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A1109 – February 27, 2011 – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
What About Those Who Have Died In Christ

All right, if you would open your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. I'm not sure what you expect from the passage but I can guess that you're expecting an exposition of the pre-tribulational rapture. I think we need to be careful about running into the paragraph with that idea in mind. If you come to a paragraph of Scripture with an idea in mind of what you're trying to find then you'll tend to read into the text what you want to find rather than read out of the text what is there.

So this week I mainly want to read out of the text what is there, that is, exegete the passage and answer the question, what is 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 18 teaching? And then if I find justifiable cause to do detailed work on the timing of the rapture from this passage then we can do that next week. That would cover the debate between pre-trib, mid-trib, pre-wrath, partial and post-trib rapture positions. But this week let's mainly focus on what Paul is teaching.

Up to this point in 1 Thessalonians we've had mainly historical narrative. Paul had gone to Thessalonica with Silas and Timothy. After only one or two months the impact of their ministry was so great that the political authorities got involved. They came searching for Paul and Silas at a believer's house named Jason. When they couldn't find them they arrested Jason and some other believers and took them down to the police department. In trying to get them to turn over Paul and Silas they eventually worked a deal where Jason and these believers could get out of prison for a large sum of money, but if Paul and Silas ever came back Jason and these believers would be thrown back in prison. So this created what Paul interpreted as a satanic hindrance. He and Silas were blocked out of Thessalonica. That night he and Silas departed and went down to Berea. We gather that Timothy joined then a day

or two later and they began to minister at Berea. When some Jews from Thessalonica found out that Paul and Silas had moved down to Berea they came and began to stir things up there and so Paul was sent over to the sea as if he was going to set sail. But it was really a diversion and Paul was escorted by land down to Athens. He sent word back to Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens as soon as possible. After some time they joined him. And as they reflected on their mission so far and the premature departure from Thessalonica they decided to send Timothy back. Timothy was not blocked. Timothy had some training under his belt. Now God the Holy Spirit was injecting Timothy into the ministry. And so Timothy went back to give them further doctrinal training and to find out about their faith. They knew they had been under tremendous pressure. There was heavy persecution in Thessalonica. It was so heavy that a number of the believers had been killed. So Timothy went to find out how their faith was holding up. When he came back he brought a good report. Despite the tribulation they were standing firm in the faith. Though they had been tempted by the evil one they had not fallen to the temptations but had been walking by the Spirit. So Paul, in response to this report, sat down and wrote the letter to them we're studying. He tells them that he continually prays for them and he exhorts them to excel still more. And then he begins to answer some doctrinal questions. Apparently they had asked Timothy some doctrinal questions that needed Paul's expertise and so in 4:13 Paul begins to answer these doctrinal questions. We're moving from historical narrative in 1:1 – 4:12 to doctrinal questions in 4:13 – 5:11.

The only difficulty is this; what doctrinal questions did they ask? We don't have their questions; we only have Paul's answers to their questions. So just as in the letter to the Corinthians, it's clear that Paul is answering doctrinal questions, but what are the questions? And all you can do is infer from the answer what the question was. So we have to work our way back. From the answer you can infer the question they asked. And here's what it appears they had asked; "We've had a number of believers killed here in Thessalonica. Since they died before Christ's coming for us, will they miss out on the resurrection? Do believers who do not live to see Christ's coming miss the resurrection?" And we infer this is what they were asking because they were grieving as pagans do; they were grieving as those who have no hope. That is, those pagans who had no hope of resurrection from the dead. So their issue was not what is the timing of the rapture but what about believers who die in

Christ? Are they going to miss the resurrection? So for them it was a very personal question, it was a very practical question. And how the question is answered will pertain directly to how you grieve for the dead in Christ. So that's what Paul is responding to.

