

# Resurrection Means Reunion

*From First Thessalonians*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Please turn in your Bibles to a familiar passage, 1 Thessalonians chapter four and verses 13 through 18, Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Christians chapter four beginning with verse 13. Hear God's Word.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 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. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will 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. Therefore comfort one another with these words.<sup>1</sup>

Let's pray together.

*Father, again we are grateful. We are grateful for grace. We are grateful for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are thankful, Father, that you have been pleased to bring us together as a congregation, to celebrate the truth of the resurrection. And as we take time now to look into this, a portion of your Word that exhorts us to take comfort in the truth of the resurrection, may it be, Father, that you will bless us with this truth. Work in our hearts that we might gain that comfort and that hope and that assurance that you desire for us. And may we be comforted by these words written so long ago. Bless us to this end we pray in the name of Jesus Christ who is the only Lord and Savior. Amen.*

When Erma and I went to the home of the deceased to visit before the funeral service, we were unexpectedly met by a wake. There was so much grief being poured out that we were staggered. Entering the home we saw the casket in the entryway and the mother of

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

the Vietnam soldier who had been killed. The mother was draped over the casket weeping and crying and beating the top of the casket.

The next day when we went to the funeral service, the church building was packed. I think it was a larger auditorium than this one. As the family members began to speak at the funeral service, each one of them a minister, not one word of hope or consolation was uttered in that funeral service.

These people needed a word of hope. They needed a word of comfort. They needed to understand that Jesus Christ, by his resurrection, will raise the dead. And one day, as a result of that resurrection, there will be reunion with departed loved ones.

And this is the message that the apostle Paul is giving to us this morning in 1 Thessalonians chapter four and verses 13 and following. He is countering the hopelessness in this funeral service. And he is countering such funeral services with a word of hope, with a word of the resurrection, with a word of comfort, and with a word that says, "Take comfort, resurrection means reunion."

And this is the point you need to take away this morning. Take comfort, because Christ will come again a second time in glory and raise the dead. Take comfort; resurrection means reunion. Let's see how the apostle works out his argument.

Like the Thessalonians you probably have questions about the Lord's coming. In fact, I know you have questions about the Lord's coming. I know this is the case because when I asked for questions from the congregation I received some questions about the Lord's coming. I received questions about this very passage and about the saints being caught up together to be with the Lord. So know you have questions like the Thessalonians had questions.

And you will notice that this text does speak about the coming of the Lord. 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..."<sup>2</sup> Yes, these Christians at Thessalonica did have questions. And if you look back at the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians to the 19<sup>th</sup> verse, to chapter two and verse 19, Paul mentions the coming of the Lord here also. "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?"<sup>3</sup>

This word "coming" that Paul uses in the second chapter at verse 19 came to be a technical term. The word is *parousia* (par-oo-see'-ah) and it means "coming." It refers to the coming of the Lord. If you read any books about the coming of the Lord, you will see this word *parousia* (par-oo-see'-ah) utilized.

And this coming that Paul is speaking about is not some spiritual appearance as often took place in the Old Testament and sometimes took place in the New Testament. The

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:19.

pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost would be an example. Nor was this appearing a theophany or a Christophany, a preincarnate appearance of Christ or an appearance of God in bodily form or in some other unusual form. God, for example, appeared as an angel, the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament. He also appeared as the Shekinah glory.

But this is not the kind of appearing that Paul has in mind. Paul is speaking about a bodily appearing of Christ. You see, when Christ was raised from the dead he appeared bodily to his disciples. And then 40 days after his resurrection he was taken up into heaven, bodily. The disciples saw him and he was received up into a cloud. And the angels that accompanied this retreat of Jesus in heaven, announced to the disciples that he would come back in exactly the same way in which he departed.<sup>4</sup>

And so this is exactly what Paul is talking about, this bodily coming of the Lord. He will return with the clouds of heaven and everyone will see him, even those who pierced him, John says in the book of Revelation.<sup>5</sup>

And this coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, this bodily coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, means resurrection and hope. Look at verse 16 again with me. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God.”<sup>6</sup> The Lord himself will descend. And then the end of the verse says, “And the dead in Christ will rise.”<sup>7</sup> At this coming of the Lord the dead will be raised from their graves.

I looked on the internet this week to see if I could determine how many cemeteries there are in Allegheny County. The count varies. The first count I saw was around 150. And then I saw a listing in which there were over 160. I then saw another notation that there over 180 cemeteries in Allegheny County. I suspect there are more than this if you count all the little church cemeteries and private cemeteries that dot the countryside. All you have to do is go out of your house and drive over a hilltop where you have a view and what do you see on the opposite hillside? You see a cemetery or two.

Imagine now. Christ will come a second time in glory and all of these graves will be opened. The dead will be raised. This is what Paul is telling us. And this will be the case not only in Allegheny County and not only in Pennsylvania and not only in West Virginia and Ohio, but everywhere. It will be the case not only in the United States, but everywhere the dead will be raised.

