

The believers future hope

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[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and verse 13. 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.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with them. 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, that is, shall not precede, them which are asleep.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and 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. Amen. I'd like you tonight to try and put yourselves in the Thessalonians' shoes before they'd received this letter from Paul.

[1 : 23] They had heard the gospel from the apostle Paul and they believed it. And Paul had only been with them a very short time, as we thought before, perhaps as little as three weeks. Now, no doubt, as Paul preached to them the good news of Jesus Christ, he had told them about his ascension, his return to heaven, and the promise that one day he was to come back to this world.

That becomes plain as we read through this letter. We've come across it once or twice, references to the coming of the Lord. You see, at the end of chapter 2, verse 19, Are you not our glory in the presence of the Lord Jesus at his coming?

They knew what Paul was referring to when he mentioned the coming. And then at the end of verse 3, verse 13, the coming of the Lord Jesus with his saints.

They knew about his coming. Paul had obviously told them something about that. Now, you have to remember that these people had none of the New Testament scriptures.

It is very likely that 1 Thessalonians was the first book in the New Testament to be written, right about 20 years after Jesus had ascended to heaven.

[2 : 39] It's possible that the letter of James was written prior to this. So, they had none of the New Testament scriptures. They just had the Old Testament. And they would no doubt have had as well oral record stories, people remembering what Jesus had done and said.

Now, since Paul had been with them, since Paul had taught them and had to leave Thessalonica, it would appear that some of the Christians had died. Now, whether they had died through persecution or whether they died just of natural causes, perhaps there were children amongst them who died from childhood illnesses, whatever it was, some of them had died.

And it left these people wondering, well, what about them? What about these people who have not lived to see the coming of the Lord once more? They didn't know what had happened to these people.

They hadn't got the New Testament to tell them. There's very little in the Old Testament to teach what lies beyond this world. As Paul writes to them here, it would appear that these people were afraid that those who had died were going to miss out on the blessings of the second coming.

Perhaps they wondered if they'd been eternally lost because they hadn't lived to see Christ. And no doubt, the question was in their own minds.

[4 : 09] What's going to happen to me if I die before Jesus returns? Is my faith going to be useless? Is it going to count for nothing? Well, it's just difficult for us to put ourselves back in their sort of position because we're so familiar with passages in the New Testament like this or like the book of Revelation, like Corinthians we read there, or indeed some passages in the Gospels.

But it must have been a real, something that really concerned these people, just not knowing what had happened to those who died. So, Paul, as he writes this letter, he is plainly very keen to put these people right, to explain to them precisely what is to happen in the future and to explain to them as well what had happened to those who had since died since he'd been with them.

So, we see in these verses, first of all, a basis for the Christian hope. He says to them that there is great hope for those who had departed.

And he goes to explain what the basis is for that hope. In verse 13 and 14, I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that you sorrow not even as others which have no hope.

You have hope. And it's based on this, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with them.

[5 : 40] The basis for the hope was the fact that they knew Jesus Christ had died and risen again. Paul here wants to add to their knowledge.

Here was something they didn't know. They were ignorant of. And Paul doesn't want them to be ignorant of this anymore. So he says to them that you're not to sorrow like those who have no hope.

Now he's not saying that there's to be no sorrow. Sorrow is right and natural when Christian believers do die when they fall asleep in Jesus. But the grief and the pain and sorrow that a believer feels is to be different from the unbelieving world who have no hope.

Because Christians have a wonderful hope, a wonderful confidence about those who have left this world, who have died and gone to be with the Lord. And the basis of that hope as I say is the fact that Jesus, Jesus himself has already died and has risen again.

Now we read there in 1 Corinthians how Paul describes Jesus as the first fruits. the idea being the same idea as is here that as Jesus had died and rose again everyone who believes in Christ will do the same.

[7 : 05] He's the beginning of the harvest so to speak. This harvest of millions of souls, millions of believers who will one day be raised to life. The fact that Jesus was raised to life is an absolute guarantee that you and I we will be raised if we died united to Christ through faith.

So, Paul is saying here you believe that Jesus died, you know that Jesus rose again. It's at the very heart of your Christian belief. And if you know that you can be absolutely certain you can have the same confidence that those who have fallen asleep are, have a hope for the future.

Now, you might have noticed that as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians there and it comes out here that he doesn't talk of people dying. He doesn't talk of believers dying.

