

June 20, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

When Christ Returns

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 18

The Thessalonians, it seemed, had a question – What happens to those believers who die? Here Paul uses the euphemism – **sleep** – to characterize those who have died. 4:13 We need to remember a couple of things as we try to understand the Thessalonians perplexity about those who died. Thessalonica was a Greek city and the Greeks believed that when someone died they went down into the dark underworld from which there was no return. And we might think that as believers, they shouldn't be putting any stock in mythology. But these were pagan people who just a short time before had embraced the gospel and believed in Christ, and Paul had spent only a few short weeks of ministry among them before he left. So understandably there were going to be some ongoing questions about many issues, and here the issue is – What happens when believers die?

Now it is evident from the text that the Thessalonians were looking ahead and anticipating the Lord's return. In chapter one Paul noted how they had *'...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven...'* 1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10a They knew that salvation in Christ meant life eternal with Him and that one day He would return to take them home to be with Him always. But they weren't quite sure how this thing worked. What happens if they died before Jesus returned? Would they get to participate in the great and glorious appearing of the Lord? The question was not whether or not they would make it to heaven – the question was – would they miss the great event of His return? These newly converted believers had a vivid expectation of Christ's return and their whole lives were adjusted to waiting for His return. So it took them by surprise when some members of that church died. They had been waiting for Christ's return but they died – and those who were alive wanted to know if they had missed something.

So Paul writes to comfort their hearts and teach them a little about that day *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.* 1 Thessalonians There is a lot of ignorance about death. Which is rather silly seeing as how the mortality rate is right around one hundred percent. But most people really don't want to deal with death – especially their own, and so they either ignore it – hoping it will somehow miss them, or make up nice-sounding stories that bear very little relation to the truth, or they simply say that death is the end of everything. Every culture has some explanation about what happens when we die – but if you do not want to be ignorant about those who die, then you need to turn to the Bible for your answers.

The writer of Hebrews puts it very succinctly: *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.* Hebrews 9:27-28 We are born with an appointment in view. When Adam fell and sin entered and death through sin, God appointed the curse of death for all of his ancestors. This is not just the result of natural causes – our birth and our death are divinely appointed. Psalm 139 tells us *Your eyes have seen my unformed substance ; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.* Psalm 139:16 A certain number of days were ordained for each one of us – God ordained them and He brings them to pass and sets our appointment with death that He determines. **God ordains all our days – from our birth to our death.**

And so this question arose among the Thessalonians as they had believed the gospel and were waiting for that glorious day of Christ's appearance – and some of them had died, or as Paul puts it – fallen asleep. By the way, the word 'asleep' **koimao** – to cause to sleep or to put to sleep – is the word from which we get our word '**cemetery**'. That was the early Christian's optimistic word for a graveyard – a sleeping place. And this is the unique hope of Christians – not a final death where we simply wink out of existence – but a peaceful repose where the body is sleeping until Christ returns to raise that body and glorify it and reunite it with its spirit.

We must understand that when the Bible talks about death and uses the term '**sleep**', it is talking about the body and not the soul and spirit of the person. The only part of us that is unconscious at death is the body. Just one reference here is all we have time for, but if you look at chapter seven of Acts you find Stephen being stoned and as he died the Scripture records this: *Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.* Acts 7:60

So we understand from this that Stephen died. But just before that he made this statement as they were stoning him: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit !"* Acts 7:59 Now we understand from this, and from other passages like 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, that the body sleeps in death, but not the soul and spirit of the person. Unless we are to suppose that Stephen is somehow unconscious in the presence of the Lord even now.

