

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (ESV)

13 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. **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. **15** 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. **16** 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. **17** 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. **18** Therefore encourage one another with these words.

This morning we are going to look at a passage about the **Lord's second coming**. Remember the context. Paul just told the Thessalonians that **God's will** for them is their **sanctification**, and the example he used was an area of their lives they probably didn't have clear thinking about. They had **been told** about how their sexual conduct should be, but they may not have made the connection of **just how important** that is in walking with Christ. It may have seemed like a peripheral issue. Paul took away that misconception and replaced it with a head on push for sexual purity.

Then Paul commends them for doing well in something that **they DID** understand and viewed as a Christian service. That something was loving fellow believers.

This morning Paul moves back to a topic they must not have understood. Maybe it is because those in their culture were mocking the **whole idea** of the resurrection of the dead.

Paul answers a question that they had about what happens to those believers who die before Christ returns. Maybe they thought they would miss sharing in this great event. Maybe they had doubts about them resurrecting at all. But Paul's answer is intended to explain what happens to them **at Christ's return**. It looks like Paul may have talked about this previously in a way that **didn't clarify** what would happen to people who die prior to Christ's return. It is really easy to understand how that could happen. He might have thought it was self evident. But he finds out that they really don't understand. So he circles back to teach them how it works.

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This article is from the New Scientist website:

“RICHARD WAVERLY was a 37-year-old history teacher. One day he was driving to work, tired after a late night and hungry from skipping breakfast. He was also in a bad mood following a row with his wife, who he suspected of having an affair. At a busy junction, he lost control, drove into a telegraph pole and was thrown through the windscreen. The paramedics said he was dead before he hit the pavement.

This story is fictitious, but when psychologist Jesse Bering narrated it to volunteers, he discovered something you probably couldn't make up. Asked questions such as “do you think Richard knows he is dead?” and “do you think he wishes he had told his wife he loved her before he died?”, large numbers of volunteers answered yes. For many, who had already professed a belief in the afterlife, this was no big surprise. However even people who totally rejected the idea of life after death – so-called extincivists – also answered yes.” (end of article)

Have you ever been amazed at the **wishful thinking** that people hold toward death? They think anyone they care about will be whisked into some sort of **spirit life** full of **beautiful things**. Maybe they become a butterfly or a spirit floating around looking over us. If you were to ask them what authoritative source they rely upon for that information, they could not answer it.

Hope in scripture is wildly looks forward to a good thing you know will happen. A Christian has **hope**. **Real** hope. We know that if we are **in Christ**, we will live forever with Christ after we die.

It is always amazing to see those with **no hope** drum up a religious belief to give them what they wish for. They have nothing to base it on. It is just wishful thinking. But they cling to it for dear life, literally.

Not everyone does that though. Some people are consistent. They want there to be life after death. But they have given up that hope in their atheistic mindset. Those people are more **consistent** in their logic. Those people don't even **pretend** to have hope. They are the best example of those who mourn so deeply because they won't allow themselves to delude themselves with the idea of an afterlife of any kind.

When Paul thought of the Thessalonians suffering from the idea of their loved ones not being resurrected, or to be left out of the glorious event of Christ's

return, when he thought of them mourning like the atheist, he felt moved to relieve that suffering right away.

He wants to inform them. He wants them to cheer up because of the good news. When they suffer the loss of a loved one, they will **still mourn** for their loss. It hurts deeply to lose someone we love. Mourning is going to happen, no matter how blessed that person's future is. Because mourning is mostly about **our loss, our hurt, our pain**. And that is expected. But when we know a person is in Christ, we have a real **fact-based, God-promised** expectation of a wonderful outcome.

Christian mourning is an ambivalent mourning. We feel opposing things at the same time. We have **hope** and we have **sadness**. If a non believer orients to the facts, all they have is the sadness. Any **hope** is just **wishful thinking** to help them **cope** with their sadness.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to do the hopeful mourning.

Note that he says

those who are asleep

In this text, Paul uses the word sleep 3 times to describe death. There are basically two doctrines that Christians believe about the state of a believer after death. They are based on what the individual believes about the relationship of the soul and the body in scripture.