This is the declaration of the gospel and this resurrection means hope. Look at verse 13. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.”<sup>8</sup> You see, friends, the great hope,

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<sup>4</sup> See Acts 1:11.

<sup>5</sup> See Revelation 1:7.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

the great Christian hope is the resurrection. You need to understand this and I need to understand this. And when Paul stood before various civil authorities to defend the Christian faith he would stand to defend the hope of the resurrection.

You see, we as Christians often have a misplaced hope. As Christians we rightly understand that when we die there is a separation of body and soul. And as the catechism tells us, when we die—and this is validated by the Scriptures—when we die, our souls are made perfect in holiness and pass immediately into the presence of the Lord.

And then the catechism goes on to say that—we read this this morning—our bodies rest in their graves to await the resurrection. And the catechism also rightly puts it this way. Our bodies being still united to Christ rest in their graves to await the resurrection. So there is a separation of body and soul.

We therefore get the idea that the great Christian hope is that we will shed these bodies. And some of us are more ready to shed these bodies than others because these bodies are feeble. And then soul or the spirit will ascend into heavenly bliss. This is our great hope, we say.

But this, friends, is not the final hope. This is not the great hope of the Christian. The great hope of the Christian is resurrection. And when Christ comes a second time in glory the dead will be raised incorruptible. And we will enter the final state, a state of more exalted bodily bliss with the Lord. This is an extraordinary thing to which you, as believers, have to look forward.

But now what about those who remain? This was the nagging question of the Thessalonian Christians. What about those who remain? Look at verse 15. You see, this is part of the argument of the apostle that he is countering at the Thessalonian Church. “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.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Paul saying to the people at Thessalonica—and I am saying to you this morning—that we who remain do not have an advantage over those who have already died.

Now, you might scratch your head a little bit at this. You see, the Christians there in that old church were thinking to themselves, our friends and brothers and sisters have died. What if the Lord comes? Will they miss out? This was their question. Will they miss the coming of the Lord because they have died? And Paul is saying to them, “No. You who remain and are alive do not have an advantage over those who are dead.”

Now you would probably say—especially those of you who are a little bit older—you would probably say, “Those who have gone to be with the Lord, who have died, they are the ones that have the advantage.” So we would probably turn the argument on its head as far as the apostle Paul is concerned.

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

But think about it in these terms. There is a doctrine that is going around the church today known as the rapture. You know this is the case. And those who tenaciously hold to this doctrine will often say to themselves, “Well, we have the advantage. We who will remain alive at the coming of the Lord, we have the advantage. We will be caught up to be with the Lord. We will be snatched away, as it were.”

Well, look at verse 15 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.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, if in the providence of God we would happen to be alive when Christ comes a second time, we have no advantage in our status as still being alive. We have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep. Paul is quite explicit with regard to this. And so he is attempting to comfort the Thessalonian Christians in this regard, you see. And this statement of the apostle Paul is also a correction for you and me.

Well now, let’s look at how Paul unfolds the coming of the Lord to explain what he means by this lack of precedence that we might have if we remain alive at the coming of the Lord. Verse 16. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”<sup>11</sup> This is a rather spectacular event, would you not say? The Lord will descend from heaven. And as we have already said, this is a visible, bodily descent from heaven. And he will descend from heaven, Paul says here, with a shout, with a call, or a command. This is what the word means. It is the shout of a command. And the command, no doubt, is, “You who are dead in the graves, arise.” This is the command. “Come out of your grave.” You remember how Jesus put it when he stood at the tomb of Lazarus and he said, “Roll the stone away.”<sup>12</sup> And he was weeping. He was grieving. And he says, “Lazarus, come forth.”<sup>13</sup>

And so the Lord will descend with a shout and with the voice of the archangel.<sup>14</sup> Now some of the commentators indicate that it is, perhaps, the archangel who is making the shout, making the command, calling forth the dead. But it appears from the text that this is an accompanying voice, the voice of the archangel.

And then we have the trumpet of God. In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, the trumpet was the sound of an alarm, the sound to call the troops, a sound to muster the forces. And so the Scriptures tell us here that Christ will descend from heaven with his call, “Come out of the grave,” accompanied by the archangel. And it may be that the voice of the Lord will sound like a trumpet calling forth, mustering his people out of their graves. If this is not the case, there will be the accompaniment of the trumpet blast

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

<sup>12</sup> See John 11:39.

<sup>13</sup> John 11:43.

<sup>14</sup> See 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

calling, assembling the troops, as it were, mustering God's people. And the dead will be raised incorruptible.<sup>15</sup>

And what will happen then? Look now at verse 14. As the Lord descends, verse 14 tells us something quite astounding. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."<sup>16</sup>

So we have two things that are going on, it seems, at once. Christ is coming with a shout and with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God. He is calling the dead from their graves. He is mustering the troops, as it were. But coming with him out of heaven is a great entourage of men and women and children and young people, the souls of all of those who have departed, coming as a great army with him, coming out of heaven.

