Jesus will also raise us from the dead to be with Jesus. He will present us who have gone before those who are still alive on the earth to those whom He will gather when He returns. What a day of rejoicing! What a blessed hope for you and me.

What will be the effect on those who have already died? Will they suffer any disadvantage at the *Parousia* because they have already died? What is the relation between the resurrection of the dead in Christ and His coming? Will they miss out on something that the living will enjoy? The main point Paul is stressing is *no*, they will not suffer any disadvantage when Christ comes.

At the *Parousia* the believing dead will be raised up before the translation of the living believers. The living and the dead will be on equal footing for the reason set out in the verses that follow. There is no ground for uneasiness about the “dead in Christ.” In the verses that follow Paul gives us the order of events.

## **THE PLAN FOR ALL WHO ARE “IN CHIRST” (4:16-17)**

### ***Return of Christ from heaven (v. 16a)***

Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3).

No one knows the time when Christ will return except God the Father (Acts 1:6-7). Fanatics never pay attention to that fact.

Paul writes, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

The manifestations of divine glory in the Old Testament are associated with the coming of Christ. The *Parousia* is an answer to Isaiah’s cry in 64:1, “O that Thou would rend the heavens and come down.”

The One who is coming is “the Lord Himself.” It will not be a delegated task. It will be a Divine intervention like in the Old Testament. The Lord Himself is coming personally. “This Jesus . . . will come” (Acts 1:11). “The Son of Man will descend . . .” (Mark 13:26; Luke 17:26; Matthew 24:31).

The dead are summoned back to life with the descent of Christ, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet-call and the shout of the commander. The clouds that gathers Christ and His people reminds us of the surrounding radiance of the divine presence of the *Shekinah* glory of God.

This coming of Christ will be with majesty and honor. There will accompany the “shout,” the “voice of the archangel,” and the “trumpet of God.” Paul gives us the impression that there will be three distinct sounds. The “shout” denotes an “authoritative utterance.” Morris notes, “It is the cry made by the ship’s master to his rowers, or by a military officer to his soldiers, or by a hunter to his hounds, or by a charioteer to his horses” (p. 143). The military commander used it as a battle cry. The *keleusma* is a military word of command always with a ring of authority and note of urgency to it. It is “a loud authoritative cry, often one uttered in the thick of a great excitement” (Morris). Majesty, authority and urgency are the emphasis. Jesus comes with “irresistible authority and indescribable grandeur.” “It is not said by whom the shout will be uttered, but the probability is that it is the Lord (cf. John 5:28f), ‘the hour cometh in which all that are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth.’” Since there is no article “the voice that will be uttered will be a very great voice, an

archangel type of voice. But more probably the meaning is that some archangel will add his voice to the call which wakes the dead" (p. 114).

Other Bible scholars see it as the voice of the Lord Himself. F. F. Bruce thinks, "Here it is the Lord Himself who shouts the quickening word, which commands a ready and obedient response (John 5:25), 'the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live'" (p. 100). Only the voice of the Son of God can awaken the dead and change the living.

J. B. Philips captures the power of the original language with these words: "One word command, one shout from the archangel, one blast from the trumpet of God and God in Person will come down from Heaven!"

There is no article before voice or shout so the quality of the voice is emphasized. Literally, "a voice of an archangel." No specific archangel is meant. Perhaps a loud clear voice is described under the similitude of a trumpet. W. E. Vine, "If as it seems probable, the subject of this threefold description is one great signal from heaven, then the words may be paraphrased: with a shout in the archangel's voice, even the voice of the trumpet of God" (p. 143).

The "trumpet of God" is also found in the Old Testament at festivals and times of triumph. It will be the *Parousia* (1 Cor. 15:52) and used to stress majesty and greatness of the day (Matt. 24:31).

John Calvin said, "As a field marshal gathers his armies to battle by the sound of the trumpet, so Christ will summon all the dead with a voice that rings and resounds throughout the whole world." The trumpet seems to be a sign of the assembling of the unfolding of something not revealed before. It is like the assembling of an army that is called to march forward. The shout, the voice and trumpet picture one great event. It is a call to those who have been saved by grace to rise and follow the King of kings.

### ***Resurrection of the "dead in Christ" (v. 16b)***

Our resurrection hope is related to the hope of the *Parousia* of Christ. What Paul is now stressing is that the dead in Christ would rise *first*. Far from suffering any disadvantage at the *Parousia*, the faithful departed believers would actually have precedence over those believers who are still alive. It is *their* resurrection that would be the first result of the coming of Christ. Only after the dead in Christ rise will those who are still alive enter into their inheritance. It is a matter of sequence. It is first Christ, and then those who are "dead in Christ" at His coming and finally those who remain alive at His coming will be snatched away together with them.

John Walvoord says, "Christians will be resurrected like the resurrected body of Christ and will have a resurrection body which will never wear out, which will never be subject to death or disease or pain a body which will last for all eternity, suited for the glorious presence of the Lord" (p. 66).

"The dead in Christ will rise first." The dead shall rise before those who are living on the earth are changed.