Most Christians believe that when a person dies, their body is dead but their spirit is ushered into the presence of Christ.

Here are some of their proofs.

Acts 7:59–60 (ESV)

59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen stated something he clearly believed would happen. And it would appear he had no problem with his spirit being separated from his body or he would have just said, receive me or something similar. Stephen was specific. He said spirit.

Ephesians 3:14–15 (ESV)

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,

Paul's reference to families in heaven is commonly understood as Christians who have died and are in heaven. This verse seems to say there are families

in heaven right now. How could they be, if bodies and spirits could not be apart?

2 Corinthians 5:6–9 (ESV)

6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight.

8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

Paul seems comfortable with the idea of a separation from an “us” that is in the body and an “us” that is apart from our bodies. When we are away from the body we are at home with the Lord. The idea is at least not clearly stated that when **our body** is resurrected we will be with the Lord. It is when we are **absent from the body**, implying that there is a separation.

Jesus also told the thief on the cross “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Now Jesus could have meant that I am telling you today, comma, you will be with me in paradise. But it would be a wasted word. If you are dying on a cross, do you really think you would waste words?

James 2:26 (ESV)

26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

There are many more passages on this.

The early church fathers disagreed about what happens after death. The debate seems to have gone back and forth for a while and the Spirit/Body separation became the most popular doctrine. A **Baptist deacon** named Henry Grew wrote a tract about it in 1837 in which he laid out a teaching about soul sleep. We Baptists always have to stir things up. Then in 1841 a Methodist preacher named George Storrs preached 6 sermons about it. About the same time William Miller was beginning a cult known as the **Millerites** who had a date figured out for the second coming. Storrs joined them and was a preacher there. 7th day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses both came out of this Millerite movement. Both embraced the idea of soul sleep. Herbert Armstrong came along later and appears to have borrowed concepts from both groups.

Now, because we can trace this teaching through these questionable sources, that does not prove that the concept is **wrong**. In fact I have read that cults often emphasize something that **may be true**, that maybe

mainstream Christianity is wrong about, and then they use that to gain credibility for all their other teachings.

If you go through the whole Bible looking at all the references about death, you will find it a very mixed bag. Very often you will find verses that you would first interpret as the soul sleeping and not being aware.

Ecclesiastes 9:4–5 (ESV)

4 But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.

This appears to say that the dead are dead dead.

Numbers 6:6 (ESV)

6 “All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body (word for soul).

This looks like the word commonly used for the soul that separates from the body is used as a synonym for a dead body. So the soul does not live on but dies.

In Genesis 1 and 2, a soul is not added to Adam. Life is breathed into him. This is to make the point that it is the body that has life. Without it there is no life.

[Dan 12:2 ESV]

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

This appears to say that the dead need to wake up, not to have their spirit joined back with their bodies.

Martin Luther believed in soul sleep.

“The theory of the immortality of the soul was one of those false doctrines that Rome, borrowing from paganism, incorporated into the religion of Christendom. Martin Luther classed it with the “monstrous fables that form part of the Roman dunghill of decretals.”

—E. Petavel, *(The Problem of Immortality, page 255.)*

Commenting on the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes, that the dead know not anything, the Reformer says: “Another place proving that the dead have no ... feeling. There is, saith he, no duty, no science, no knowledge, no wisdom there. Solomon judgeth that the dead are asleep, and feel nothing at all. For the dead lie there, accounting neither days nor years, but when they are awaked, they shall seem to have slept scarce one minute.”

—Martin Luther, *Exposition of Solomon's Booke Called Ecclesiastes, page 152. Great Controversy 549.2*

I had thought about a series of sermons to fully investigate this doctrine but I decided against it. The reason? This is not a **divisive** issue like the Sabbath was. The logic of the Sabbath doctrine makes it divisive. The logic of soul sleep or the ability for the soul to be separated from the body is **not divisive**. Everyone agrees on the final state of the Elect. Whether they are wakened or their soul is rejoined with their bodies does not matter all that much. No one who believes either way will be at all disappointed. The next thing they will know after death is that they are with Christ.