Now, since that is what Paul is responding to can we infer what Paul had taught them? Yes we can, at least partially. Paul had evidently taught them that when Christ came all who were alive would be caught up in the air and resurrected. And Paul was evidently teaching them to live each moment as if Christ were going to come at that moment. But after Paul was locked out of Thessalonica some of them were persecuted unto death and now they want to know about those who didn't remain alive until Christ came. Are they going to miss the resurrection? So we infer that Paul hadn't answered that question.ⁱ They were ignorant on that subject. And that's why in verse 13 he begins, **Now we do not want you to be uninformed**, it's the Greek word for ignorant, we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren. Why not? Because it leads to an emotional grieving that is out of kilter with the facts. So Paul wants them to know the facts about **those who are asleep**. Don't be uninformed on doctrinal questions because if you are it will cause unnecessary emotional responses. So Paul begins, **Now we do not want you to be ignorant about those who are asleep. Those who are asleep** are defined for us at the end of verse 16 as "the dead in Christ." So **asleep** is being used as a metaphor for physical death. A number of their group had been killed, which shows you the level of tribulation these believers were facing in Thessalonica, it was very intense. And Paul refers to those who had been killed as **asleep**, a metaphor for physical death. It does not refer to soul sleep. The context is the resurrection of the physical body. So he's not saying that their souls are asleep. He is saying that their bodies are asleep. The body sleeps, the soul does not sleep. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. So when we die our soul departs from our body and goes immediately into the presence of the Lord. But our body remains on earth and is said to be asleep. Now what is so helpful about this metaphor **asleep**? What do you expect if you see someone asleep on the couch? You expect them to wake up. And that's why Paul used it. His whole point is to comfort them that these fellow believer's bodies are simply asleep and one day they will be woken up. So he has already begun to answer their question about the dead in Christ simply by using the metaphor that they are asleep.

Then in v 13 he gives the reason. Why does he want them to know the truth about them? **So that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.** Evidently they were grieving over them as those who have no hope of resurrection grieve over their loved ones. And Paul is saying I am teaching you this doctrine **so that you will not grieve as those who have no hope** of resurrection. Who are those who have no hope? They were in Europe and the popular Greek philosophy floating in the air of Europe was Epicureanism. Epicureanism had been founded by Zeno and Zeno taught that there was no afterlife or bodily resurrection. This was what was being taught by all the top professors in Athens and Athens was just down the road. In fact, Paul had already faced the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens since he left Thessalonica. So it is no wonder that Paul is couching his response to them in terms familiar to them, the Epicureanism that permeated Athens, Corinth, Thessalonica and other cities in Europe. As one author writes, "His letters to the Thessalonians and Corinthians in particular show this tendency. These letters offer strong indirect evidence that Epicureans were the principal ideological opponents that Saul had to contend with in Greece."ⁱⁱ So Paul had to face false doctrines of the world system just as we do and he's saying here you're Christians not Epicureans. Christians believe in the bodily resurrection and so we have hope. Epicureanism doesn't, so they have no hope. And a corollary to these two systems is how you grieve. We have a resurrection so we don't grieve like Epicureanism which does not.

So now Paul intends to inform them about the bodily resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Christ. Verse 14, **For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.** Keeping with the metaphor of sleep he opens with the gospel, **that Jesus died and rose**, the gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus. **If we believe** the gospel, and we do, it's a 1st class condition. The 1st class condition assumes the reality of the situation. So you could translate it "since." "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Now, there's a lot here so let's just think through a few things. Observe that those who have fallen asleep in Jesus are going to be brought back with Him. If that's true then where are they now? They must be with Jesus. They can't come back with Him if they aren't with Him. So where are the souls of those whose bodies sleep on earth? They are with Jesus, the One in whom they believed. To be absent with the body is to be present with the Lord. So for those believers who have died a

separation has occurred. Their bodies are asleep in the earth; their spirits are alive and well with Jesus in heaven. Again, there is no soul sleep, only the body sleeps.

We can add another observation and that is that this passage teaches us how to grieve for believers. It doesn't tell us one thing about how to grieve for unbelievers. Knowing what we know about the resurrection from both Old and New Testaments; that all men are resurrected, some unto eternal life and the rest unto eternal damnation, what can we conclude? We can conclude that there are two kinds of grieving that are proper, depending on which resurrection the person will be part of. Paul doesn't tell us how to grieve for an unbeliever but dead unbelievers will not be coming back with Jesus, they'll be resurrected and cast into the lake of fire. So how would you grieve for such a one? Much more intensely. Surely we should grieve more for an unbeliever than a believer. So two observations from v 14; 1) believers who have died in Christ are already with Christ and 2) there is a difference between how we grieve over believers and unbelievers, it's just incipient in the passage.

