

This week as I was considering how I might begin our study in today's passage from 1 Thessalonians... my cell phone sounded an alarm that I had received a text. I paused what I was doing and found that my daughter, Katie, had just sent a picture of a poster someone had placed in the lunchroom where she works. ... To her... and to me... as I looked for a way to begin our time this morning in God's Word... it was a timely message. This is the picture that she sent:

People are often unreasonable and self-centered

FORGIVE THEM ANYWAY

If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives

BE KIND ANYWAY

If you are honest, people may cheat you

BE HONEST ANYWAY

If you find happiness, people may be jealous

BE HAPPY ANYWAY

The good you do today may be forgotten

DO GOOD ANYWAY

Give the world your best and it may never be enough

GIVE YOUR BEST ANYWAY

for you see, in the end it is between

YOU AND GOD

It was never between you and them anyway

-Mother Teresa

In our passage today... Paul seeks to deal with a situation... that had left several of the Thessalonians... very discouraged. ... (You see...) Even when we do what is right... if our eyes are not consistently in the right place... we can become disheartened... de-spirited... downcast... and even depressed.

You perhaps have heard of the old sales managers' device of holding up a large piece of paper with a small orange spot down in one corner. He says to his salesmen, "*What do you see?*" They all report that they see that orange spot, and he says, "*That's your weakness as a salesman. You see the spot and don't see all of the open white space. Look further and notice all of the opportunity before you.*" ... CHRISTIAN! In the end, it is between you and God. ... It was never between you and them anyway.

On Friday, I read this excerpt from a missionary letter of a man who had gone into the jungles of New Guinea. He wasn't merely looking at an orange spot...

"It's great to be in the thick of the fight, to draw the old Devil's heaviest guns, to have him at you with depression and discouragement, slander, disease! He doesn't waste time. He hits good and hard when a fellow is hitting him. You can always measure the weight of your blow by the one you get back. When you're on your back with fever and at your last ounce of strength, when some of your converts backslide, when you learn that your most promising inquirers are only fooling, when your mail gets held up and some don't bother to answer your letters, is that the time to put on your mourning suit?

"No Sir! That's the time to pull out the stops and shout hallelujah! The old fellow's getting it in the neck and he's giving it back. And all of heaven is watching over the battlements: 'Will he stick it out?' And as they see who is with us, as they see around us the unlimited

reserves, the boundless resources, as they see the impossibility of failure with God, how disgusted and sad they must be when we run away. Glory to God! We're not going to run away. We're going to stand."

Here is the point... that I believe we are to take away from our passage of study this morning. Let me give it to you now... and then watch and see how it unfolds in these verses... . . . **If we are ever going to be liberated from the things that bring us to the point of despair and discouragement and fear... it will be because we have purposely placed our concentration... on all that Christ has done for us... and will do for us... because of His death and resurrection...**

If any one of us... as believers... comes to the point of grieving... the way unbelievers do... over the loss of a job... the loss of respect from others... the loss of our health... finances... or even a loved one... then we've only been looking at the orange dot in the corner of the page. ...And there is a whole lot more that God wants us to see.

Before we turn to our Scripture passage... I would like to point out... what had probably discouraged these believers in Thessalonica. ... Where was their focus...? What was **their** orange dot...? What news had Timothy just returned with... and informed Paul about... by which Paul needed to write these verses...? I think it would be good for us to see what the likely situation was... that Paul is about to offer the solution for...

The concern of the believers at Thessalonica involved dead believers... Would their loved ones... who had died... share in the resurrection when Christ returned to earth? ... Remember: the church at Thessalonica had just been founded... it was brand new probably just months old. ... It was

also being bitterly persecuted and was under savage attack. ... Some of the believers were dying... perhaps some were even being martyred... and Christ had not yet returned. ... They were eagerly looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ. ... Would believers be resurrected when Christ returned? ... The Thessalonian believers knew the gospel just as we know it... the gospel proclaims that Jesus Christ is returning to earth to receive believers unto Himself.

