

Thessalonians, Part 10: “Encourage Each Other with These Words”

1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV (Pg. 574) 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.

- I. After everything else Paul has said, today we come to the crux of his letters to the Thessalonians. It will occupy a large portion of the remainder of these letters.
 - A. This portion concerns the return of Jesus. Paul had obviously taught some on this topic when he was there. Most likely, however, his sudden departure prevented him from giving the Thessalonians all they needed to have sound understanding; the result was that they were confused and worried.
 1. Did you notice that Paul mentioned Christ’s return once in every chapter of this first letter? Though he has much to say to them, he doesn’t seem to want to drift too far from the main point of the Thessalonians’ concerns.
 - a) In Chapter one he speaks of how they turned from idols to serve the living God for this reason: “to wait for his Son from heaven”¹.
 - b) In chapter 2, Paul describes their little church as “our hope...joy...(and) crown of boasting before the Lord Jesus at his coming”².
 - c) **1 Thessalonians 3:12b ESV** may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, **13** so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, **at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.**
 2. One other interesting thing to note is that in chapters one and five, Paul refers to his frequent trifecta of Christian characteristics; faith, hope, and love³. But in 3:6, Paul says that Timothy has brought word of their “faith and love”. He does not mention hope, probably since hope is running short in Thessalonica, because of their confusion about what is to come.
 - B. The Bible is full of promises that Jesus will physically return to earth someday. “23 of the 27 books of the New Testament state that he is coming. One out of every 30 verses in the New Testament either speaks directly of his coming or of the end times surrounding his coming. For every biblical reference to Jesus’ first coming there are 8 that point to his return.”⁴
 1. **Acts 1:11b ESV** “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, **will come in the same way** as you saw him go into heaven.”
 2. The return of Christ is a guaranteed fact, it is the hope of our salvation, when everything will be made new, and the redemptive work of Christ finally completed. Christ’s return is the “happily ever after” of our story.

- C. But in the passage we read, Paul’s main concern is not to exhaustively explain all of the events of the end times. It is a mistake to try and read a much larger scope into this text than Paul intended. Paul is being far more pastoral than theological in this passage⁵. What is it he wants them to know?
 - 1. Mostly that Jesus is coming again, and that he is coming for his church, the elect; those he died to ransom. Moreover, that the “dead in Christ” will not miss this event, but will share a glorious, triumphant participation in it.
 - 2. Also when he comes, there will be a magnificent reunion with both Christ and the Body of believers across all time; and that this expectation should be a source of tremendous encouragement for all who trust in Jesus.⁶
- D. This element of encouragement is vital. People get too obsessive on the mysterious details of Christ’s return, and miss the point that the promise of his return should infuse us with great courage to live today and to face tomorrow.
- II. So apparently Timothy has returned to Paul, not only with the good news of the Thessalonians’ enduring faith and love for one another, but also with questions about things Paul wasn’t able to fully explain during his brief time there.
 - A. Paul seems to have introduced them to two important doctrines: First, when Christians die, they are ushered into the presence of God. Second, a day is coming when Christ himself will return to gather the righteous, judge the wicked, and set up his eternal kingdom within a recreated heavens and earth.
 - B. But the confusion for the Thessalonians was found between those two facts. Among their questions was a most pressing concern: “What happens to believers who die **before** Christ returns?” **“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. Paul was concerned about what they didn’t know. We want you to come to church and learn the scriptures, and more importantly, to study the Bible for yourself, because “Theological ignorance invariably leads to confusion, worry and frustration.”⁷ Peace accompanies knowing the truth.
 - 2. Look also at how he talks about those who have “fallen asleep”. He is speaking of physical death. The Bible often uses sleep as a metaphor for the death of believers⁸. There is a great promise in that for you and I.
 - a) Sleep is temporary. If you sleep, you will wake again. Death in the Bible is always an enemy; indicative of judgement. It is not positive.
 - b) This is not to imply the false doctrine of “soul sleep”; meaning that when we die that we are unconscious, held in a sort of limbo state for a future date. **2 Corinthians 5:6b ESV 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.**
 - 3. Paul also points to their grief and states that the way a Christian grieves should be obviously different from how an unbeliever does.
 - a) This doesn’t have to do so much with the depth of our emotions, or even the expression of them, but rather the end result of them. Even at the graveside of his friend Lazarus, **John 11:35 ESV Jesus wept.**