He is dealing here solely with believers, those who have a faith in Christ. He doesn't say that they die. He says that they fall asleep. And that apparently is true for the whole of the New Testament.

The believers are never described as dying in the New Testament. And that description implies that there must be a resurrection.

[8 : 29] The death is not the end. When you have a nap, when you fall asleep you're going to wake up again. In the same way these people who had fallen asleep in Jesus they were one day to be awakened at the resurrection.

But if you look carefully at this verse 14 you'll notice that Paul says that Jesus died. He doesn't say that Jesus fell asleep. He says that Jesus died.

Why? Why is Jesus said to die? To have died? Well because Jesus did suffer all the pains, all the horrors, all the terrors of death.

Jesus went through, and his experience in his word, the equivalent of hell where he was under God's judgment and God's wrath. Certainly at the point of his death he was immediately in paradise with his father.

But for Jesus that death was a horrific experience. A time where Jesus in one sense had no hope.

[9 : 37] Almost at the point of despair when he calls out my father, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus died. He went through all the pains and horrors of death.

But in doing so, he transformed death for his believing people into falling asleep. Because he has endured the pains of death, death becomes something that has lost its terror for believing people.

Now, death of course is something that perhaps we don't like to think about, perhaps you younger folk here, you never think about death, you think that's a long way away, it's never likely to come to you. But whether it comes sooner or later, it is going to come to every one of us, unless the Lord himself should return.

But here's the great news for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, death has lost all its terrors, it's going to be falling asleep, it's going to be with the Lord for a while, and then there's to be this resurrection, this raising to life once more.

Perhaps you'll note as well in this verse 14 that Paul says that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

[11 : 02] He's making the point here that those who have gone, those who have left this life, they are still real, active, living people. If they weren't, then God couldn't bring them.

He couldn't bring these people back with Jesus. They are in another realm, in another place. They are still as alive today as they ever were. They are to be brought back by God with Christ.

Then they are to be reunited with their bodies, and they will be raised to life. There will be a resurrection of all these people. So Paul is teaching these Thessalonians, you don't have to worry about those who have fallen asleep.

You don't have to worry about these Christian believers who have died. They are not lost. They are not going to miss out on the blessings of the second coming. They are with God, and God is going to bring them back to this world when Christ himself returns.

Clearly then we are taught here that believers in the Lord, they continue in a living, active way, even after they have left this world through death.

[12 : 11] This sleep is not sleep in an unconscious state, as some of the sex would hold, but it is called sleep because the victory of death is gone, because Christ has defeated death.

Death has lost its power. It has lost its power because it has been defeated by Christ. Christ, and even death is not able to break the bond between Christ and his people.

See in verse 16 there, Paul speaks of the dead in Christ. Those who have died are still in Christ, they are still united to Christ.

Their bodies in the graves, if you know your catechism, they are still united to Christ. There is an insoluble link, a link that can't be broken between Christ and his people, even through death.

So if tonight you are in Christ, if you have that believing faith, whether you're just young or more mature than years, you need have no fear of death.

[13 : 18] No fear of death whatsoever. Nothing can terrify you now. It's perhaps a bit scary for the younger ones to think about death, perhaps for us all to think about death.

But at the point where death comes, there is no need to fear because Christ has died and transformed the believer's death into a falling asleep.

And that falling asleep will be for a time until we are awakened at the resurrection from the dead. So the basis of our hope then for those who have departed is the fact that Jesus has died and risen again.

Paul then goes on to the fulfillment of that hope in verses 15 to 17. 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 proceed 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.

[14 : 37] Here's the fulfillment of this hope that believers have. Paul goes on to give some details to fill in exactly what is to happen on this occasion.

And you'll note that he's particularly emphasizing those who have already gone into death. he's particularly careful to make sure that these Thessalonian Christians know what's going to happen to them, because that is what's concerning them.

He's making the point that they'll be at no disadvantage. It makes no difference whether men and women are alive when Christ returns, or whether they have died. Before that, they will all have the same blessing at the time of Christ's return.

Now he says that he has this message as a word of the Lord. Now that may mean that here was something that Jesus had said in his own earthly ministry, something that's not recorded anywhere else in Scripture.

We've got an instance of that, for instance, in Acts chapter 20, I think it is, where Paul says that the Lord had said it's more blessed to give than to receive. That doesn't appear in the Gospels anywhere.