The Christians whose bodies have been in the grave will be resurrected, and their bodies will be transformed into resurrection bodies, and then they will meet the Lord in the air. This will take place in the blink of the eye. It will all of this will take place in a split second before living Christians are translated from these bodies of flesh into resurrection, immortal, incorruptible bodies.

"The dead in Christ" are those believers who in life were "in Christ" and have died a physical death. Their spirits went to heaven to be with Jesus the moment they died, and their bodies were laid in the grave. It refers to our position in Christ when we received Jesus Christ as our personal Savior who died for us and rose from the dead. In the instant we trusted in Christ to save us we were placed into "the body of Christ." We became a part of the organism which is called His church. Every authentic born again Christian is equally in Christ. The dead in Christ will be raised when Christ returns. This is a "selective resurrection." Only those who are "in Christ" will be raised in that moment. The unsaved will not be raised at this time. Death cannot upset the vital union the believer has "in Christ." Those who live "in Christ," in death remain "in Christ." We are with the Lord forever. It is an unchanging relationship with Christ in life and in death.

### ***Rapture of the living "in Christ" (v. 17a)***

"Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

"We who are alive and remain" are those believers "in Christ" who have not died and are still alive here on the earth.

After the dead rise, then the living “will be caught up together with them” and then we “shall always be with the Lord.” The thought of the resurrection and reunion gives the grieving heart hope and assurance. A. T. Robertson says, “This rapture of the saints (both risen and changed) is a glorious climax to Paul’s argument of consolation.”

The living saints will be transformed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and in that instant will be given immortal, incorruptible bodies (1 Cor. 15:51-52). There will not be an interval between the raising of the dead believers and the change of the living saints. Those rising from the grave and those who are caught up are going to meet the Lord in the air. He will take us to heaven where He is now preparing a permanent dwelling place for us (John 14:1-3).

The reunion with those who have died is very important to Paul. He stresses the fact that they will be together. The saints who are alive will be caught up to be with Christ, and the dead in Christ who have been taken up to their place with the Lord. It is comforting and encouraging thought to those who are bereaved. Here are words of comfort to those who have loved ones who have gone on to be with Christ.

Living Christians will be transported with the resurrected Christians to meet Christ “in the air” (v. 17a). Paul does not tell us in this passage, but the bodies of the believing will be changed to imperishable and immortal bodies just like those who have just been resurrected (1 Cor. 15:42-44, 50-54). This translation will take place suddenly, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” We will be with the Lord unblamable in holiness. In that majestic moment we will be like Christ perfectly holy. We will be cleansed from every spot and wrinkle and every sign of age and corruption. We will be clothed in the beauty of His perfect righteousness and we will be with Him forever. The dead in Christ will be raised in incorruptible bodies, i.e., “bodies not liable to the decay.” Our living bodies cannot enter their heavenly inheritance until these bodies are changed. This “mortal body must put on immortality.” The “mortal” body must be “swallowed up of life” (2 Cor. 5:4).

God will raise up “the natural body” of the “dead in Christ.” The living “in Christ” will be changed into “the spiritual body.” “The image of the earthly” will give place to the “image of the heavenly and this body of humiliation will be fashioned anew to the likeness of the glorious body of the risen Lord. We get some idea of what this will be like when we examine the accounts of the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29; 2 Peter 1:16-17; Rev. 1:14-17).

### **“Shall be caught up together with them in the clouds”**

*Harpazo* means “to snatch up, to seize, to carry off by force, to rapture. The word often denotes the emotion of a sudden swoop and usually that of a force which cannot be resisted” (*Linguistic Key to Greek New Testament*). It means, “to seize, carry off by force” (Grimm-Thayer, *Lexicon*). “There is often the notion of a sudden swoop, and usually that of a force which cannot be resisted. The application of such a verb to the snatching away (the ‘rapture’) of the saints is obvious” (Morris, p. 145). Bruce says it “implies violent action, sometimes indeed to the benefit of its object, as when the Roman soldiers snatched Paul from the rioters in the Jerusalem council-chamber (Acts 23:10) or when the male child in the apocalyptic vision was caught up to God to preserve him from the great red dragon (Rev. 12:5). It is used in Acts 8:39 for the Spirit’s snatching Phillip away after his interview with the Ethiopian chamberlain and (more gemanely to the present passage) of Paul’s being caught up to the third heaven of paradise (2 Cor. 12:2, 3)” (p. 102). Our word *harpazo* expresses what will happen in terms of a sudden and almost violent action. Those who are caught up are subject to the irresistable power of God. Neither will the living be disadvantaged when Christ comes. For all practical purposes the resurrection of the dead and the rapture of the living will be simultaneous. Only a moment of time will separate the resurrection of the dead and the translation of the living (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

We get our English word “rapture” meaning “the act of conveying a person from one place to another.” The word “rapture” is frequently used as a technical word in theology to describe the event foretold in this verse.

### **“To meet the Lord in the air”**

The place of meeting is in the air. Once again “clouds” are mentioned. The divine glory is veiled in clouds (Exodus 19:16; 24:15-18; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10, 11; Psalm 97:2; Daniel 7:13; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Rev. 1:7). They are associated with the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:7), His ascension (Acts 1:9) and His coming in like manner as they have seen Him go (1:11).