- b) A believer's grief is always undergirded by hope. Hope that their loved one no longer suffers; hope in the fact that neither they nor their loved one will cease to exist in the grave; hope of a future bodily resurrection; and mostly hope in an eternity with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
 - C. This hope that Paul points to is based in a couple of historical facts: **"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."** He states that believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ insures that even in our death, we will suffer no permanent loss, nor experience any lasting defeat.⁹
 - 1. Jesus' death transforms our death into sleep. He experienced the penalty of death that our sins demanded. So in Christ, we need not fear death.
 - 2. But his rising is a sign that God has accepted his sacrifice, and that he has purchased us from death, so that in him, we might live. **John 14:19 ESV Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.** Jesus death for our sins and rising from that death was to defeat death's power for all who believe.
 - D. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"¹⁰ **Romans 14:9 ESV For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.**
- III. The Thessalonians likely believed that those who died were with Jesus, but they wanted to know if they would miss out on the physical resurrection because their spirits were already with him in heaven. Would they be a part of the vindication that will happen for all believers at the end? **"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."**
 - A. Paul says this instruction is a "Word from the Lord". We don't know if he means something that Jesus said that wasn't recorded in the Gospels, or something that was revealed to him directly by the Holy Spirit, but either way, what he is saying has the gravity of God's holy Word. And to us, it is scripture.
 - 1. His message is that those who have died believing, whether from sickness, old age, or even as the result of the persecution they were enduring, will not be edged out of the glory of the resurrection at the end.
 - 2. The beautiful point of all this is that all of God's good kingdom plans include all of his people. Whether we walked with Jesus, served as an Apostle, lived in the dark ages, or are a modern-day saint being sanctified by the Holy Spirit day by day, we will all share in the world to come.
 - B. Now Paul tells them how this will look: **"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."** Physically and visibly Jesus Christ will appear in the heavens suddenly, with no advance warning being given. His appearance will be preceded by three sounds, each with a distinct meaning:
 - 1. "A cry of command": This signifies authority. Three times in scripture Jesus commanded dead people to rise; he did not request that they do so. The King James says he will descend with a shout. I imagine that with

- his great thunderous voice, he will awaken all of his people who have slept in him for thousands of years, and they will rise to attention and worship.
2. But we are also told that he will descend with “the voice of an archangel”. When a great man (or a conquering king) would enter the cities that were subject to them, they would always have a herald to announce their arrival. Jesus’ second coming to the earth will be announced by the voice of angels, just as his first arrival in Bethlehem had been.¹¹
 3. Lastly we are told that he will come with the blast of a trumpet. In scripture, both the appearance of the Lord, and victories won, have been signaled by the blowing of trumpets¹².
 - a) This will be the ultimate appearance of the Lord, for it will bring redemption and judgment, and bring human history to a dramatic end.
 - b) And there has never been a victory like this one! Sin, death, the powers of hell, and the devil will all be defeated once and for all forever!
- C. But Paul answers all of the Thessalonians concerns when he assures them **“And the dead in Christ will rise first.”** Those disembodied spirits who have been enjoying unbroken fellowship with Jesus in heaven will receive their final inheritance; a perfect, resurrected, unailing, glorified, yet physical body to enjoy and with which to serve the Lord with gladness for all eternity.
1. Because Paul had said that “God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep”, yet also that “the dead in Christ will rise first”, the implication is that the spirits of the saints that are with the Lord will descend with him and return to their physical bodies for an amazing resurrection.
 - a) You might say pragmatically, “What if their were eaten by sharks, or died 1000’s of years ago and have turned to dust?” We know that scientifically that matter cannot be destroyed, only redistributed.
 - b) So do you really imagine that it would be too much for the one who created you from scratch to call all of your atoms together from the four corners of the earth and re-create you?
 2. I hope that if I have not “fallen asleep” that I will be driving by the City of Lubbock Cemetery in that moment when the graves of all the saints are opened and they rise to receive their reward. What a sight that will be!
- IV. But that’s not all. What about those of us who will still be serving God here on earth at the time of his return? **“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”**. After the saints that have gone before are resurrected and rejoin Christ in the air, then you and I will soar through the air to meet both them and our Savior in the sky.
- A. As those who have died won’t miss the second coming, those who are living won’t miss out on the resurrection. Paul talks about what will happen to those who remain in greater detail when he says **1 Corinthians 15:51 ESV Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 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.**
1. In that chapter Paul describes it as the perishable “putting on” the imperishable, and the mortal putting on immortality¹³.