But good biblical teaching on what happens when you die puts to death those silly ideas like purgatory or soul sleep and other such inventions of twisted minds. The only thing that sleeps at death is the body. The spirit and soul go immediately into the presence of the Lord when a believer dies. On the other hand, the soul and spirit of those who reject Christ go immediately into a place of conscious torment and punishment. The clearest teaching on that comes from Luke 16 where Jesus tells the story of the beggar and the rich man. When the beggar dies he goes immediately and consciously to the place of comfort and rest – the rich man goes immediately and consciously to a place of torment and punishment.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to have a strong and clear understanding about these things for one principal reason: [so] *that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* What Paul emphatically **is not** saying is that we should not grieve. It is good and right and normal that we grieve the passing of our friends and loved ones. If we didn't grieve – we probably really didn't have any kind of relationship with them. But the grieving Christians have is not the kind of hopeless grieving those without Christ have. **Our grieving is with the sure and solid hope that we will one day be reunited with those who died in Christ** Unbelievers cannot grieve hopefully. Theirs is an unrelenting hopelessness, a dead-end grief with no prospect of joy. Oh there are religious systems that offer **theories** of life after death – but they have no sure certainty they can offer. I've been to a lot of funerals, and the only funerals that are both grieving and hopeful are those funerals for believers. I've been to the other kind and would just as soon stay away because of the pervading sense of hopelessness and fear.

Why can Christians hope? On what is that hope founded? Paul answers that 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.* 1 Thessalonians 4:14 **The fact that the Author of our salvation died and rose again means that those who have believed in Him, and died, will rise when He returns.** When Jesus rose from the grave He conquered death for all who believe. By His death He fulfilled all the conditions that God required to pay the penalty for sin. And in His death [by the way, the Bible always refers to His death, not His sleep], by His death He turned death into sleep for those who believe. I remember when Eli first went to China and the thought of the distance and fact that Eli was gone was just too great for Lyn to bear and so she adopted a euphemism for Eli's absence. When she would talk about Eli, she would say, 'O, she's just taking a shower.' That gave her hope. But sleep is not a euphemistic way a believer copes with death. It is how the Bible views all those who have died in Christ – their bodies are sleeping until Christ returns – and then they wake up.

Until Christ returns, believers will die – we know they do. The effect of the death and resurrection of Christ was not that we would live eternally in these sin-sick bodies, but that even though our bodies will one day die, we have the grand and glorious hope of resurrection in new bodies free from the curse of sin. The effect of the curse of sin on our bodies is unmistakable – our bodies are dying. If you've made a habit out of looking at yourself in the mirror throughout the years, the progression is undeniable. But we have hope because Christ is risen from the dead and so shall we. Job testified to this: *As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth. "Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God ; Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another.* Job 19:25 – 27

The key to the Christian's hope is in Christ's death and resurrection. Because He did – we shall. But not everyone will die before the Lord returns. Paul goes on to say: *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. 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.* 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 That is, those who have fallen asleep in the Lord apparently have the privilege of meeting Jesus in their resurrected bodies first.

This is the great event for which we are looking – the Lord Himself descending from heaven with a shout. This is a **'word of command'**. And I believe the command is to those who are sleeping **'Rise'** – much like Jesus commanded Lazarus in the grave to **'Come forth'**. This is used of army commanders when they shout orders to their soldiers – it is not a quiet whisper. When the Lord returns, it is a remarkable and loud event. This is not something done in a corner.

Because you notice that along with the shout, we have the voice of **the** archangel. It does not say **an** archangel but **the** archangel which means that this is probably Michael the archangel. He is the only angel the Bible refers to specifically as **the** archangel [See Jude 9]. And if Michael is there, no doubt his army of angels is there. It was Michael and his angels who threw Satan out of heaven, and his appearance here tells us something about what is going to take place. However, Paul doesn't go into that here – he simply lets us in on the cast of characters. And finally, In addition to the shout of the Lord and the voice of the archangel, we also have the sound of the trumpet.

So one of the things to notice about this event is that it is going to be loud. I don't believe that if you have the Lord shouting, the archangel speaking and the trumpet blowing that this event will either be secret or quiet. I don't think anyone on earth will be able to ignore what is happening. I think this is important for at least one reason, and that is many people talk about the Lord's coming as though it were going to happen without notice or fanfare. Ever see those bumper stickers that say, 'In the event of rapture this car will be driverless'? That implies that those who aren't raptured will have no idea as to where the driver suddenly disappeared. All they will see is that he's there one minute and gone the next with very little fanfare. I don't believe that is the case.

