

1 Thessalonians

I. Introduction

A. **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** . . . 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. [14] For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. [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, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. [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. [17] 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. [18] Therefore comfort one another with these words.

B. Pray

II. Truths surrounding the return of Christ

A. [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.

1. One possible explanation for **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** is that the Christians of that day started speculating about the return of Christ and somehow concluded that Christ would return only for believers who were alive at the time.

a. In other words, any believer who died before Christ's return would not be taken up to meet Christ in the air.

b. There is no clear statement as to what the believers thought was going to happen to those who died before Christ's return, but apparently whatever they believed was causing them to grieve **as if** deceased believers were going to lose out on being with Christ forever in God's eternal kingdom.

2. But before we look at Paul's words about grieving as if there is no hope of a resurrection, I want to point out two other truths found here in **vs 13**.

a. **First**, Paul uses the word "sleep" when referring to believers who have died, and this is not unique to Paul. For example:

(1) In **Job 14:12**, death is spoke of a sleep.

- (2) When asked to raise a girl from the dead, Jesus refers to her as being asleep (**Matthew 9:24**).
 - (3) When told that His friend, Lazarus, had died, Jesus said, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep” (**John 11:11**).
 - (4) In describing Stephen’s death by stoning, Luke writes, “Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep” (**Acts 7:60**).
 - (5) And in **1 Corinthians 15:6,18,51**, Paul refers to believers who die before the return of Christ as having fallen asleep.
 - (6) An interesting side note: the English word **cemetery** is derived from a Greek word which means “**a place to sleep.**”
 - (7) This picture of death is in itself a comfort, because for most of us most of the time, sleep is something we look forward to after a hard day. And for most of us, sleep is peaceful and something from which we awaken refreshed and energized.
 - (8) Therefore, for believers, death is not to be feared or treated as something to be avoided at all costs. Rather, death is a friend, just like sleep is a friend.
- b. **Second**, Paul speaks of Christian grief as being significantly different from the unbeliever’s grief. For the Christian, there is the confident expectation of a heavenly life hereafter with God and those who love God. Whereas for the unbeliever there is only death, loss, and suffering.
- (1) No matter how good life is for the believer on this earth, death is his portal to an indescribably better life in a better place.
 - (2) For the unbeliever, no matter how bad life has been, death is his portal to something unimaginably worse.
 - (3) No matter how many loved ones the believer leaves behind, he is going to a place where love reigns supreme, where relationships are meaningful and satisfying, the community is his family, God is his loving Father, and where any loved ones from his earthy family who are believers will eventually join him.
- c. It isn’t this way for the unbeliever, for he has no hope of being raised up to meet Christ at His return to be with Him forever. The unbeliever’s encounter with Christ after his death will be

at the judgment seat of God, with the outcome resulting in condemnation and eternal damnation.

- d. And though many unbelievers may not know what awaits them, they have no rational basis for believing there is any form of existence after death that is better than what they have now – which is cause enough to grieve as if there is no hope.
 3. Does this mean that the Christian ought not grieve at the death of a loved one? That doesn't appear to be Paul's point.
 - a. Paul's point is that we ought not to grieve as if there is no hope of a resurrection.
 - b. Therefore, we ought not grieve inconsolably.
 - c. We ought not to grieve as if God's love, presence, and continued care is not enough to comfort us in the face of our loss.
 - d. We ought not grieve as if God, himself, is not enough to fill the void left by the one who died.
 - e. And we ought not grieve as if happiness has been snatched away, or joy is lost, or our reason to feel secure has been taken, or as if God will not bring good out of our loss.
 4. When you love someone and their presence is taken from you, it is natural to feel the loss. Therefore, as Christians, we can feel the loss and we grieve the loss, but let us not grieve as those who have no hope of a resurrection and no God to fill the void left by the loss.
- B. Moving on to **vs 14**, we find that Paul presents his first of two reasons why Christians ought not grieve for the dead as if there is no hope of a resurrection for them. [14] For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again (*and of course we do because that is what we believe when we repent and came to faith in Him*), even so (*we ought to believe that*) God will bring with [Christ] (*that is, resurrect*) those who have **fallen asleep in Jesus** (*those who have died as a believer before the return of Christ*).
1. Paul's **first** reason for NOT grieving as if there is no hope is that just as Jesus died and God raised Him from the dead, so God will resurrect every Christian who dies before Christ's return. In other words, the Christian's resurrection at Christ's return is directly tied to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, because God did the one, He will do the other.
 2. Paul goes into much greater detail about this in **1 Corinthians 15:12-23**, "Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? [13] But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even

Christ has been raised; [14] and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. [*skipping to vs 16*] For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; [17] and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. [18] Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. [*skipping to vs 20*] But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. [21] For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. [22] For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. [23] But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming.”

