

Together Forever

Mark Heath, 5th December 2005

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thess 4:13-18 (ESV)

Acts 17:1-10 tells us the story of Paul's incredible church planting mission to Thessalonica. Initially things had been going well for Paul and his companions (Silas and Timothy). They had been received in the local synagogue, and there were a number of conversions. But things quickly turned sour. The popularity that Paul was enjoying did not go down too well with the Jewish leaders, who rounded up some bad characters and stirred up an uprising.

They stormed the house of Jason, one of the new believers, and not finding Paul there they took him instead. The charges they tried to press against him were extremely serious. He was accused of treason against Caesar – the Christians were proclaiming another King. Thessalonica had a history of the Romans brutally crushing rebellions, and the Jewish leaders were perhaps hoping that the Romans would also put a swift end to the Christian religion in their town. But the Romans were not so easily manipulated, and Jason was let off with a fine.

Though the immediate danger had passed, it was only a matter of time before the trouble would arise again, so it was agreed that Paul and his companions should move on secretly to Berea. They must have gone with heavy hearts, fearing for the future safety of this fledgling church. This letter of 1 Thessalonians tells us of Paul's joy in hearing from Timothy that the church had not caved in to pressure, but had remained faithful.

Future Resurrection (v13,14)

Though Paul had been in Thessalonica for only three or four weeks, somehow he had found the time to give the new converts a grounding in Christian truth. Just as many churches today have some kind of basic training course that for new believers, Paul did a similar thing. He would have introduced them to the doctrines of the Christian faith, and the standard of conduct and contribution to church life expected of them. The sudden nature of Paul's departure probably meant that the instruction was left partially incomplete, though he had covered at least some of the basics of the end times.

Unfortunately, the Thessalonians had not fully taken in all that Paul had said on the subject. They knew that Jesus was coming again (Acts 1:11), and this was perhaps one of the key thoughts that sustained them as they endured hostility and persecution. They also knew that this day would come like "a thief in the night", and they needed to be ready for it. This had led them to assume that Jesus would return in their own lifetimes.

But now some Christians were dying. We are not told whether this was as a direct result of persecution, or just death due to natural causes. Either way, this raised all kinds of questions in their minds. Would these believers who have died miss out on the second coming, and the life in the eternal kingdom of Jesus? Would the Christians who were still alive ever meet these brothers and sisters again?

The thought of Christians grieving with the same hopelessness that unbelievers do was too much for Paul. He had to set the record straight. These believers who had died were going to be raised from the dead by God, in exactly the same way that Jesus was. They would receive new bodies fit to dwell in the new heavens and the new earth forever.

The idea of life after death seems ridiculous to many in our society. They see it as a coward's way of refusing to face up to the harsh reality of death. But we have confidence in our future resurrection, not because it makes us feel better, but because we know the one who has died and returned to life – Jesus. He went before us through suffering to glory, and we will do the same.

This is not to say that mourning at a time of bereavement is inappropriate. In Phil 2:27 Paul admits that had Epaphroditus died, he would have experienced “sorrow upon sorrow”. It is hopelessness that is inappropriate. When a Christian dies, we know we will be reunited with them – our separation is temporary.

An Immanent Return (v15)

In verse 15 Paul seeks to encourage his readers with the thought that those Christians who had died were not in any way going to miss out on the glory of the second coming, and the resurrection life it brings. In fact, they would be the first to greet the returning King.

But two phrases Paul uses, almost casually, raise some interesting questions. First he mentions that he knows what he does because of a the “Lord's own word”. Some have suggested that he had received a special personal revelation, but his use of the word “we”, and the strong resonances with teaching in the gospels on the end times points strongly towards the fact that Paul was simply reminding them of what he had already taught them based on the words of Jesus.