Let's look at how Paul describes it. First he says the Lord returns with a shout and we hear the voice of the archangel and a loud trumpet – and then he says: *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.* 1 Thessalonians 4:17 This is the rapture passage. And some would object saying that the word 'rapture' does not appear in biblical text. And they are partially right. But ignorant of biblical scholarship. The Greek word translated 'caught up' is **harpazo** and it means to **seize** or **snatch up forcibly**, to **carry away by force**. Paul used this word to describe being caught up to the third heaven. When the Greek was translated into Latin, the translators used the Latin word **raptus** to describe being caught up. And of course we get our word **rapture** from the Latin. Now I suppose we could talk about **the seizing** or **the snatching**, but I don't think that would really capture the essence of the event. And it would look a little weird to have bumper stickers that say, 'In the event of snatching...'

I believe the shout and the voice and the trumpet will sort of clarify things for people – especially as they see the tombs opened and resurrected people headed up and then those around them leaving the earth as well. Some talk about the Lord's return in terms of there being a secret coming and an open coming – I don't believe the Bible makes that distinction. Every time the Lord's return is discussed, it is always accompanied by a lot of fanfare. For example, turn to Matthew 24. In verse 27 Jesus says this about His return: *"For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.* Lighting is fairly visible, so I think it makes sense to infer that His coming will be visible as well.

And then Jesus goes on to say: *'But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.* Matthew 24:29 – 31 In other words, this thing is not done in a corner. The rapture of the believers to the Lord is open and awesome and spectacular. Paul doesn't mention here anything about the other events of the meeting, which include the judgment seat of Christ – for the believers – or the marriage supper of the Lamb, or the Millennial kingdom and the destruction of the armies of the AntiChrist. His intent was to reassure the Thessalonians that those who died in Christ before His return would not miss anything but would certainly participate in these events as well.

Therefore encourage one another with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 These words are meant to be an encouragement to us. And specifically I believe they were meant to encourage us in at least seven ways. To watch for His coming, to wait for His coming, to look for His coming, to hope for His coming, to love His coming, to be faithful until He comes, and to be patient until He comes.

Watch for His coming

When Jesus was telling His disciples about the end of the age He said: *Therefore, stay awake* [literally: watch – be alert], *for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.* Matthew 24:42 Watching in the Bible is nearly always associated with praying. And so we might say it like this: **Therefore pray – because you don't know when the Lord is coming back and you need to pray so that you are alert and don't get distracted and diverted.** Peter says nearly the same thing: *The end of all things is near ; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.* 1 Peter 4:7

Wait for His coming

Paul noted that the Corinthians were in a posture of waiting as he wrote to them in 1 Corinthians: *as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ*, 1 Corinthians 1:7 And he told the Thessalonians to: *wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.* 1 Thessalonians 1:10

Look for His coming

Looking for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, . Titus 2:13

Hope for His coming

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:13

Love His coming

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. 2 Timothy 4:8

Be faithful until His coming

keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 1 Timothy 6:14

Remain patient until His coming

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. James 5:7-8

Our gracious God and loving Father,

Teach us to number our days so that we may present to You a heart of wisdom. Forbid that we would join the world in forgetting the certainty of our death and the glorious promise of Your coming. Don't let us play with the preciousness of life but make us ready to meet You when You come in glory with all Your saints. Help us not to be surprised by suffering, discouraged by the pressures of living, or by being cut off early from this life knowing that we are heirs of all the promises of God in this life and the next. Fill our hearts with the eager expectation of Your soon return. May we be those who are watching and waiting, looking and hoping, and loving Your appearing. Keep us faithful and patient until we see You coming on clouds of glory. And as those who have been made glad in God may we ever live to make others glad in You we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ, our soon returning Lord and King, Amen.