But what about our loved ones who have already died? ... What will happen to them? ... Will they have a part in the spectacular return of Jesus Christ to earth? ... Will they have the privilege of sharing in the majestic display of God's power and in the glorious reunion of living believers with Christ? ... And how about their bodies?

Perhaps you and I know that our bodies... and all the bodies of believers who are living when Christ returns... will be transformed. ... They will never lie in the ground... and decay... and deteriorate. ... But what about the bodies of our loved ones who have already decayed... and in some cases are scattered over the world due to war... disease... accident... and having been maimed? ... Are they going to share in the glorious resurrection and transformation when Christ returns?

All kinds of concerns about the resurrection arose in the minds of the Thessalonian believers... just as they still might plague the minds of believers of our own generation. ... And Please Notice... that the word *concern* is being used instead of questions. ... The Thessalonians were *concerned* over their loved ones who had died... not curious. They were

asking questions about the resurrection and the Lord's return out of concern... not out of curiosity.

Unfortunately... this is not the case with many questioners today. They want to know about the end times... out of curiosity... not out of concern. Often it feeds a person's ego... to have a perspective of what the Bible says will happen in the end. ... And that is all... some people are after.

A study of these things that our passage deals with... has produced so many arguments. Not everyone understands end-times theology the same way. There has been a lot of controversy among believers over it. ... And for that reason there are many Christians who don't want to study it at all. ... But stop and consider something with me...

Paul went to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. ... Acts 17:2 says that he only had ...three sabbath days in which he reasoned with them out of the scriptures. ... That means that Paul was there less than a month. In that month's time, he performed a herculean task. He preached the gospel... converts were made... and he established a church. Then he taught these new believers the great truths of the Christian faith. It is interesting... that out of all the important things to teach these brand new believers... Paul taught them about the end-time event... known as the rapture of the church.

Over the years... have been advised... "*You shouldn't preach on the end times. That is deep truth and should be given to mature saints. It shouldn't be given to new believers.*" ... You know... it's too bad that Paul wasn't given this wisdom... of my friends... because he hadn't been with the

Thessalonians for a complete month... and yet he was teaching them prophecy. In fact, when we get to the second letter to the Thessalonians... we will find that he taught them about the Great Tribulation and the Man of Sin... the Antichrist who is to come. ... Paul taught a great deal about end time prophecy. ... I think that it is nonsense to say this is not to be given to new believers. ... Paul demonstrates that there is value in it.

One of the impression that Paul made on the Thessalonians... was that the rapture of the church... might occur at any moment... that it was imminent. Then Paul left Thessalonica... he went to Berea... established a church and was there for some time. ... Then he took a ship and went over to Athens. ... We don't know how long he was there either... probably a short time. ... He was waiting for Timothy and Silas to bring word from these young believers in Thessalonica. ... They didn't come... and Paul went on down to Corinth. ... After he was there for awhile, Timothy and Silas came. They came with questions from the Thessalonians to ask of Paul. So Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to encourage them and to answer their specific question... what about those among us who have died...? Had they missed the Rapture?

To us the question the Thessalonians had is not meaningful in the same way as it was to them. That is because you and I live nineteen hundred years this side of 1 Thessalonians, and literally millions of believers have already gone down through the doorway of death. Therefore, most of the church has already gone ahead, and a small minority remains in the world.

What made it even more difficult for the Thessalonians... was that they were part of the Greek culture. To a 1st Century Greek... Why would any

man want to have his body resurrected? Furthermore, *how* could his body be resurrected, when the elements of the body would decay and become a part of the earth? To them, the doctrine of resurrection was foolish and impossible.

The pagan world in Paul's day had no hope of life after death. A typical inscription on a grave demonstrates this fact:

I was not
I became
I am not
I care not

So this was the situation... to which Paul writes our verses of study today. I hope you can see now... just how serious the matter was. They were very discouraged.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Do not be ignorant about these things. Verse 13... *“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers...”* Do not be ignorant about end time prophecy. ... Study and grasp what God teaches... and be comforted... and challenged... in the glorious hope He gives.