Milligan cites examples of “the formal reception of a newly arrived magistrate.” Moffatt says it implies “welcome of a great person on his arrival.” It may well be “a royal reception” that Paul has in mind with our “meeting the Lord in the air.” The King is coming! We will be presented to the King.

The words “to meet the Lord” are used to describe a dignitary paying official visit to a city. The leading citizens of the city would go out to meet him and escort him back on the final stage of his journey. When Julius Caesar went through Italy in 49 B.C., Cicero wrote, “just imagine what *meeting* he is receiving from the towns, what honors are paid to him!” Also the bridal party goes out to meet the bridegroom in a Jewish wedding and escort him with a procession to the banquet hall (Matthew 25:6). Roman Christians did the same thing for Paul (Acts 28:15). Everything leads up to the great note of triumph, “so we shall ever be with the Lord.”

These analogies Paul uses in relation to the *Parousia* suggest the possibility that the Lord is pictured as being escorted on the remainder of His journey with His people—both those newly raised from the dead and those who have remained alive. F. F. Bruce writes, “it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with His people) continues His journey to earth or returns to heaven. Similarly it is not certain whether the Son of Man, coming ‘in clouds’ (Mark 13:26; 14:62), is on His way to earth or (as in Daniel 7:13) to the throne of God” (p. 103).

### ***Reunion will be with Christ forever (v. 17b)***

“We shall always be with the Lord” is the glorious outcome. Paul doesn’t tell us in this passage if we return to the earth with Christ or immediately depart for heaven. However, Paul’s chief concern here is to give the blessed hope that we will be with Christ for all eternity (1 Thess. 5:10; Phil. 1:23; Col. 3:4; 2 Cor. 5:8). All Christians will be united with Christ. From this time and forever they will be with the Lord. He will take the living believers to the permanent dwelling place He is presently preparing for them in heaven (John 14:1-3). The one thought Paul embraces is that we will be with the Lord forever.

All of the resurrected and raptured Christians will be with Christ forever. “We shall always be with the Lord.” Having joined Him we shall be continually with the Lord. This is the grand climax of blessedness. It was Paul’s desire on more than one occasion (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8). Note the permanence of the fellowship with Christ and one another.

How should this reunion with our loved ones and our resurrection affect our view of death, our life today, and the future? “Those who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

### **THE PROMISE FOR ALL “IN CHRIST” (4:18)**

“Therefore comfort (*parakaleo*) one another with these words.”

This great message of comfort, encouragement, cheer and hope should cause the believers at Thessalonica to actively strengthen one another. It should give them courage to face death and comfort their hearts in the face of death of loved ones.

“Death makes no difference to our relationship to the Lord. . . All things and all men are in His hands. When it is His will to bring in the end of this age, those who have died in Him and those who still survive will be united in His presence” (Morris, p. 146).

Those who “die in Christ” live “in Christ.”

Phillips translates, “God has given me this message on the matter, so by all means use it to encourage one another.” Here are solid grounds for comfort, encouragement and hope.

Paul has given us a definite word from the Lord. He has spoken “by the word of the Lord.” He is not making some suggestions about how we might comfort one another. We, just as the Thessalonians, can comfort one another because God has been pleased to reveal to us what has happened to our loved ones who have died. He has not left us ignorant and without hope. God has revealed some good news for us who face death.

The whole point Paul is making is that this great event will happen. It is a voucher that will be redeemed. It is a promise for us to personally believe. Emil Brunner well said, “A Christian faith without expectation of the *Parousia* is like a ladder which leads nowhere but end in the void.”

Do we really love the Lord’s appearing? What does it mean to you that Christ might come back today for you? Do you have a living expectation of His coming for you? Do we have our minds and hearts fixed upon Christ?

“We will love the appearing of the Lord in direct proportion as we love the Lord Himself. If we love Him, if we long to see Him who first loved us, then the truth of the Lord’s coming and the fact that He could come today will be a precious truth,” writes John Walvoord, p. 62.

Let us live every day as if it will be our last day lived for Christ upon this earth.

Death is real for the believer in Christ, but the hope of the resurrection means that it is not a everlasting state. It is temporary interruption. For the believer in Christ, death is only a transition from this life to the next. The moment we die physically we are ushered into the presence of the living God.

“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.” Even so, come Lord Jesus.

The Christian can face death, not with despair, but with a hope in what God will do, grounded in what He has already done in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The believer who dies “in Christ” remains “in Christ” for all eternity.

We have nothing to fear because Jesus will come either *with us* or *for us*!

Here is the blessed hope for the “dead in Christ” as well as for the living “in Christ.”

“We shall always be with the Lord.” Do you have that assurance in your heart? If you died today and stood before the Lord God and He said to you, “why should I let you into my heaven,” what would you say? Here is A Gift for You to help you make that decision for Christ.

Title: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 What Happens After You Die?

Series: 1 Thessalonians

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