Verse 15, **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.** There's a lot we can say here, this is thick. **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord.** First we want to ask where the Lord taught this. Paul says this is **the word of the Lord**. So if that's the case then at some point the Lord spoke this. And yet you can search the gospels and you won't find it anywhere. You won't find anything like it. But if you turn to 1 Corinthians 15 I think you find the answer. 1 Corinthians is the next set of epistles Paul is going to write. He wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians and then he wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians, but they're separated by about six years. So keep in mind the order; 1 and 2 Thessalonians and then 1 and 2 Corinthians. Paul taught this truth to both of these churches. And here he is six years later writing to the Corinthians. What's the subject of 1 Cor 15? It's the most extensive chapter on the resurrection. If there's one chapter to remember on resurrection it's the one you're looking at right now, 1 Cor 15. Now is the resurrection a new doctrine? In other words is the New Testament where the resurrection is first taught in Scripture? Hold your place here and turn to Job 19. Job lived after the Flood and before Abraham, more than 2000 years before Christ, so we're going way back here. And look

what he says in Job 19:25. "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth. ²⁶Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God." He doesn't say from my spirit I will see God, he says from my flesh. That's bodily resurrection. Job says I will see God with my own eyeballs, in my flesh. Then we have Isaiah, turn to Isaiah 26:19. Isaiah lived in the 8th century before Christ, he ministers to an apostate nation, so if you're a believer and you have to live among an apostate nation what do you need to hear every once in a while? That there's hope. So Isaiah injects hope in verse 19, "Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy," if their bodies are going to awake what must they be doing in the dust? Sleeping. See, this is the beginning of the metaphor Paul picks up in 1 Thessalonians. It started with Isaiah, it's not new with Paul in the NT, Paul got it from Isaiah in the OT. "For your dew is as the dew of the dawn. And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits." And the idea there in the Hebrew is that the body is just a shade when the spirit is absent. When somebody dies you can go look at their body if they have an open casket viewing, but the person isn't there, the body is just a shade of the person. So did Isaiah teach the resurrection of the body? Absolutely, no question. Last turn to Daniel, Daniel 12:2, what did Daniel teach, he lives in the 6th century before Christ and he's read Isaiah, he's read Job, he's an orthodox believer. In Dan 12:2 he gets this revelation, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake," observe again the metaphor of sleep. Daniel says the body is asleep in the dust of the ground and it will awake, "these two everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt." Did Daniel believe in bodily resurrection of all men, believer and unbeliever? Of course he did. It was well-known from OT times.

So was resurrection a mystery in the OT? No, it was well known. Now look at 1 Cor 15:50, this comes in the middle of the most exhaustive chapter on the resurrection and he says, "Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Behold, I tell you a mystery;" now they already knew about resurrection. That was well known. So what are you going to tell us Paul? Something never revealed before. So Paul says, behold, that means pay attention, I'm about to tell you something that is not taught in the OT. Search the OT day and night you will not find this truth I am about to tell you. It was a mystery until it was revealed to me. So is the mystery the resurrection? No, that was already known from the OT; Job taught it, Isaiah

taught it, Daniel taught it. Jesus taught it, Paul taught it, resurrection was well-known. But what was not known was this, “we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.” What’s that mean? That not everyone is going to die before they are resurrected. There’s going to be one generation of believers alive on the earth who will not die but will be changed. Nobody ever knew this truth before God revealed it to Paul. And so one generation of believers will be just walking along doing whatever they’re doing in life that day in their mortal bodies and then suddenly their mortal bodies will be changed into immortal resurrection bodies. They won’t have to die. That’s the new thing Paul brought to the table and that is something *new* with the NT. We say a lot of the things in the NT aren’t new. This is new and that’s why Paul calls it a mystery. There are some 16 mysteries in the NT, this is one of them, one generation of believers won’t die, they’ll just be instantaneously resurrected.