I think the reason that **Soul sleep** is such an anathema to evangelical Christianity is that those who hold this view often hold **other views** that are divisive, and some outright heretical. So they lump them all together instead of looking at each separately. I think that actually gives cults more credibility in their ranks when we treat it that way. If we attack soul sleep with the same dogmatism as we attack an errant gospel, the cult can say, look what a strong position we hold on soul sleep. Our opponents cannot provide a strong argument against it. Therefore **all of our doctrines** are superior.

So even though the word sleep is used here for death, this was a common way to refer to death. I think we are wise not to read too much into that word.

Let's look at the context to see what Paul is talking about.

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.

OK, so the Thessalonians had the understanding that Christ died and rose again. That is not the part that was giving them trouble. After all, that is the core belief in our salvation. The Corinthians had trouble with that idea. But the Thessalonians did not.

So Paul extends this resurrection to **all** believers. Since Christ died and rose again, then through Christ, God will resurrect **all believers** who have died. Not it is interesting here that Paul says "will bring with Him". He will explain in a bit what Paul means.

15 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.

What does Paul mean by "A word from the Lord?" It means either that Paul is applying a principle that **Christ said** and it is **found in scripture**, or it is something that Christ said that **did not make it to scripture** but Paul knew

about it, or it was revealed **by Christ to Paul** or one of the prophets. We don't know. But Paul was certain on this point.

The Christians who are living up to the point that Christ returns will not get to go first to meet with Christ.

Now there is something very important here that we will not see in our English words. The word for **coming** is Parousia. This is a special word. It was normally used to describe visitations of the emperor or dignitaries to a city. Then we go down to 17 and we are to **meet** Christ in the air. The word for meet is a special word too.

Gene Green comments that this word for meet “was almost a technical term that described the custom of sending a delegation outside the city to receive a dignitary who was on the way to town.”

When we put those two words together we get what I believe is the real picture here. The ultimate dignitary, Christ is coming, actually returning, to the earth. A contingent of those on earth who love Him and long for His return are going to Him prior to His arrival on earth in order to accompany Him and welcome Him to their city.

That is the picture that the Thessalonians would have understood by the words that Paul used.

John Chrysostom understood Paul's meaning in just this way: “For when a king drives into a city, those who are honorable go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within.”

Lets go to verse 16

16 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.

Cry of command

Voice of the archangel

The sound of the trumpet of God

Let me ask you. Does anything about that seem like it is **done in secret**? I think this would ruin all the movies about the rapture where Christians are disappearing all over the place and everyone wonders why. Can Christ not yell loud enough for people to hear? Can angels not garner attention? Do God's trumpet players not have sufficient volume?

Those who believe that this passage is talking about a rapture of believers prior to the great tribulation have to do business with these words and

concepts. The way this is worded, it creates a mental picture of something that is highly visible and audible. You could be anywhere and you will know this is going on. Let's look at the parts.

Cry of command- This is Christ commanding that all of His children, dead and alive, come to be with Him.

The word used here is used for **an order** which an officer **shouts to his troops**, a **hunter** to his **dogs**, a **charioteer** to his **horses**, or a **ship-master** to his **rowers**. This is not like the cry of command by so many parents where the cry is made but nothing happens. No. This is the authoritative cry that when it is made, dramatic things happen. Christ calls. His people come, dead or alive. That is power.

Voice of the archangel- We do not know what the archangel says. But whatever it is, it will be clear and it will be something that is accomplishing God's will. Maybe it is a command to all the angels to carry out what Christ just commanded. We do not know.

The sound of the trumpet of God- The way this is worded it appears that it is the **angel** that blows the trumpet.

A trumpet was often used to signal an opportunity to **hear from God**.

Meetings with God were signaled with a trumpet blast Ex 19:16-17 When

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God a trumpet was

blasted. Ex 19:19 When the marriage of the Lamb with its bride meets its

culmination, a trumpet blast is appropriate. Rev 19:7. The trumpet was used

when Jehovah was coming to rescue people from oppression Zeph 1:16 The

final trumpet is also the signal for the dead to rise and for the living to be

changed, and for the elect to be gathered. Matt 24:31

For those of us who are in Christ, this is a glorious truth. It is full of joy and

hope. This we be the best **trumpet player** we have ever heard. He will be

playing- "**Come see Jesus**" to every believer. That will be one of the top ten in eternity.