[15 : 54] And if you remember, John said that if everything that Jesus had done was written, the world wouldn't be able to contain all the books that would be written. Many things that Jesus did and said are not recorded for us in the Bible.

But this may be one thing that Paul is saying, here's a word, this is coming to you from what Jesus himself said. Or alternatively, it may be a special revelation that Jesus gave to Paul, telling him what was to happen in the future.

But either way, Paul is really saying, this is coming with all the authority of Jesus Christ himself. And you can believe exactly what I'm telling you. They need have absolutely no doubt that the events described here will absolutely and perfectly be fulfilled.

Jesus' return to this world is clearly going to be a visible thing. It's something that people will see.

It's not something that's going to go on quietly, that perhaps many people in this world don't know nothing about. Again, some of the sects, the false religions, they would hold that the return of Jesus has happened already.

[17 : 15] I think it's the Mormons say that Christ came back to this world some earlier this century and that some people have met him in the air. Nonsense. This is going to be a visible thing.

Everyone's going to see Jesus come back. And not only that, it's going to be an audible thing. People are going to hear Jesus coming back again. So we have him descending with a shout, with the voice of the archangel.

Now there seem to be here, two things, two sounds, two noises actually heard. Literally, the way the word order is in the original language, it is, for the Lord with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, with the trump of God, will descend.

The verb comes at the end there. And the first word, the shout, it's a word that's used only here in the New Testament. And it means a command that a charioteer, someone driving a chariot, might give to his horses.

Or a commander in the army would give this command to his soldiers. It's a shout, a command that comes with authority. People must do it. They must obey it. And it comes with urgency.

[18 : 30] Something that has to be done there and then. And it's not immediately obvious from whom the shout is coming, but it would seem most appropriate to say, this is God, this is Christ himself.

This is the Lord of glory giving this command to the earth. And that command being a command that the dead should rise. If you go back to John's gospel, you see this written for us more explicitly.

John chapter 5 and verse 28. Amen. Amen. John 5 verse 28.

Marvel not at this, said Jesus, for the hour is coming in which all that are in the grave shall hear his voice, hear the Son of Man's voice, and shall come forth.

They that have done good unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation, or the resurrection of judgment. They will hear his voice and they will rise.

[19 : 39] So it would seem best to understand what Paul is saying here, is this command, this shout, comes from Jesus himself, that the dead should rise.

And then along with that is this voice of the archangel, and the trump, with the trump of God. It may be that here the archangel is being represented, as sounding the trumpet of God.

It is the voice, the noise, sometimes it can be translated the noise of the archangel. Now, the details of who this archangel is, I think is unnecessary for us to go into.

But clearly it's the idea of a signal, a signal from God, with all the authority of God, that will bring about the resurrection of the dead. What do we associate the trumpet with?

Well, if you think back to Exodus 19, where God appeared on Mount Zion, I beg your pardon, there, there was a trumpet call.

[20 : 44] It grew louder and louder. And it was calling the people to meet with God. God had come down on the mountain, there was smoke and fire and earthquake and lightning, all kinds of things.

And there was this trumpet calling people to meet with God. the same idea here. People are being called from the grave to meet with God.

Also, if you know a little bit about the festivals in Israel, it was the festival of trumpets. And this was an occasion where the trumpets were sounded at the year of Jubilee.

Now, the year of Jubilee was the 50th year in the calendar in Israel. And on that year, slaves were allowed to go free. Anyone who owed debts, their debts would be cancelled.

Everything reverted back to its original owner. And no doubt that would have been a time of great joy and rejoicing. That all the burdens that people were carrying, financial burdens and burdens of work, they were gone.

[21 : 52] People were set free. And perhaps there's the hint of this here as well. That this trumpet call of God is bringing about the liberation of his people from their bondage to death.

Bringing them into the joy and the freedom of the new universe. So, well, however we interpret it, this shout and this trumpet call of the archangel, it's a signal for the dead to rise.

A signal that's going to be heard throughout the world. Perhaps even throughout the universe. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians there, we read it as well, the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.

And having been raised, then, well, I missed a bit there, I beg your pardon, in verse 16, the dead in Christ shall rise first. Here's Paul's emphasis on those who've already died, they're not going to miss out.

They are going to rise first of all, and then, after that, verse 17, they who've risen and we who are still alive will all be together and will meet the Lord in the air.