So now go back to 1 Thess 4:15 and see if we can’t see more. **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord.** Where did Paul get this? Digging through the Gospels reading what Jesus said? No. Personal interview with Luke? No. He got it straight from Jesus Himself. It was a mystery until revealed personally to Paul by the Lord. Did he get it on the Damascus road? I don’t know? Did he get it in the Syrian Desert? I don’t know. But he got it sometime before all this. And then he explains what he got. **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.** Now Paul just did something most theologians probably wouldn’t be too comfortable with until you went through this slowly. If you did they wouldn’t have too much problem with it. What did he just do? He just split the resurrection of believers in two? He said there’s an order to the resurrection of believers who have fallen asleep in Jesus. What else could he mean when he says at the end of the verse, **will not precede**, that means if you have two groups of believers in Jesus; those dead in Christ, we’ll call A, group A, and those who are alive in Christ, we’ll call B, group B. Which group will be resurrected first? Group A. Group B, those alive in Christ **will not precede** group A, those who have died in Christ. So there is an order, there is a sequence, one before the other, not at the same time. I don’t think it’s a big gap of time because down in verse 17 we’re all going to meet the Lord in the air, group A and group B. But there is a gap of time between the

resurrection of those who have died in Christ and those who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord.

So now look at what he's done for the Thessalonians. Thinking back to their original question; they didn't even know if the dead in Christ would be resurrected. How does Paul answer their question? Not only will they be resurrected but they'll be resurrected before those that are left alive on earth. So that's a tremendous comfort.

And let's make another key observation in verse 15. This observation does relate to the timing of this event. We'll call it the rapture because that's what it is. You can argue, rapture isn't in the Bible but if you were reading the Latin Bible it would be in your Bible in verse 17, here's the Latin text for everyone that has to see, "deinde nos qui vivimus qui relinquimur simul rapiemur cum illis in nubibus obviam Domino in aera et sic semper cum Domino erimus." See that word I underlined, that's the Latin word from rapio that eventuated in people referring to this as the rapture. Jerome translated the Greek *harpagesometha* into Latin *rapiemur*, so the word is there, you've seen it for yourself, it's a legitimate word, it means "catching away, snatching away," so I'm going to use the word rapture whether you like it or not.

And there's an observation in verse 15 that has implications for the timing of the rapture. Let's read it again, **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.** Who will not precede those who have fallen asleep? **We**. Does Paul include himself in that statement? Yes he does. He doesn't just mean, you know that generation that is living at that time will precede. If he'd wanted to say that he would have said, "*those* who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep." But Paul doesn't say that, he says "*we* who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep." So by saying it that way does Paul think he may be alive and remain until the coming of the Lord? Yes he does. What does that mean for the timing of the rapture? It can come at-any-moment. Paul didn't say it would come in his lifetime, nor does he imply that it would, he simply indicates that it could come in his lifetime. If that's the case then does anyone know, other than God, when the rapture will happen? No. And that's a very important observation because it's pointing to the doctrine of imminency.

That the rapture is imminent, meaning it can come at-any-moment. It could have come in Paul's lifetime, it could have come in the Anselm's lifetime, it could have come in Calvin's lifetime, it could have come in Wesley's lifetime, it could come in our lifetime. It hasn't yet but it could from a human standpoint. Of course God knows when it will come, but from a human standpoint it can come at-any-moment. So what does that mean for where we put the rapture in a timeline? It means that wherever you place the rapture on a timeline it has to be protected from anything that destroys imminency. You say, well you're setting me up to look at the rapture a certain way. No I'm not, Paul is. Paul said this, not me. Paul thought it could come in his lifetime. So if Paul thought it could come in his lifetime and it didn't then we have to think it can come in ours.