I have come to love how Paul used the word “asleep” in verses 13 and 14. At first... I must be honest... I wished Paul would have used the word “dead.” ... That would make it more clear what he was writing about... wouldn't it...?

But there have been a number of things that I have come to realize... and now I am glad that the word “asleep” was used.

#1. In most cultures... the idea of sleep is a euphemism for death... and it certainly was in Macedonia. ... So the Thessalonians would not have been confused at all.

#2. The dead body of a Christian and a sleeping body are very similar. A sleeper does not cease to exist... and neither does a believer who dies.

2 Corinthians 5:8 (ESV)

Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Sleep is temporary... and death for the believer is temporary. Sleep has its awakening... and death for the believer has its awaking ... at the resurrection.

#3. The early Christians, adopted a very wonderful word for the burying places of their loved ones... it is the Greek word koimeterion (koy-me-ter-ion) ... which means "a sleeping place." ...The same word was used in that day for inns... or what we would call a hotel or motel. ... When you check into the Hilton... or a Ramada Inn... or a Holiday Inn... you expect to get up the next day and continue your journey. ...This is the picture of the place... the early church understood... as where you bury your believing loved ones. ... They're getting up! ... You don't weep when you have a friend who goes and spends a weekend in a Hilton Hotel, do you? The body of the believer has just been put into a motel until the resurrection. ... One day the Lord is coming and that body is going to be raised up.

The other churches understood it this way... but Paul had not yet taught it to the Thessalonians. Paul's use of the word "asleep" reinforces his main point that their loved ones... who have died... will awake at the rapture... in

fact... they will enjoy the blessed event before those who are alive at the time... will.

1 Thessalonians 4:13b

Christians weep... of course! ... There is nothing wrong with that. Paul never says that believers are not to weep. ... What he does say is that we are not to sorrow as the others who have no hope. ... Death in pagan antiquity was understood as final and complete... so death often elicited unspeakable sorrow and mourning. ... A Christian... on the other hand... has a sorrow at the death of a loved one... but he also has hope.

Ignorance of the truth... can produce unnecessary sorrow. Paul did not want the Thessalonian believers to be sad. They needed to be and could be joyous.

If we are ever going to be liberated from the things that bring us to the point of despair and discouragement and fear... it will be because we have purposely placed our concentration... on all that Christ has done for us... and will do for us... because of His death and resurrection...

1 Thessalonians 4:14

Believers can have hope in the resurrection... because of what happened to Jesus. Because Jesus died and was raised to life again... believers can also trust that those who have died will also be resurrected. Then, when Jesus comes... God will bring back with Jesus... all the Christians who have died. ... Believers who have died are with the Lord already! ... They are presently with God and will come with Jesus. ... I just showed you 2

Corinthians 5:8... which teaches that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:15

Did you notice how Paul used the pronoun "we"...? ... "*We who are alive... who are left until the coming of the Lord.*" It's been over 2,000 years! Did Paul expect that he would be alive when the rapture takes place...? ... A lot of theologians think that this was the case. I don't. I am among those who think he was simply indicating that he was currently among "the living" ... and his contrast was with the living and "the sleeping." Remember... Paul's concern had to do with the simple fact that the living have no advantage over the dead... regarding the coming Rapture.

His original readers would be encouraged to know that their deceased loved ones... instead of being missing out... would actually precede them in the resurrection. ... So Paul uses a double negative... to **emphatically** express this certainty (**by no means... will we precede them...**).

Jesus Christ will give "a shout of command," just as He did outside the tomb of Lazarus. Those "in the graves shall hear His voice." ... The King is coming unexpectedly... personally... suddenly... forcefully... visibly... audibly... and spectacularly. ... Christ's return will be unmistakable. ... No one will miss it.