[23 : 07] You'll notice there a reference to clouds. Often, in reference to our Lord's return to this world, there is this reference to clouds.

Very frequently in the scriptures, clouds are associated with God's appearance, the appearance of God, and with his activity.

I'm sure the children well know about the God leading the Israelites through the desert, and there was a pillar of clouds. It was a sign of God being there, leading them through the wilderness.

There was a cloud, as I mentioned, that came down on Mount Sinai. There was a glory cloud in the temple. When Solomon dedicated the temple, the temple was full of this glorious cloud, so the priests had to leave the temple.

They couldn't stay there. There was a transfiguration of the Lord Jesus. A cloud descended, a symbol of the presence of God. And then, if you know Daniel's prophecy about the Son of Man coming back to this world, clouds are present there as well.

[24 : 13] I think Jesus made reference to it as well on his trial. Was it before Pilate or before the Jews? Before the Jews, I think it was, that they would see the Son of Man coming on in the clouds.

So this reference to clouds, the idea, the symbolic of the presence of God and the activity of God. God's life. Now, no doubt, as we think about these things, there are all kinds of questions that arise in your mind and in mine about the details of how this is going to happen.

We didn't read it in 1 Corinthians, but obviously there were some in the Corinthian church that were saying, well, how is it possible that the body can go into the grave and it's going to be raised to life?

Well, God doesn't give us all the precise details, but he's given us all that we need here. And Paul finishes up with a great climax at the end of verse 17, and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Here is the ultimate fulfillment of the Christian hope. The very end point of your Christian experience. What is the most wonderful thing that you can possibly look forward to?

[25 : 29] Is it not being with the Lord Jesus Christ? Being in his company, enjoying his fellowship, seeing him, and being with him forever. That's what Paul is saying.

That this is, all these events are leading up to this end point, this climax, when we will be with the Lord forever. Being with the Lord with our new glorified bodies, our body and soul having been brought together once more.

And nothing in all of eternity shall ever interrupt, shall ever bring to name that fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, as we meditate on these things, surely these truths, these doctrines, should fill us with praise and wonder and thanksgiving to our God and Saviour.

That all these wonderful events lie ahead of us. And they are absolutely certain. If tonight you know, in your own experience, that Christ died and has risen again, you can be just as certain that Christ will return precisely as is described here.

It makes no difference to you whether you live to see it or whether you die before Christ returns. You can be absolutely assured that nothing can prevent you enjoying these great blessings when Christ returns.

[27 : 02] Your hope in Christ will not be disappointed. There is nothing more sure in this world than that Christians will go through this experience. Now it's easy, isn't it, to get very taken up, very involved over here and now.

The ups and downs of life. The humdrum of daily responsibilities and duties and just the ordinary day-to-day life.

And because of that, these things can get pushed out of our minds. But it's good for us to take time to focus our minds on these things.

To think about the glorious return of Jesus Christ. It would seem to me, as Paul wrote this letter, that this idea of Christ coming, it was so much in his mind that it keeps popping up here and there.

As we mentioned in chapter 2 and chapter 3 as well. That he was intent on filling in the details, as he has done in this chapter.

[28 : 09] And we'll see more in chapter 5. But he couldn't, I can't help, but saying a little bit about it here and there beforehand. It's good for us.

It's encouraging for us. It brings us strength in our trials and difficulties to meditate on these great and glorious truths. To see the wonder of the fact that one day we are going to be with the Lord Jesus.

Jesus. And we are going to be with him through all the endless ages of eternity. And nothing shall ever take that away from us. Nothing can remove it from us. Because he loved us.

And he died for us. It is going to be fulfilled. God through Paul here has given us enough detail to assure us that it makes no difference whether we live to see this event.

Whether we are still living when Christ returns. Or whether we fall asleep and enjoy being with him for some time before Christ returns. But in this, think finally of the consequences of our hope, of this Christian hope.

[29 : 22] Verse 18. Wherefore, comfort one another with these words. Comfort one another with these words. What's to be the major consequence of this hope, here and now, today as we live in this world?

It's comfort. It is comfort for Christian people. These wonderful truths have been given to us by God to bring us comfort, comfort to ease the pain of this world.

Especially at times of sorrow. And at times of bereavement. At times of parting with dear friends and family who fall asleep in Jesus. God has graciously given us these wonderful truths.

Because he loves us. And he wants to ease the pain of parting with loved ones. It's only because of what Paul has written here. What the Spirit of God has written here.