Now while Christ **descends**, believers **ascend**. Depending upon your view of

what happens when people die, either the souls of the believers will come

with Christ to be united with their risen bodies, or their risen bodies will be

given life and the bodies with life will rise. But this scripture demands that the

dead here are resurrected.

That is the first thing to happen.

17 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.

OK so do they **get to** the Lord first, or are they just **started** first because they have further to go. Scripture does not make that clear and let me ask you. Do you care at all? Would you care if you were alive and the dead reached Christ first? I think Christ is like Carla's mom here. We will all get there at the same time because she never wants to show any favoritism. But really. Who cares? Just **going** is our goal. Who we beat there doesn't matter at all. And if it did, if we were living and thinking that way, we probably would not be going.

Now the word for "caught up" is the word that movies are made of. The word is **raptō** and that is where we get the idea of **rapture**.

Now this word is a very interesting one. And all of its meanings give us clues about what is really going on here.

"To catch away speedily."

"To seize by force."

"To claim for one's own self."

"To move to a new place."

"To rescue from danger."

Every one of these things will happen to us. This event is going to happen very quickly. All of the wording conveys this. This will happen so fast that the wicked will not have time to repent.

[1Co 15:51,52 ESV]

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 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.

If this were a government program this would take a hundred million years. And even then, there would be mistakes. But God is going to take billions of believers, raise them and give them new bodies in the time it takes to blink. Does that seem impossible? Of course it does. This is God we are talking about. This is mind blowing.

And from then on, we will always be with the Lord.

Oh this is so wonderful. Is it hard **to wait for this**? It should be.

One of the reasons I have moved from a "futuristic, Israel focused, temple built, raptured church prior to a tribulation", view of end times is because of the trumpet. I think there is only **one** last trumpet. And it happens at the end

of time as we know it when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. He will call His people to Him as He comes to earth. It will be amazingly swift. And judgment will happen to both believers and non believers. For believers it will be for rewards. For non believers it will be for punishment.

Scripture is very clear how unbelievers will be judged. They will be condemned due to their sin. What an awful fate awaits everyone who does not have faith in Christ for salvation.

But I am not clear about judgment of believers. I wonder if all of our **unconfessed** sin will be exposed. Those wrongs that we have committed against other believers might become evident. Our sin is remembered no more in the sense that it is held against us. But in light of all the scriptures saying everything becoming evident at judgment, might it not become evident. I think it might come down to either we expose our sins to one another, or He will. How would that change how honest we are with each other?

But whatever the case, we are changed. We are given new bodies. We will be with Christ forever. No harm will ever come to us again. All will be good. And no sin will be held against us. Those things that we have done for Christ will receive their reward. That is why we are to be storing up treasures in heaven. This is the event where the treasures are converted from deeds to rewards. What a wonderful day.

18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

What is there in your life that you **struggle with** that will not be **remedied** when **Christ returns**? What **problem** do you have that will **not be fixed** when Christ returns? What **pain** are you experiencing that will not be **relieved** when Christ returns. When the world comforts the world, it is with a shallow optimism. They cannot know if things will get better. And they will certainly get very much worse with time.

When a believer comforts a believer, He has **the promises of God** to base the comfort on. It is worthy of **belief**. It is rock solid. It is encouragement that can be **counted upon** and **depended upon**. We can encourage each other with these words. Christ is coming. Christ is coming. Is your life hard? Christ is coming. Are you tempted to fear? Christ is coming. Is your health failing? Christ is coming. Is the price you are asked to pay high? Christ is coming. Hang in there. The **trumpet music** will begin **any time now**.

A wonderful application this morning is to intentionally live for Christ's coming. A good question is, what do I want to be found doing when Christ returns? Am I doing that today. (repeat) If not we should repent and change.