There are a number of places in the gospels that the end times are discussed (Matt 24, 25, Mark 13, Luke 17, 21), containing parables and direct discussions of the end times, though some of what Jesus says in these chapters refers to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD70.. The book of Revelation had not yet been written at this point – neither Paul or the Thessalonians knew of its contents and had not even heard of ‘the Millennium’. This may surprise some who make the Millennium such a crucial part of their end times doctrine, but all that the Thessalonians needed to know at this point, was the teaching of Jesus himself.

Second, Paul says “*we* who are alive”, rather than “*those* who are alive”. Some people have thought that this means that Paul thought the second coming would happen in his lifetime. That may or may not be so, but he certainly seems to be willing to entertain the possibility that it *could* happen in his lifetime. After all, Jesus' teaching emphasised that *no one* knew when, so *everyone* should be ready. Clearly, Paul was being obedient to this command.

Does this mean though that Paul thought that there were no more signs yet to be fulfilled before the second coming? I would say not, as in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 Paul assures those who thought they had missed the second coming with a reminder that it will not happen before the “man of lawlessness” is revealed. In other words, Paul still believed that there were signs to be fulfilled before the end came, but didn't rule out the possibility that those signs could be fulfilled in his own lifetime.

A Loud Return (v16)

In verse 16 we are told of the loud nature of the return of the King. There will be shouting and trumpets. The idea of trumpets at the second coming can be found elsewhere in Matt 24:31 and 1 Cor 15:52. Other passages too talk about the loudness of the event and the fact that everyone will see it (e.g. Rev 1:7, Matt 24:27; 2 Pet 3:10).

Though some Christians have argued that this verse describes a secret return of Jesus that the world does not see, it seems clear to me that this verse agrees with the rest of Scripture in affirming the unmissable nature of the Lord's return. When he comes, everyone will know about it.

A Sudden Return (v17)

This verse describes what is known as the “rapture”, where Christians are snatched away to be with the Lord. The meaning of the Greek word used suggests the suddenness of this event. It is almost certainly describing the same event as 1 Cor 15:51,52 where we will be changed “in the twinkling of an eye”. Suddenly we will be given our new resurrection bodies, just as those Christians who have died will receive theirs.

The language of this verse is interesting. Will we literally float up into the air and meet Jesus in the clouds? Or is this a case of “apocalyptic language” like we find in Revelation? It is hard to know exactly how we are meant to understand this. We will of course know the answer to this question for sure on the day of his return.

The “clouds” speak symbolically elsewhere in the Bible of the meeting of God and man (Ex 13:21, Ex 24:15, 1 Kings 8:10), and also feature in other passages discussing the second coming (Matt 24:30, Acts 1:9-11; Rev 1:7). It will certainly be an awesome experience for us to personally meet Jesus Christ in bodily form for the first time ever.

Aside from speculations about exactly how this verse will be fulfilled, the main point that Paul wants to make here is about *reunion*. We will be both united with Jesus, and with other believers who have died. What's even better, is that that reunion will be *forever*. We will never be separated by death again.

Be Encouraged

Verse 15 uses the Greek word *parousia* to describe the 'coming' of Jesus. This was the same word that was used to talk about when the emperor came on a royal visit to a town. A delegation of VIPs would go and meet him outside the city to escort him in with great ceremony.

Jesus' coming will be greater than the most spectacular royal visit this world has ever known. The occasion will be the most amazing experience anyone has ever witnessed. For Christians this will be a great and wonderful day, when their prayers for the

kingdom of God to come on earth will finally be answered in all their fullness. It will also be a time of great joy as we are reunited Christian friends who have died.

So the purpose of learning about the second coming is not so much that we can get good scores in a Bible Quiz, but as Paul says in verse 18 – that we would be encouraged. The Thessalonian believers were going through a really tough time of persecution, possibly including martyrdom. There would have been a great temptation to give up, or become disheartened.

So if you are finding the Christian life a struggle, whether through the grief of a bereavement or through the discouragement of facing many trials in life, do not lose hope. Like the long distance runner who sets his eyes on the prize he will receive if he keeps going through the pain, we too must take encouragement from the future glory that awaits us.