

Unveiling The Future

Introduction. The study of the end times is the consuming passion of many in religion today. Sensational best-selling authors argue that current events fulfill their often dubious interpretations of biblical prophecy. Tragically, some people get so caught up in the study of the end times that they neglect the basic principles of spiritual growth. Paul's concern in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 was not just doctrinal, but practical. He wanted to help the Thessalonians.

The gravest concern to the Thessalonians were those of their number who had died. They believed the return of Christ was imminent and could happen in their lifetime. Their sorrow was caused not only by the fact that their friends were removed from them by death, but from the fact that they had no evidence that their souls would live on; or that, if they still lived, they were happy; or that their bodies would rise again. Therefore, when they buried them, they buried their hopes in the grave; and so far as they had any evidence, they were never to see them again. Since their grief was based on ignorance, Paul comforted them by giving them knowledge.

I. ***The Pillars***

A. The death of Christ.

1. Christ's death satisfied the demands of God's righteousness, holiness, and justice by offering the appropriate sacrifice for the sins of a Christian (Isaiah 53:10).
2. Paul did not use the metaphor of sleep to refer to Jesus, but says that He died. Jesus experienced the fully fury of death in all its dimensions (1 Peter 2:24).

B. The resurrection of Christ.

1. Christ's resurrection indicates that the Father accepted His sacrifice (Romans 3:26). It proves that He conquered sin and death, and became the source of resurrection for every Christian (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:18).
2. The phrase "even so" links the resurrection of Christians inextricably to the resurrection of Christ (John 14:19; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Corinthians 4:14). The redeemed are united with Christ, and share the same destiny (1 Corinthians 15:12-14).
3. With Christ, the whole concept of death was transformed. The figure of sleep for death is common in the New Testament (cf. Mark 5:39; John 11:11; Romans 13:11). Our word "cemetery" means "to put to sleep." They do not "sleep" in heathenism, or in infidelity, or in the gloom of atheism, but in the blessed hope of Jesus returning.
 - a) "Sleep" applies only to the body, never to the soul. "Soul sleep," the false teaching that the souls of the dead are in a state of

unconscious existence in the afterlife, is foreign to scripture (2 Corinthians 5:8).

- b) The soul is not unconscious (Matthew 17:3; Luke 16:19-13; 23:43; Revelation 6:9-11). How could unconsciousness be "far better" than conscious communion with Jesus Christ in this life (Philippians 1:23)?
- C. The revelation of Christ.
 - 1. The specific identification of this source is difficult. It is possible that Paul may have had in mind a general allusion to all that the Lord had said about His coming.
 - 2. Paul could mean that the Lord had specially revealed this to him or one of the prophets (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:1, 9; Galatians 1:12; 2:2; Ephesians 3:3).

II. ***The Participants***

- A. Two groups of people will participate at the end of the world: those who are alive and those who have fallen asleep. Paul had a proper anticipation of and expectation for the Lord's return, The plural "we" indicates that allowed for the possibility that he would be alive at the return of Christ.
- B. Paul lived in constant expectation of and longing for Christ's return (1 Corinthians 6:14; Philippians 1:20; 2 Timothy 4:6-7), though Christ and the apostle realized that no one would know when it would occur (Matthew 24:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3). So Paul did not set a date, although people today feel like they can. Because we do not know when it will occur, it is foolish to not be prepared (Matthew 24:45-25:13).
- C. But the apostle nevertheless reassured the Thessalonians that those of their number who had died would not miss the Lord. Moreover, the living will not precede the dead. They will not take precedence over them or gain an advantage over them. They will in no sense be inferior to the living.

III. ***The Plan***

- A. The Lord will descend from heaven in a return for His people (Acts 1:9-11; 7:56; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Hebrews 1:3); He will not send angels to do it, although they will come with Him (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7).
- B. The word "shout" has a military ring to it, as of a general to his army, an admiral to his oarsmen, or a charioteer to his horses (John 5:25, 28-29; 11:43). The righteous dead will be the first to rise -- a truth that must have greatly comforted the anxious Thessalonians.

- C. The trumpet is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:52. It is used to assemble God's people (Exodus 19:16-19) and to signal His deliverance of them (Zechariah 1:16; 9:14-16). In Matthew 24:31, Jesus used the trumpet to signal the destruction of Jerusalem.
- D. "Caught up" in the Latin is the word from which rapture is derived (cf. Matthew 11:12; John 10:12, 28-29; Acts 8:39; 2 Corinthians 12:2, 4). Clouds are often associated in scripture with divine appearances (Exodus 24:16; 40:34; Matthew 17:5; Acts 1:9).
- E. The words denote a succession so close as to exclude the idea of a long interval in which another important transaction would occur; i.e., a long personal reign of Christ on earth. So right after the resurrection of the righteous the living will be caught up in the air.
- F. It must be noted that the passage specifically says that Christ will not set foot upon the earth. Those who are alive will meet Him in the air -- above the earth. Our final home will then be in heaven.

IV. ***The Profit***

- A. The benefit of understanding the end of time is not to fill the gaps in one's understanding of the Bible. As noted in the beginning of the lesson, Paul's goal in teaching the Thessalonians about the end of time was to comfort them.
- B. The "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3) grants to all Christians the encouraging comfort of knowing that Christ will one day return for them. It also alleviates the sorrows of bereavement.

Conclusion. The "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) of the resurrection is not based on the shifting sands of philosophical speculation. Nor is it religious mythology, a fable concocted by well-meaning people to comfort those who grieve. It is based upon the Holy Spirit's revelation.

The death of the Christian is a calm and gentle sleep. It is not annihilation; it is not the extinction of hope. Why, then, should the Christian be afraid to die? There was no need for the Thessalonians to grieve or sorrow over their fellow Christians who had died. Unfulfilled prophecy which is relevant to your life still exists in the Bible. To most people, however, the subject of the judgment day is dreadful. If you want to reflect on the comforting nature of what has been said today, then please obey the gospel.