And I find it hard to believe that Paul thought that he would go through the wrath of the day of the Lord before he could be raptured because look at 1 Thess 5:9. The context is what in verse 2? "the day of the Lord." Then what does he say in verse 9? "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ," in other words we're not going to go into the wrath of the day of the Lord. We're going to be raptured before the wrath of the day of the Lord. And this is actually where the conflict over the timing of the rapture occurs. See, a lot of people see what I just told you, they see clearly that the rapture must occur before the wrath of the day of the Lord. Pre-trib people see this, mid-trib people see this and pre-wrath people see this. They all see this and they all agree with it. So what's the problem? Why do we still have pre-trib, mid-trib and pre-wrath rapture views? Why can't we all agree on the timing of this thing? Answer: because they all say the wrath of the day of the Lord begins at a different time. Pre-trib people say the wrath of the day of the Lord begins with the tribulation and lasts the whole seven years so we will miss the whole tribulation. Mid-trib people say the wrath of the day of the Lord begins at the middle of the tribulation and lasts the last 3 ½ years so we have to go through the first half of the tribulation. Pre-wrath people say the wrath of the day of the Lord begins about ¾'s of the way through the tribulation and so we have to go through about ¼'s of the tribulation. So the decisive issue comes down not to whether you believe in a rapture or not. Everybody believes that. What it comes down to is when the wrath of the day of the Lord begins. If that can be settled then we know we're raptured before that and then we have our answer. And my whole point with this imminency statement by Paul in v 15

and later in v 17 is that the rapture can't be imminent if *any* part of the tribulation has to occur before the rapture can happen. If *some* part, *any* part of the tribulation has to occur before the rapture can happen then we're no longer waiting patiently and expectantly for Christ to come for us. We are waiting for events of the tribulation to begin, once they do begin we can put a date on when the rapture should happen and then we can start waiting expectantly for Christ. But that doesn't gel too well with Paul's statement in 1 Thess 1:10. So let's look at 1:10. This is very hard to gel with a mid, pre-wrath or post-trib view of the rapture.ⁱⁱⁱ "and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." What were the Thessalonians doing that we should be doing? Waiting for Him to come from heaven and rescue us away from the wrath to come. Paul didn't say, now wait until the tribulation begins and then start waiting expectantly for Christ to come. No, they were already waiting for Him and we should be doing the same thing today. And the verb *anameno* doesn't mean just "wait," it means "to wait expectantly," like someone is coming over to your house and you know they're coming but you just don't know exactly when, but you expect them. What do you do in that scenario? What I do is every time I walk by the window I'm looking out, as I walk around I'm listening for them to drive up. That's the kind of waiting this is talking about. But if I know five other things have to happen before they come I'm not looking at the window, I'm not listening for them. So if I'm a mid-trib rapture person I'm not going to be waiting expectantly for Christ because I know that 3 ½ years of tribulation have to come before Christ can come. I'm looking for Antichrist not Christ. Or if I'm a pre-wrath rapture person then again, I'm not waiting expectantly for Christ. I know about 5 ½ years of tribulation have to pass before Christ is going to come get me. So I'm going to be looking for Antichrist and preparing to live under his rule. And if I'm a post-trib rapture person then I'm certainly not waiting expectantly for Christ. The whole seven years of tribulation has to happen before Christ is going to come get me. Why look expectantly for Christ if He can't come until after these events? Look for these events and then start waiting for Him. So do you see what my point is? I'm pointing out that Paul could not have included himself in the statements of v 15 and 17 unless he held to imminency, that the rapture could come at-any-moment, and the moment you start putting the church in the events of the tribulation you've just wiped out imminency. 1 Thess 1:10 and 4:15 and 4:17 do not fit with mid-trib, pre-wrath or post-trib positions. And you say, well, that pretty much locks me

into a position on the timing of the rapture, it's got to be pre-tribulational; before the seals, trumpets and bowls of Revelation and I say, yes, that's good, you're using good biblical logic.

But let's go on and develop Paul's answer to the Thessalonians. Their question was not "When is the rapture going to happen?" Their question was, "What about believers who die before Christ comes to rapture us? Will they miss out on the resurrection?" If they will that's very depressing and that's why they were grieving so intensely. Paul says not only will they not miss out on the resurrection; they'll actually precede those who are alive and remain on the earth when He comes.

