

"Behold, He Comes!" - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

It was not easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica. Because of the predominant pagan culture and because of opposition by unbelieving Jews, Christians were overtly persecuted. As we read in Acts 17, Paul and his companions had to be rushed out of town to ensure their safety. Jason, in whose house the church likely met, was arrested and accused of sedition. And not just him; several of the brethren were dragged before the magistrates too. The accusers cried:

"Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." (Acts 17:7)

A very serious charge in the Roman Empire! These Christians were harassed, marginalized, persecuted simply for believing the truth.

Yet persecution had not tempered their faith. Persecution has never been able to stamp out true Christian faith. In fact, when persecution rages, the Church always becomes stronger. These Thessalonians were not living their best life now. Instead, they were looking forward to the promise of Jesus' return. They were clinging to the promises of God. They were praying with the Spirit and with the Bride, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!" And they were sure Jesus would come at any moment to vindicate their faith.

Unfortunately, they were so obsessed with this that it caused at least some of them to stumble. Some folks decided there was no sense in continuing to work. But Jesus didn't come as quickly as they expected and as time went on, some of the believers were dying. It caused great concern among the faithful Thessalonians, because they didn't fully understand the nature of Jesus' return and His power over death. They were ignorant, and it was apparently causing stress and concern.

Fortunately, ignorance is a disease that can be treated. It can be cured by ample doses of God's truth. That is exactly what Paul does in our text this morning. He gives them inspired instruction about what was going to happen when the Lord returns.

Before we begin, though, I want to caution you about something. This is prophecy and Biblical prophecy is never given so we can write history ahead of time. This passage teaches us something about what is going to happen but it does not tell us exactly when it will happen.

There are many who use this passage to proof-text the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church. Now it certainly doesn't preclude a pre-trib rapture. (In fact, I would love to be taken out of this world before things get much worse.) But neither does it prove a pre-trib rapture. I've come to believe that a thorough study of the full council of scripture cannot support this doctrine, but I am quite willing to agree to disagree. But despite what you might think, or what you might have been taught, this passage does not give an exhaustive sequence of events that will take place when Jesus returns.

So, I'd rather use a different "R" word; and believe me, it is a glorious word. That word is **resurrection**; and it is at the very center of our blessed hope.

Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP

*IN VICTORY." "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING? O HADES,
WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY?" (1 Corinthians 15:51-55)*

I pray that you are not focused on the “great escape” of the Church. Our joy comes not from rapture, but from transformation. We will be changed from corruptible to incorruption. We will be transformed from mortal to immortal. We will receive redeemed bodies, perfectly adapted to the New Heaven and the New Earth that is to come. And we will be with Jesus ... forever.

Behold He Comes!

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep 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 by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

In verse 13, Paul draws a distinction. It is a distinction between two classes of people. Those who have no hope and those whose hope is in Jesus Christ. Really, it is the only distinction that matters to God. Are you trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation? Or are you yet to believe?

God is immaculately holy. He is the Creator and Sustainer of this universe and as such, He gets to set the standard of behavior for His creatures. He demands perfect obedience. Unfortunately, we have all fallen short. (Romans 3:23) We are all guilty of rebellion. We are all sinners.

And the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23a) We die because of sin, but worse still, there is an eternal, spiritual death waiting for all who refuse God’s offer of redemption. John calls it the Lake of Fire in Revelation. It is a place of eternal torment, worse than any torture you might imagine and it goes on forever. Hell is for real!

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Sometimes “but” can be a truly wonderful word! Despite your cosmic rebellion, God still loves you. He loves you so much, that God the Son came to earth as a human being to die for your sin. (Romans 5:8) But He didn’t stay dead. On the Third Day, He rose. He was resurrected, and in that resurrection, He conquered sin and death for everyone who would believe.

In the 11th Chapter of John, there is a beautiful story that demonstrates Jesus’ power over death. He raised a man named Lazarus who had been dead and in the grave for four days, but before He did, he spoke with Lazarus’ sister Martha and this is what He said:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26)

Jesus is the Resurrection. Jesus is life. If you believe in Him; if you confess Him as Lord and believe He was raised from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9) You will live ... you will be resurrected and then, you will never die.

Do you believe this? You need to believe this. Your place in eternity depends on it. Are you one of those folks with no hope or are you one who has found your hope in the finished work of Jesus Christ?

The Thessalonians were worried about their fellow Christians who had already died. Paul says, "Don't be ignorant! Don't sorrow as if you have no hope because physical death is not the end!"

Here's what's going to happen for those who have placed their trust in Jesus. The Lord is going to return and He is going to gather His saints to Himself. Those who have suffered physical death, will be first in line for resurrection.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

You see, according to scripture, when a believer dies, his or her soul goes immediately into the Lord's presence. Paul tells us:

We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)

Paul wrote to the Philippians and told them he was really torn. He had a great desire to continue teaching the Philippian Christians. He loved them, but he knew that to die would be better for him.

For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. (Philippians 1:23)

So, if you are a Christian and you die, it is only your body that dies. Your soul goes immediately into the presence of Jesus and when He returns, He is going to bring you with.

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 by no means precede those who are asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:15)

The dead in Christ are first in line when Jesus returns!

By the way, that return is going to be a noisy affair.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. (1 Thessalonians 4:16)

The dead will rise? I thought they were already with Jesus. They are; but only their souls. They are going to need resurrected bodies to inhabit the New Earth bodies like Jesus has. They will be resurrected. Their souls will be reunited with immortal bodies, incorruptible bodies, bodies that are no longer subject to disease and death. Best of all, these are bodies that will no longer sin.

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

The Thessalonians were concerned that their brothers and sisters who died were going to miss out. Paul says no, they are going to be resurrected first. But don't worry. If your body is

alive when Jesus returns, you won't have to wait long. You are going to be "caught up" with them.

That word translated "caught up" is the Greek *harpazō* (ἁρπάζω). It means to seize, to pluck, to catch, or take by force. The word "rapture" doesn't actually appear in scripture. It is a word that has been used to describe this process, and it's okay to use it but don't make it into some sort of magical process. Don't focus on the process at all. Focus on the result.

You see, the issue is, you cannot take the body you have now into the eternal state. It has to be transformed, *changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet*. Think of it as an instantaneous death, burial and resurrection. Then, with your resurrected body, you will be able to meet Jesus and all the saints in the air.

Your hope should not be in some sort of great escape. Your hope should lie in the fact that you will be in the physical presence of the Lord.

And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Forever together, just as the song says.

Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

Do you take comfort with these words? We all have friends, family members, acquaintances that have departed this earth. Those who placed their faith in Jesus are in the presence of the Lord right now. Some, sadly, might be in torment. The sad fact is, not everyone is saved. But it is not for you to judge. Someone once said: "When we get to heaven, we will be surprised by who is there, and surprised by who is not." But at that point, we will no longer sorrow. Because ...

... God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

You should not be at all obsessed with the eternal destiny of those who have already passed. God is in control. Just give it to Him.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

You should also not be at all obsessed with exactly when Jesus will return. Jesus told us that no one knows the day or the hour, except the Father. Jesus is coming at exactly the right moment in history. It has been foreordained and God is working everything together according to the counsel of His will. (*Ephesians 1:11*)

You should be concerned about only one thing: Am I ready?

Are you ready?

And the Lord said, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. (Luke 12:42-43)

Behold, He comes!

Let us be the voices in the desert crying "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" Let us be the laborers in His vineyard, declaring the word of the Lord!