
The Thessalonian Letters

The Resurrection of Church-Age Saints

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18



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Paul's teaching about future events

- Paul would have taught them of the certainty of resurrection from the Old Testament (Job 14:14; 19:25-26; Ps 49:14-15; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2).
- The mystery of the church had not been revealed in the Old Testament (Eph 3:1-7) so new revelation was needed, especially concerning the stages or phases for the resurrection of the righteous.
- The Old Testament revealed that there would be a terrible period called the "Day of the Lord" during which the wrath of God would be poured out on the unbelieving world followed by the Messiah's return in glory (e.g., Joel 2). Additional revelation for the church age taught that there would be a separate coming of the Lord to rescue believers before the wrath of that future "Day of the Lord" (5:9).

Expectation of Jesus' imminent return

- The Thessalonians were eagerly awaiting “His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1:10).
- After Paul had departed from Thessalonica, some of the believers there had died. This situation raised a concern which Paul had not addressed.
- Would church-age believers who already died be overlooked at Christ's imminent return to rescue believers from the wrath to come? Would living believers have an advantage at the transition to heaven? Would there be a separation or distinction between the two groups for all eternity? All of this made the living believers wonder when they would be reunited with their deceased loved ones.

What about “those who are asleep?” (4:13)

- **“those who are asleep”** ~ a common figure of speech which referred to people who have died. Used by Jesus to refer to death (John 11:11). Paul will address the situation of church-age believers who had already died.
- Paul must have already instructed them about the resurrection of living church-age saints. Here he was building on facts he had taught them. He would share new revelation about the sequence of events at the coming of the Lord to rescue church-age saints from the future period of wrath and judgment. The Thessalonians apparently assumed that Christians who had died would miss the reunion with Jesus when he returns to take believers to heaven, but Paul will share information to correct this wrong assumption.

Deceased believers will not miss the reunion (4:14)

- **“if we believe that Jesus died and rose again”** ~ In the Greek language there are several classes of conditional clause. Here Paul used a first class condition which is often called the “condition of fact.” First class conditional sentences mean that if something is true, and we assume that it is true, then the conclusion will also be true.
- **“*Since*”** they believe that Christ was resurrected, then it is also true that **“God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.”**
- At His coming for living church-age believers, Jesus will bring with Him the souls of their previously deceased brethren.

Deceased believers will actually rise first (4:15)

- **“by the word of the Lord”** ~ Paul could not quote from the Old Testament to instruct them because this **“coming of the Lord”** was part of God’s program of resurrection for the church which had not been revealed in the Old Testament.
- **“we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord”** ~ refers to those church-age believers who are still living at the moment when Jesus returns for them.
- The living **“will not precede those who have fallen asleep.”** The Thessalonians had wrongly assumed that the living would take priority over their deceased brethren, but Paul declared that exactly the opposite will be true. The living will follow immediately afterward.

Resurrection of the dead “in Christ” (4:16)

- This resurrection is specifically for those “**in Christ**” ~ those who have put their faith in Christ during the church age, which started at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) when the Holy Spirit began indwelling believers and placing them into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). From that time until now, all believers during this age form the spiritual body of Christ.
- “**the Lord Himself will descend from heaven**” ~ He will step down to a place above the earth.
- Three signals: a “***shout***,” a “***voice***,” and a “***trumpet***.”
- The dead “**will rise first**” ~ they will ascend from the earth, into and through the atmospheric heavens, to meet the Lord above the earth.

Living church-age saints will “catch up” (4:17)

- Immediately after the dead in Christ are resurrected, living believers will then be “**caught up**” (*harpazō*) ~ snatched away, transported suddenly. Living church-age saints will rise to join their deceased brethren. Paul gave additional details in his later epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15).
- Jesus descends only as far as the atmospheric heavens, which is described as “**in the clouds**” and “**in the air.**” The Lord Jesus does not descend to the earth; rather, church-age saints ascend to meet Him above the earth.
- “**we shall always be with the Lord**” ~ After this coming of the Lord for church-age believers, we will never again be separated from Him. Jesus’ promise of John 14:3 will have been fulfilled.

Taking comfort from this truth (4:18)

- Paul was writing to believers who were grieving the death of their saved loved ones, but his final exhortation to them was that they use these words from the Lord to comfort one another.
- The coming of the Lord Jesus to gather church-age believers and return with them to His Father's house will occur in this order:
 1. Christ steps down from His Father's house to a place above the earth where He calls believers to Himself (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess 4:16).
 2. The dead in Christ will rise first in their resurrection bodies (1 Thess 4:14-16).
 3. Then living believers will be transformed and rise to meet Him in the clouds (1 Thess 4:17; 1 Cor 15:50-58).
 4. Christ will receive and gather together all who are His (1 Thess 4:17).
 5. Christ will take them to the Father's house where they will be with the Lord forever (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:17)