2. We will be the same in the sense that we will still maintain our identities. I'll know you, and you'll know me. But we will also be completely different. Death, sickness, decay, sorrow, and even sin will all be things of the past.
- B. Paul says that this wonderful state of things will be wonderfully permanent; **"so we will always be with the Lord"**. Romans promises us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus¹⁴. But a day is coming when nothing will be able to separate us from his physical, face-to-face presence, not even our own fears, anxieties, or sins. We will finally be free to worship.
 1. We will have all eternity to hear him, to learn of him, to discover the unsearchable depths of his mercy and love, unhindered and unashamed.
 2. In addition, we will be reunited with all the people who we have loved, who also trusted Christ as Savior and Lord.
 - a) We will also meet many other from all nations and tribes, not to mention generations, who we will instantly love as brothers and sisters.
 - b) And I suspect that we will all be amazed and will rejoice at all those who we see there that we didn't even expect to be there with us.
- C. Paul concludes by instructing the Thessalonians to **"encourage one another with these words"**. Some translations say to "comfort one another".
 1. These verses weren't put in the Bible to give us some mystery to unlock, or another point of contention to argue about, they were placed here to comfort and encourage us. I hope that is how we will chose to use them.
 2. When your believing loved one dies, isn't it a comfort to know that a day is coming when they shall rise? When you struggle with chronic pain, or a terminal disease, how encouraging is it to know that "we shall all be changed"? When your heart is broken, how does it help you to realize that Jesus is on his way to mend hearts and wipe away tears? When you see terrible injustice in the world, doesn't it strengthen you to believe that a righteous judge is soon coming to balance every scale?
- D. The words I read to you every week before we share communion together have a great prompting to remember the end of our story, and a reminder of what keeps us pressing forward. **"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes.*"** In this way, the Lord's table reminds us to both look back and be grateful for what the Lord has done for us on the cross; and to look forward and be grateful for what he will do for us when he appears in the clouds and makes us all new.
 1. As you come this week, take a moment and think about that day. What do you imagine it will be like? What is the change you are hoping for? A forever healed body? A restored mind? Renewed emotions? I hope that you are all expecting the joy that will accompany the removal of all sin.
 2. Now take another moment and affirm your belief in Christ's sure return by considering all the good and bad of your life; all your hope, dreams, joys, disappointments, failures, and successes, and praying the beautiful 5 word prayer found as the benediction of the book of Revelation
Revelation 22:20 KJV Even so, come, Lord Jesus.
- V. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and

when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Benediction: **1 Corinthians 15:51 ESV** Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, **52** 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. **53** For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. **54** When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." **55** "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:10

² 1 Thessalonians 2:19

³ 1 Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8; 2 Timothy 1:12-13

⁴ Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians; by Mark Howell; Pg. 118; © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

⁵ ibid; pg. 110

⁶ ibid; pg. 117

⁷ ibid; pg. 109

⁸ Matthew 9:24, 27:52; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; John 11:11, 13; Acts 7:60, 13:36; 1 Cor 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; 2 Peter 3:4

⁹ ibid; pg. 112

¹⁰ John 11:25-26

¹¹ Luke 2:13-14

¹² Exodus 19:16; Joshua 6:16; Judges 7:22; et al.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15:50-55

¹⁴ Romans 8:38-39