

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-16

“Together In the Clouds”

I.) Intro.

II.) Vs. 13-14 A Reason for Hope

III.) Vs. 15-16 Coming In First

I.) Intro.

Last week Paul spoke about living a life that is pleasing to God; *A life that is surrendered for His pleasure.* It appears that Paul stated this because some of the Thessalonians had misunderstood the soon return of the Lord, had quit their jobs and were mooching off of their brothers and sisters in Christ. In the section before us he sets about correcting their miss understanding as to Jesus’ return. It is important that the interpretation of this passage remains in the context of the letter and not left up to our own reasoning.

- 1.) The context of this passage is verse 13, “**..I do not want you to be ignorant brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep..**” There was confusion concerning those Christians that have died prior to the Lords return. So Paul is saying these 6 verses to clear up this confusion.
- 2.) The desired **outcome** in sharing these six verses is given in verse 18 as they were to be used for a: “**... comfort to one another...**” What Paul had to say concerning the rapture of the church must be interpreted through this. We will be looking at the timing in which the rapture of the church will happen and based upon the context we need to ask, “**Would these words comfort me?**”

This passage is one of the clearest teachings on what happens to the believer at death as well as what happens to the believer if we should remain alive until the Lords return.

II.) Vs. 13-14 A Reason for Hope

Vs. 13 Paul address what happens to believers when they die as there was concern over those believers who, as Paul describes, have “**fallen asleep**”. The average age of death based upon the epitaphs inscribed on tombs was 29 years old at the time when Paul wrote and something that clearly troubled the early church in light of Christ’s coming. The first thing Paul defines is “**death**” as he gives a word picture of what happens to a believer when they die as just “**falling asleep**”. When the ancient world used the word “*sleep*” to describe death it was always used as an expression to describe death as eternal sleep. One of their writers expressed it this way: “*The sun can set and rise; but once our brief light sets, there is one unending night to be slept through.*” Or consider the words of a Greek poet who said, “*Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope.*” **It was the non-believers view that those that died just went on into a sleep that never ended.** But Paul only uses this phrase to describe **believers** who have died and are now in the presence of the Lord. **There are three verses that shed light upon this:**

- 1.) James 2: 26 “*For as the body without the spirit is dead,..*”: The Bible teaches that the body is just a tent in which our spirit resides, so that when our body dies our spirit or soul departs.
- 2.) 2 Cor. 5: 8 “*...rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.*”: When we die our spirits go after it departs our body to be present with the Lord. The word “**present**” means to be at home with or to make our permanent residence with. **For the believer it is death that is dead!** Leaving this body is like taking a nap and awaking in the glory of the Lord! Saints, we aren’t going to die we are just moving to

a **BETTER HOME**. It was **Christians who first started calling their burial places “cemeteries” which literally means “sleeping places”**.

- 3.) Phil. 1: 21 *“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”*: Paul clearly saw death of the body and his presence with the Lord a far better place than remaining alive on earth. We often describe the death of a loved one as a “*loss*”, but if they were born again they are not lost they are found in Jesus.

The first thing that Paul corrects is the miss understanding of what happens to the believer when the body dies. We Christians have a hope that the world does not have. When the non-believer dies they cease to exist and their body goes into the ground and there is no hope at all. The Bible never describes the death of unbelievers as “**sleep**” because **there is no rest as there is nothing peaceful about the death of a non-Christian!** **When a non-believer dies it is proper to sorrow for them, but when a Christian dies it is only proper to have sorrow for ourselves.**

Vs. 14a The words “**for if**” would better be translated “**since**” as it presupposes that these Thessalonians are believers. Hypothetically Paul is answering the question that he anticipates these believers wanted answered, “*How do I know that if I die as a believer I will be in His presence?*” To which Paul answers that our hope is based on nothing less than Jesus death and resurrection. He made a similar argument in 1 Cor. 15: 17-18 when he wrote “*..if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.*” The bases of our salvation is upon our trusting in Jesus death and resurrection, and since we are saved we can be assured of the fact that to die is to be in the presence of the Lord! Paul told the Corinthians in 15: 20

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” **Jesus’ resurrection serves as a promise as to our own reunion with Him.** Compare that to an inscription found in the ruins of ancient Rome in one of the pagan tombs, “**I WAS NOT; I BECAME; I AM NOT; I CARE NOT.**” But with the believer in Christ ours would be Ps. 4: 8 “**I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; For You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.**”

In earthly relationships there is only one thing that has the power to permanently separate loved ones, DEATH! But between Jesus and the person who loves Him there is nothing that can ever break that relationship not even DEATH! Paul wrote to the Romans, “**I am persuaded that neither DEATH nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”

Vs. 14b Next Paul again anticipates the question, “So the believer goes to be with Jesus when they die, what happens to them next?” And Paul answers, “**..God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.**”

- 1.) Paul is making a promise only to those “in Jesus”. Those who aren’t in Jesus do not have that hope!
- 2.) In the next verses Paul explains this, but first he wanted them to know that no matter where Jesus is the believers who have died are going with Him.

III.) Vs. 15-16 Coming In First

Vs. 15a Before Paul sets the timing of the rapture he wants the Thessalonians to know that what he is going to share with them was not just his opinion. It was the Word of the Lord. Perhaps Paul's certainty came about during the events he records in 2 Cor. 12: 3-4 where Paul speaks of an encounter with the Lord where, "...he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

Vs. 15b The Thessalonian believers were afraid that those that died in Christ would miss out on the millennial reign of Christ. These new believers grew up in a culture that saw getting rid of the body as their great hope. They wondered why any person would want to be resurrected. "How could a person's body be brought back from decay? Where they to be some sort of Zombies?"

- 1.) Paul uses the first person which tells us that Paul believed that Christ could return at any time and he believed that he was going to be one that was alive to see it. The IMMEDIATE return of Jesus is what all Christians should believe! I'm not looking for signs, or events to transpire before the Lord can return, I'm looking for Jesus!
- 2.) Those who die and are in the presence of the Lord are the ones who come in first! What a difference being Christian makes as far as death is concerned as we already saw in Paul's words to the Philippians, "to die is gain."

Vs. 16a Paul's sets the events that will reunite all in Christ.

- 1.) "The Lord Himself": We are not waiting for someone else we are waiting for the Lord Himself.

2.) “*Descend from heaven with a shout*”: The word for shout is a word used for a ship’s captain to his rowers or a commander to his soldiers. It always has a ring of authority and a note of urgency. There will be three specific sounds that will signal the return of Jesus with those who have died in Christ:

- a.) Jesus’ voice: Of authority and urgency.
- b.) The voice of an archangel: We are not told what archangel, but it appears here that Jesus will speak with authority and urgency and then one of the archangels will then speak.
- c.) The trumpet of God: Perhaps it is the archangel who tells them to blow the trumpet of the Lord. The trumpet or shofar was used for three things:
 - **To gather the army for a battle**: The Lord is calling all of His followers to get ready for the battle at the end of the tribulation.
 - **To announce special times and seasons**: It announces a special time and season as we will be forever with Him.
 - **To gather people for a journey**: He is also gathering us for a journey, as He said before He left that “*where He was would be with Him.*”
 - **In Rome they were used to announce the arrival of a great person**: It announces the arrival of the greatest person there has ever been, Jesus!

There was one other time God commanded that they blow the shofar and it was just before He gave them the Law. So we see that God is giving us the Word the horn is sounded.