And now in verse 16 he's going to explain the order, verse 16 gives an order to the events that will occur that Paul taught everywhere he went and you better pay attention to it because it's going to clear the air for some more flack that gets thrown at the pre-tribulational rapture. Verse 16, **For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven**, what's the first action? There are three actions that are taken here. The first action is the Lord Jesus Christ **descends from heaven**. That tells you where dead believers are right now because they're going to come with Him. So their souls are in heaven face to face with Christ. Christ will descend with them **from heaven with a shout**. That's the first action and this is a sequence, this is a linear sequence of actions. Action 1: Christ descends from heaven with a shout, and it's the word for a command, a military command. Christ gives a military command. Action 2: **with the voice of the archangel**. Who's the archangel, arch means highest, he's the top dog, he's a fighting angel, he goes to combat with demons that manipulate political rulers, that's Daniel 10. He's at war in the air space over geopolitical entities. So Christ takes action 1, He gives the command, then Michael the archangel takes action 2, he utters his voice, and this sets off action 3: the last action; the trumpet of God. That's why it's called the last trump in 1 Cor 15. It's not called the last trumpet because you're supposed to read that up into the seventh trumpet in the book of Revelation. Paul called it the last trumpet in 1 Cor 15 because it's the last of these three steps that sets off this great event! Paul didn't know about the seventh trumpet in Revelation. John didn't reveal that for another 50 years. It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with the fact that every time Paul taught the sequence that would occur here he taught that there were three actions that initiate this great event and the last one is the trumpet of God.

That's all it means. It means the last in a series and here's the series: one, two, three, boom, boom, boom, Christ, Michael, the trumpet, then it happens. What happens? The end of verse 16, **the dead in Christ will rise first**. So they're descending with Christ. As they're descending action one happens, Christ gives the command, action two happens: Michael the archangel says his thing, which is probably to the angel with the trumpet, then the angel blows the trumpet of God and at that moment the dead in Christ, that's the bodies of those descending will be raised. So now their bodies that have been sleeping all this time are awakened and rejoined to their souls. Then what? Verse 17. **Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up**, that's the believers walking around here on earth at this moment. We can't see the Lord descending and we can't hear His command, we can't hear or see Michael the archangel do his thing and we can't hear the trump of God. Only the dead in Christ can hear and see all that, when they do they're resurrected. We're still here on earth just going about our business and suddenly verse 17, **Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them**, caught up is the word *harpazo* from which we get rapture, it's just a sudden jerking off of this earth, don't worry, you won't get hurt, but the point is you're ripped off the earth, body and all, your body doesn't fall down dead and your spirit depart, no, body and spirit, your whole person is ripped off the earth. Don't ask me what happens to your clothes. All I know is that you get clothed with a new body. Your old, mortal body is going to be changed into a new, immortal body instantaneously. This is the mystery Paul taught in 1 Cor 15:51. And when we are caught up he says **we will be caught up together with them in the clouds**. With who? With believers who died in Christ. We're all going to have this reunion right there with all believers in Christ. So now is this answering the Thessalonians question? It's a great answer. Now you can see why Paul says, don't grieve like the pagans that have no hope. The believers who die before Christ comes are not going to miss out on the resurrection. In fact, at Christ's command Michael will alert the trumpeter. You say, why does Michael have to be involved? He doesn't have to be but don't you see how fantastic it is that God includes us, He can involve us in things He accomplishes? So Michael will blow the trump of God, and if you know about the trumpet in Scripture that's great, if you don't it's the signal to assemble and what do you see in verse 17 but a great assembly in the clouds. But in this order, the dead in Christ are resurrected first, then we who are alive and remain are ripped off the planet, instantaneously changed from mortal to immortal and finally we're all going

