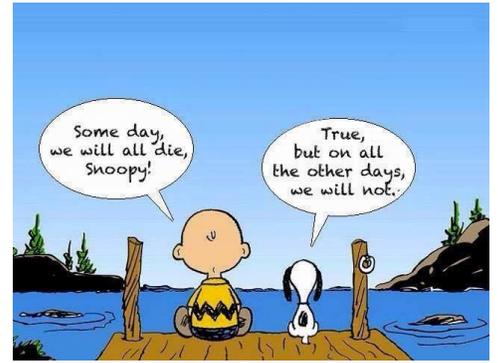


Amos 5:18-24  
 Psalm 70  
 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
 Matthew 25:1-13

## SO WE SHALL ALWAYS BE WITH THE LORD



Today we come to what some commentators call the main message of 1 Thessalonians. As we saw in Acts 17, Paul, Silas, and Timothy planted the church in Thessalonica. Paul then departed and came eventually to Corinth, where he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to check on the condition of the church, as we discussed earlier (1 Thess 3). When Timothy returned, Paul learned of the church's concern that those who died would miss the second coming of Christ. That is, when Jesus returned, wouldn't the dead be beyond Christ's power to save them? So Paul wrote this wonderful message of encouragement in Chapter 4.

1 Thess 4:13-18. *But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* <sup>14</sup>*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.* <sup>15</sup>*For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.* <sup>16</sup>*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; <sup>17</sup>then we who are alive, who are left, shall 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.* <sup>18</sup>*Therefore comfort one another with these words.*<sup>1</sup>

- *Those who are asleep* (v.13). Paul knew perfectly well that those in question had died. He used *asleep* to emphasize the transient nature of the death of a believer. Perhaps you have lost someone dear to you in this life. If he or she has died in faith, it is well to think of him as “asleep,” because he will be raised at the coming of Jesus Christ. The lament, “O death, where is thy sting” will become the shout of triumph!

The “others who have no hope” in v.13 are those who have not believed in Jesus Christ and received him as their Lord and Savior. They have every reason to grieve. When Jesus said, “*You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he*” (John 8:24), he meant exactly what he said.

- *We believe that Jesus died and rose again ...* (v.14). This is the essential belief – the central fact of our faith – the main source of our hope: Christ is risen! We believe this on account of the testimony of the early witnesses, and we believe it because God has placed the notion of eternity in our hearts, and has bestowed on us the gift of faith. When someone says, “Death is final – there is no life after death,” the resurrection of Jesus Christ stands in the way. And as Josh McDowell wrote, “the evidence demands a verdict.”

- *We who are alive ... shall not precede those who have fallen asleep* (v.15). Death is a mystery. People ask, “What happens when I die?” Some believe you cease to exist. But the Bible says, “*It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment*” (Heb 9:27-28). In other words, whether you like the idea or not, death will not end your existence, and the Bible has a clear answer to the question, “What happens?”

For believers, half the answer, which is quite remarkable, is in this passage. If you are concerned, as some of the Thessalonians were concerned, about a loved one who has died believing in Christ, v.15 has two things to say: First, you may think of your loved one as being *asleep* – not conscious of the passage of time. Second, at the time of Christ's coming, some will still be living. You may be among these. If you are, Jesus will gather you to himself, but not before he has gathered all those who have “fallen asleep.”

The other half of the answer is in 1 Cor 15:51ff: “*We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet ...*” The text here, taken with the passage above,

<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV.

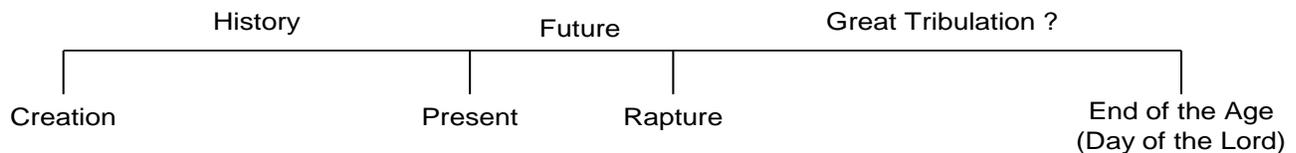
implies that if a believer dies, he may “sleep” for many years from the viewpoint of the living, but he will not see these years pass. It will seem to him that he had died, and then was raised immediately to be with Christ.

- *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven ...* (v.16). Verses 16-17 are the most interesting and exciting – and at the same time controversial – verses in the passage. They are interesting and exciting because they reveal details of our Lord’s coming, and controversial because theologians today do not all agree on where this event fits on the eschatological time line. Some believe it precedes the period of great tribulation, some believe it comes during the tribulation, and some believe it comes after.

Notice first the details you see in v.16-17. Where does the Lord come from? What sounds accompany his coming? Does he actually come to earth? What happens when he comes?

The coming of Christ described in this passage is known as the “rapture.” The word has a Latin root that emphasizes being *caught up* (v.17), as a great bird (*raptor*) snatches up its prey, or as when one’s spirit is *caught up* in an ecstasy of joy. There are stories and legends of eagles saving men – snatching them up and away from harm. The time line below illustrates one concept of this “rapture” in the course of world events.

This is the “pre-tribulation” view. Most of the scriptures support this view, but some (Mark 13:24-27, for example) seem to support the view that the rapture comes later, at the end of the age. However, none of these latter passages in any way contradicts the passage we are discussing in 1 Thessalonians.



- *Therefore comfort one another with these words* (v.18). The point of all this, Paul said, was to *comfort* those who were afraid their loved ones who had died would miss the second coming. Today, two thousand years later, the passage carries the same message. It says our own loved ones and all believers in Christ who have “fallen asleep” will rise again to be with him when he returns. The verse says to comfort *one another*. In other words, don’t just use the passage for your own comfort. Use it to comfort someone else as well.

To conclude our discussion here, it’s a good idea to compare v.16-17 with the end of the time line above – *the Day of the Lord*. The *rapture* in v.16-17 is a time believers look forward to and wait for; the *Day of the Lord* is a time non-believers fear and hope never to see. The latter is described in no less than nine of the prophets (Isa, Jer, Ezek, Joel, Amos, Obed, Mic, Zeph, Zech), and mentioned several times in the NT (Acts, 1 Cor, 2 Cor, 1 Thess, 2 Thess, 2 Pet). Discuss how the following descriptions differ from v.16-17:

Isa 13:9-22. *“Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. <sup>10</sup>For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light. <sup>11</sup>I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless. ...”* (See also Isa 66:15-16.)

The prophet was probably thinking of the destruction of Babylon by the Persians under King Cyrus (~540 B.C.), but through him God was also describing at the same time a day yet to come – obviously a day very different from the day of the “rapture” in 1 Thess 4:16-17.

- 2 Pet 3:1-13. ... <sup>8</sup>*But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. <sup>9</sup>The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. <sup>10</sup>But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up ...”*

NT prophecy (Matt 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, etc.) is consistent with OT prophecy in depicting the end of the age as a “day of destruction,” when *“the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up”* – again, a day very different from the day Paul described in our lesson today in 1 Thessalonians. So let us raise our hearts in thanks to God for the final outcome of the matter: *“so we shall always be with the Lord!”*