1 Thessalonians 4:16

Because of the way this is written in the Greek... I do not believe that these are three different sounds. These three descriptions are written in a Greek construction known as “apposition.” That means they are... all three... the same utterance... They just have three different expressions for the same thing – the shout of command.

The way it can be determined that these three descriptions are in “apposition” ...is that there is only one little conjunction... “and”... that appears between the second and third description. In English... it is perfectly acceptable... but in Greek if you only have “and” appear once... among three descriptions... it means... they are all the same thing. ... If we were supposed to understand these as three distinct sounds... Paul would have written: “...with a cry of command AND the voice of an archangel AND the sound of the trumpet of God. ... But he didn’t write it this way. All three of these are one single summons... that will call us to meet the Lord in the air.

The first image of this summons... is a shout... like a military command. It is a shout of authority. It is an irresistible command. Every saint... and long decayed particle from saints who have died for thousands of years... will respond to it immediately.

Next... the summons will not only be with the authority of a military commander... it will also have the majesty and authority that goes beyond... The quality of the voice will be like the voice of an archangel.

Third... the summons will be like a trumpet sound. ... This is not the only place where the voice of Jesus is described as sounding like a trumpet. At the beginning of Revelation... John wrote: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's

day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet."(Rev. 1:10) ... He turned to see who it was, and he saw the glorified Christ. It is the voice of Jesus... in His resurrected body... is like the sound of a trumpet.

1 Thessalonians 4:17

Let me be careful to point out that what we read about here... the rapture... and the second coming of Christ... are two distinct events... which are separated by at least seven years.

At the rapture: (1) **Christ** gathers His own (4:16-17); (2) resurrection is prominent (4:15-16); (3) Christ comes to reward (4:17); (4) believers depart the earth (4:15-17); and (5) unbelievers remain on earth.

In total contrast, at the Second Coming: (1) **angels** gather the elect (Matt 24:31); (2) there is no mention of any resurrection; (3) Christ comes to judge (Matt 25:31-46); (4) unbelievers are taken away (Matt 24:37-41); and (5) believers remain on the earth. ... These dramatic differences demand that they describe two very unique events at two separate times.

An important distinction is noted here about the Rapture... in contrast to the actual return of Christ. In the Rapture... Christ does not come to terra firma of the earth... His feet don't touch the ground... but He only comes to meet the saints "*in the air.*" ... Somewhere in the atmosphere of the earth... will be a great meeting (a re-union) of the saints... and with the Savior.

Believers who have already died will be "*Together with them.*" ... These words are critical in Paul's explanation to the Thessalonians... for they were sorrowing concerning those believers who had died. ... Our passage

says the believers who are alive at the Rapture will be reunited at the Rapture with the believers who passed away before the Rapture.

It will be a *glorious* meeting, because we shall have glorified bodies. When He was here on earth, Jesus prayed that we might one day see His glory and share in it (John 17:22-24). The suffering that we endure today will be transformed into glory when He returns (Rom. 8:17-19; 2 Cor. 4:17-18).

We will not only meet our Lord Jesus Christ at the Rapture, but will also be reunited with our believing friends and loved ones who have died.

"Together with them" is a great statement of encouragement. Death is the great separator, but Jesus Christ is the great Reconciler.

The Bible does not reveal all the details of this reunion. When Jesus raised the widow's son from the dead, He tenderly "delivered him to his mother" (Luke 7:15). I picture that this is what the happy ministry of Christ will be like... reuniting separated families and friendships. ... Jesus will probably have the same tender expression... as He reunites us.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, the three disciples knew and recognized Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:1-5). Certainly, the saints will know each other in glory.

Several times this week as I studied this passage... my eyes welled up with tears of joy... in anticipation of the reunion with my mom... my aunt... and my grandmother again... three ladies who brought the Gospel of Jesus to me.

Verse 17... in our English translations say... we will be caught up together with them... in **THE** clouds. The article "The" before the word "clouds" is not in the original Greek. The Greek says..."will be caught up together with them in clouds..." ... "in clouds."