It's only because of that that we can sorrow. In a way that the world doesn't sorrow. We sorrow but we have hope. We're not going to be the same as them.

[30 : 32] We're not going to have a hopeless sort of grief. That can't be, that nothing can change. I'm going to say that it's been very evident in our own congregation here.

At times of the death of the Lord's people amongst ourselves here. That this hope, this confidence has been very, very evident.

It has transformed, if you know, I might be able to say, from being mournful and despairing, hopeless occasions to services that have been full of thanksgiving to God and of confidence in God.

And I might even go as far as saying that there's been something of a solemn joy there as well. That the Lord's people have finished their course in this world and gone to be with the Lord.

And that comfort is here strengthened by the words we have in verse 17, that we are to be caught up together with them.

[31 : 41] Together with them who have already fallen asleep in Jesus. After they've been raised, we're going to be together again. We're going to be reunited.

Parting with people does bring pain. It does bring a natural pain and sorrow. I remember on several occasions as a child being in tears, having to say goodbye to my grandparents.

Perhaps we'd spend a holiday with them or they'd been with us and it was really sad to have to say goodbye to them. And that pain, that sort of sorrow, is of course much keener when we're parted by death.

Because nothing can bring these people back in this world. But here is this marvelous truth put very simply, just in these three words, that we'll be together with them.

The separation is not permanent. It is not permanent. We are one day to be reunited with those who've gone before us. And we will never be separated ever again.

[32 : 53] Now no doubt, our greatest joy is to be with the Lord. To see our Saviour and to enjoy his fellowship and his comfort and to be in glory with him.

But surely there's going to be rejoicing as well at being with our friends, being with those who have fallen asleep in Christ before us. But one last thought.

Notice here that the Spirit, through Paul, is giving every one of us a job to do. He doesn't simply say that these things are to be a comfort for each one of you.

He says you've got a job to do. You comfort one another with these words. You go to your Christian friends in their times of sorrow. You go to your Christian friends when life is hard for them and they're finding the Christian life difficult.

And you remind them of the glorious future that Christ is promising. You remind them of these precious truths, of the precious hope for the future. Read this passage together.

[34 : 01] Speak about it. Pray over it. and bring comfort to your Christian friends. You can imagine the Thessalonians perhaps reading this for the first time.

And the joy and the comfort it must have brought to them. To think, oh, now these people we love, they're not lost. They're with the Lord and one day we're going to be reunited.

And they will share in the blessings of Christ's second coming in precisely the same way that we will. It must have been great for these people to learn these truths.

They would have been greatly encouraged to know that those who had gone on already were safe and that they have no less part in Christ's second coming than those who remained.

Well, is this your hope and confidence tonight? Can you say that by God's grace, he has saved you by Christ's death and resurrection?

[35 : 01] Are you confident of your own resurrection? That you will simply fall asleep in Jesus? That death has lost its sting, has lost its terrors?

Are you confident that one day you will be awakened? That you will hear this shout, this command of the Lord and you will be raised.

You'll be raised incorruptible. Incorruptible meaning that you'll never decay. Things will never go bad. You'll never get old. Nothing will ever go wrong with your body ever again.

Well, that's the great Christian hope that Paul speaks of here. To be given a glorified body. To be reunited with Christian loved ones.

To be caught up and to meet the Lord in the air. And to be destined to be with him for all of the endless ages of eternity. We have a job to do for each one of our Christian brothers and sisters.

[36 : 08] To seek to bring them comfort through these works. 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. Amen. Let's pray together. Most loving and gracious Heavenly Father.

Were it not for what you have told us in scripture here. We would be ignorant about the future. How good you have been to us then. In giving us these insights.

Into the glorious. And wonderful return of your Son, our Saviour. We thank you that for all of us who have. Have seen you at work in our lives.

Transforming us from those who were children of wrath. To those who are now the children of God. Who have washed away our sins. And sent us in the family of God.

[37 : 13] We thank you that there is a marvellous glory. Made up for us. And we rejoice as well. In the comfort that it brings to us. To know that those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

Are at this moment alive and active. And rejoicing in your presence. And that the day is coming when we will be reunited with them. And we will forever be with the Lord our Saviour.

Thank you for giving us these truths. May they indeed be a source of great blessing and comfort. And encouragement to each one of us. For your glory's sake.

Amen.