Look, if you will, at the third chapter of 1 Thessalonians and the very last verse in the third chapter, chapter three and verse 13. Paul says, "[May he] establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus *with all His saints*."<sup>17</sup> In other words, what we see is a picture of Christ coming with, as I say, this great company of believers, the souls of all of those who have died in the past. At death, their souls ascended into heaven in perfect holiness to be with the Lord. And now Christ is returning and he is bringing back these disembodied spirits with him. And now these souls are reunited with their bodies that are in the grave. The dead are raised bodily from the grave, their souls being reunited with those bodies. I suppose that this will be quite, quite a scene.

But if you grasp this scene and you understand this is your hope, I now want you to look at the sequence of events that Paul lays out in our text. Let's read verses 16 and 17 together. "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first."<sup>18</sup> First in relationship to what?

Well, you see, Paul is countering this misapprehension that the people have that somehow they have the advantage over those who are in the grave, their brothers and sisters who have died. And Paul is saying, "No. Listen to me carefully, Christ "will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead."<sup>19</sup> Your brothers and sisters will rise first. You see, Paul is speaking to the Christian community very specifically here. He doesn't have unbelievers in mind. The dead in Christ will rise first.

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<sup>15</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:52.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Thessalonians 3:13.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Now look at verse 17. “Then we who are alive and remain...”<sup>20</sup> You see? Those of us who are left, we’ll be there, too, correct? The dead will be raised and they will be brought on to an equal plain with those of us who remain. This is what Paul is indicating. “Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord.”<sup>21</sup> The dead who are raised along with those of us who remain will be caught up together, caught up, raptured, if you will—and this is the language—we will all be caught up together to be with the Lord.

I want you to see something else here now, though, in verse 17. “Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them... with them.”<sup>22</sup> That is, there will be those who have been raised from the dead. We will all be together *with them*. And we will be caught up together *with them*.

Think about this, friends. We will all be together bodily. I ask you, “How many of you have friends and relatives who have passed away.” In answer to such a question, every one of you would raise your hands. And when Christ comes a second time in glory and the dead are raised, then those who remain, together with the dead who are raised, will be caught up to be with the Lord. We will be *with them* and this will be a glorious reunion, a very glorious reunion. And your blessed father and mother who loved Jesus Christ will be raised and you will see them bodily and you will be with them. Thank you, Lord, that this is the case.

This is your hope dear Christian brothers and sisters, this is your hope. And this is why Paul says, “Therefore comfort one another with these words.”<sup>23</sup> And he also begins this section, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.”<sup>24</sup>

You see, this hope, this resurrection hope tempers grief. You can grieve. It is right to grieve. You need to grieve at the loss of a loved one or the loss of a dear friend in death. It is not right if you don’t grieve. It is not right if you don’t let it out and weep.

You may grieve. As one who loves Jesus Christ, who trusts in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who knows that your sins are covered and the sins of your loved one are covered, you can grieve. But you do not grieve as those who have no hope. Your hope is the hope of this resurrection. And you look forward to this reunion about which we have been speaking.

After that funeral service in which not one word of hope was uttered even by ministers, I should say so-called ministers, I went to the cemetery to do the graveside service. And I opened my Bible to 1 Thessalonians chapter four and verses 13 and following, this text about which we have been speaking. You don’t hear many sermons preached at

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:18.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

gravesides. The services are usually rather perfunctory and short. But on this occasion, because of the lack of hope given in the church, it seemed that there was only one thing to do at that graveside. It was my duty to read this text and to preach on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope of the resurrection. It was my place to point those people to the Savior and to indicate to them that Christ will come a second time in glory, that all of the graves in that cemetery would be opened, and that the graves would be emptied because the dead would be raised. And similarly the loved one of theirs will be raised again. And if he trusted Christ and they trust in Christ, there will be a glorious reunion at that time. And they will be with him forever and with the Lord forever.

And this is the message that Paul was anxious to set before to those Thessalonian Christians. This is also the message you need to hear this morning. Take comfort, friends, take comfort in Jesus Christ because resurrection means reunion with your loved ones who also love Christ. Take comfort; resurrection means reunion.

Let's pray.

*Lord, thanks for your grace. Comfort our hearts. If we falter with regard to this truth of the resurrection bring it home to us. Show us by the power of your Spirit and the power of your Word the truth of it. And grant, Father, that we may depart from this place, thanking you and taking comfort in you and in your Son the Lord Jesus knowing that this resurrection about which we speak, about which you have spoken and which you will bring about, that this resurrection means reunion with loved ones and deeper union with you, our Lord. Yes, resurrection means reunion. Bless us this understanding and comfort us with these words we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*