You know what that suggests to me...? That these are not rain clouds. ... I think that it is more likely clouds of people... gathered there in the atmosphere... for that reunion... at the rapture. Millions and millions of glorified bodies... not like the ones we have now... being reunited with each other.

The experience of living face to face with the Lord shall begin. We shall be caught up and "so shall we ever be with the Lord." As wonderful as the reunion of believers will be, the most wonderful event will be seeing our Lord face to face for the very first time. What will our first thoughts be? Our first reaction? Everything will take place in the blinking of an eye.

Suddenly...

- we will be standing in mid-air and transformed into perfect men and women.
- we will be standing in the clouds in the midst of teeming millions.
- we will be transformed in the midst of the spectacular glory and majesty, dominion and power of the Lord God Himself.

Is there any question what our first thoughts and response will be? The great reunion with family and believers will not be the occupation of our thoughts. Christ will be! The Lord God Himself in all His majestic glory and sovereignty will consume our attention and praise. We will be lifting up His

name in the most perfect hymn of praise and adoration ever arranged. Jesus Christ Himself will be the total focus of our attention.

1 Thessalonians 4:18

This is not a difficult assignment but it is often neglected.

Paul did not write this section to satisfy the prophetic curiosity of the people or to present some spectacular doomsday scenario. Actually, he wrote to the Thessalonians who were uninformed and worried. So he says **comfort one another with these words**. They would be comforted by: (1) the fact of these events; (2) their certainty; (3) their order, with the dead being resurrected first; (4) the expectation of reunion; (5) the irreversibility of these events; and (6) the eternal prospect of these events.

We can walk alongside one another and remind one another constantly that the pain of this life has an end. There is a day coming when Christ will come again to be crowned the King of kings and Lord of lords, when he will wipe away every tear, when justice will be meted out fairly and everything will be set right, when God's new heaven and earth will come and this place will become what God always intended it to be. In the midst of tragedy and struggle we can stand with each other and say, "Jesus, the one who died and rose again, the one who is coming again, is our hope. This is where we place our faith."

Kelly James was a 48-year-old landscape architect who loved to climb mountains. On December 9 of 2006, he and two of his friends set out to climb Mount Hood in Welches, Oregon. Tragically, they were caught by a sudden blizzard after reaching the summit, and forced to take shelter in a

snow cave. Kelly was able to use his cell phone to call his family and tell them what was going on, but the storm was too severe for rescue workers to operate. All three hikers eventually perished.

In an interview with Katie Couric on the *CBS Evening News*, Kelly's widow, Karen James, demonstrated the extreme faith in Jesus Christ that had defined life for the couple. During the interview, Couric asked if Karen was angry at all with her husband for choosing to climb in the first place. She replied: "I'm not angry. I'm really sad our journey is over, for a while, and I miss him terribly. But he loved life so much, and he taught me how to love. He taught me how to live. And I don't know how you can be angry at someone who loved their family, who loved God...and gave back so much more than he took."

When asked how her husband would like to be remembered, Karen referred to his faith in Jesus: "Kelly had this little ornament, and he's had it since he was little. It's a manger. It's just this little plastic thing. And it's always the tradition that [our son] Jack and Kelly put it on the tree together. And so I said this Christmas, 'We're going to put that ornament on the tree.' And one of the things that we really understand about Christmas is that little baby born in a barn is the reason our family has so much strength now. And that is really important to Kelly."

Impressed by the strength of Karen's faith, Couric asked if the family's confidence in God had been tested by her husband's death. "No, it was never tested," Karen answered. "I remember one time we were watching TV, and Kelly said to me, 'I can't wait to go to heaven.' And I said, 'What?' We were watching some show that had nothing to do with it. And he said,

'Yeah, that's going to be really cool.' And I said, "Can you hold off? Can we wait?' But he wasn't scared. And so those conversations are what I hold on to."

Kelly and Karen James had certain hope. Jesus came once... and He is coming again. We will be reunited with Him... and we will be reunited with our loved ones.

Do you have this hope today...?