to go to a meeting in the clouds with the Lord. This is the atmospheric heavens just above the earth. And I don't know what this meeting is all about but the Lord has scheduled a meeting of all the church saints and we're going to get some orders there, the Lord Jesus Christ is going to give us a speech, He has something to say, and then it says, **and so we shall always be with the Lord.** It doesn't say where we're going to be with Him, it just says we're **always** going to **be with** Him. We'd have to go to other passages like John 14:1-3 to find out where He's going so we know where we're going and we discover that we'll return with Him to heaven. They come down, we go up, we have a meeting, then we all go up to heaven. It doesn't say anything about Jesus coming down all the way to earth. It says He comes down in the air, the atmospheric heavens. And I don't care how smart you are, how many Ph.D.'s you have, you can't show from 1 Thess 4:13-18 anything other than Christ coming down to the atmospheric heavens with the dead in Christ and catching up those who remain and are alive in Christ to Himself for a meeting in the air. That's all you can show. Where he goes after that you have to find in other passages. John 14 tells us. We go back to heaven with Him. Other passages show we then go to the judgment seat of Christ and then to be presented before the Father, after all that we'll come back with Him to earth for the millennial kingdom. But Paul didn't go into all that here because isn't it enough with the question at hand to tell the Thessalonians, **and so we shall always be with the Lord?** That comforts. And what's his goal? To comfort them. They've lost a number of believers, probably family members been beaten and clubbed to death in the last few months and they're not even sure they'll be resurrected. Paul says, oh yes they will, they'll be resurrected before you, a moment before you, then you'll be caught up together with them in the air at a meeting. So don't grieve as those who have no hope. The Lord has a terrific plan for His bride, the church.

Now Paul has basically answered the question so let's close with some observations. Observation 1: Who says it doesn't matter what you believe it only matters how you live. Paul's whole point is that it's what you believe about resurrection that determines how you grieve. It totally matters what you believe, and it's not just what you believe, it's what the Lord has revealed, its truth! Truth is what matters. You want to believe the truth don't you?


Observation 2: if a fellow believer dies you should comfort them with these words. Verse 18, it's the only imperative in the passage; **comfort one another with these words**. That's why I say if a pastor doesn't preach this at a believer's funeral he should be fired. I wouldn't give him a second chance. If he won't preach 1 Thess 4:13-18 he's not a pastor, fire him. If he doesn't have enough love and compassion to obey this command of the Lord and comfort the family with these words of truth he should be fired. But it's not just for pastors; it's a command for all believers. Comfort one another with these words. What words? Doctrinal words of the rapture!

Observation 3: you can't comfort everybody with these words when they lose a loved one. You say why not? Answer. Because not all people are believers. Not all people believe v 14, **that Jesus died and rose again**. And since not all people believe that then not all people are going to be raised on the day of the rapture and be reunited with their loved ones. It's not a comfort when an unbeliever dies. It's grief. Nothing but eternal torment for that person; maybe your friend, your spouse, your co-worker, someone you loved, someone you spent time with, someone you laughed with, someone you cried with. The day they died, if they died in unbelief, it's not a celebration. They are not in a better place.

That's why observation 4: the urgency of the gospel. You have to work with people to get them to the gospel message. How can people come to Christ if they don't hear the gospel? The death and resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ on their behalf. And how will they hear it if you don't tell them. Evangelism outside the church, training inside the church, that's the order of the day.

So Paul has answered their question, Paul has comforted them. And next week we may press on or we may look more at the different views on the timing of the rapture. I'll have to see if it's relevant to what we're trying to do here. There are a number of objections to a pre-day of the Lord rapture, what most people call pre-tribulational, I call pre-day of the Lord, and if you have any questions about it I'll gladly respond.

ⁱ Does this imply that Paul taught a distinction between God's program for Israel and God's program for the church? The Old Testament clearly taught a resurrection unto eternal life and a resurrection unto eternal damnation (Daniel 12:2). Surely Paul taught them that all Israel will be raised at the



end of the age. But here they seem confused on the resurrection of those in the church. Undoubtedly they see a resurrection of those who remain alive at Christ's coming for them, but they don't know about the resurrection of those who have died before Christ coming. Paul sets the record straight.

ii <http://www.epicurus.net/en/history.html>

iii Marv Rosenthal, in his book *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* does not deal with it. See pp 55, 246 and 283 where he mentions it but does not deal squarely with the implications. In fact, while he admits that one generation will be living when Christ returns and will be raptured he states, "What Scripture does teach is *expectancy*—the belief that any generation could be called upon to enter the seventieth week of Daniel..." That is not at all what 1 Thess 1:10 teaches, it says, "to wait expectantly for His Son...who rescues us from the wrath to come. To wait expectantly for Christ is far different than waiting expectantly to enter the seventieth week of Daniel as Rosenthal, following Robert Van Kampen, claims.

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