- C. In vs 15, Paul presents his second reason why we ought not grieve for believers who pass away as if there is no hope of a resurrection. [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, will not precede (*arrive before so as to gain some advantage over*) those who have fallen asleep.
1. Paul's **second** reason for NOT grieving as if there is no hope is that God, through some speaking or means of revelation has revealed to Paul – or to someone other than Paul – that those who are asleep in Jesus will be raised from the dead at the return of Christ. And not only will they be resurrected, they will arrive – most likely – at the same time as the Christians who are alive when Christ returns.
 2. Now you may be wondering **when** God revealed this information to Paul or to the apostles or to some individual. The reality is, we don't know. But we do know that this would not be the first or only time God did such a thing since the birth of Christ.
 3. Jesus said He spoke the words God told Him to speak (**John 7:15; 8:26; 14:10**). In other words, God revealed truth to Jesus and what He wanted Jesus to say about the truth revealed.
 4. In possibly the same or a similar way, Paul recounts hearing directly from God in **Galatians 1:11-12**, “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. [12] For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”
 5. The reality is, God has spoken and still speaks in a variety of ways – but not at our whim or according to our will. God speaks according to His will and to accomplish His purposes. However, we see here in **1 Thessalonians 4:15** that God's speaking is for our sake, and our benefit so that we might be comforted in the face of death.

- D. In **vs 16**, Paul begins to state what God revealed about Christ's return in relation to the Christians who die before His return. [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.
1. Will descend from heaven **with a shout** – the idea here is like that of a king or a leader of an army yelling “charge” as he leads the troops into battle.
 2. **With the voice** of the archangel – possibly refers to a second shout of “charge” by the leader of the angels. According to other portions of scripture, the archangel referred to could be Michael – though that is speculation.
 3. And **with the trumpet** of God – the sound of a trumpet in relation to God appearing and gathering His people together was first spoken of in **Exodus 19:16-17**. “So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. [17] And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.”
 - a. In **Matthew 24:29-31**, Jesus links a trumpet sound to the return of Christ: “But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. [30] And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. [31] And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”
 - b. And finally, Paul says this in **1 Corinthians 15:51-52**, “Behold, I tell you a mystery; we (*Christians*) will not all sleep (*die*), but we will all be changed, [52] in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead (*in Christ*) will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”
 4. The **dead in Christ will rise first** – the idea here is that when Christ returns, the first thing to happen is the believers who have

died before Christ's return will be resurrected, and on their way up to meet Christ in the air the living will join them. Paul confirms this to be true in **vs 16**.

- E. [17] Then **we** (*all Christians everywhere*) who are alive and remain (*when Jesus returns*) will be caught up together with the (*dead who have been resurrected*) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. [18] Therefore comfort one another with these words.
1. There is one truth and one exhortation in these two verses that I want us to consider.
 2. The **truth** is that once all believers from the beginning of creation to the day of Christ's return are gathered together with Him, we shall be with Him forever.
 - a. Jesus promised this in **John 14:1-3**, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. [2] In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. [3] If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."
 - b. Now I know that life here in the US has been good. We've known freedoms that most of the world have never known. We've had wealth that most of the world can only imagine. We've amassed possessions, enjoyed pleasures, and had more food available to us than we should. We have easy access to physical and mental health care. We have support systems that few in the world enjoy.
 - c. And though this list could go on and on, but I want to affirm that there is nothing in this life or in this world that is better or even close to equal to being with Christ forever in His eternal kingdom.
 - d. Therefore, to want this life over being with Christ forever is like wanting fools gold over real gold. And so I urge you, do not love this world or the things that are in this world. Love God – for in Him and with Him is life – an abundant life while here, and a perfect life throughout eternity.
 3. The exhortation in **vs 18** is "comfort one another with these words."
 - a. We may not need to comfort one another about the plight of believers who die before Christ's return, but there are other things we can sensitively and compassionately comfort one

another about in relation to the passing of loved ones and the return of Christ. So let's do that.

- b. And keep in mind that telling someone not to grieve is not comforting. But encouraging them not to grieve as if there is no hope of a resurrection is comforting.

III. Conclusion

- A. I want to conclude by pointing out two topics that do not appear in these verses – yet are often talked about when dealing with these verses.
 1. **First**, Paul does not tell us anything about what happens to the unbelievers who have died prior to Christ's return or what happens to those who are alive at Christ's return.
 2. **Second**, the word "rapture" is not found in these verses. In other words, in these verses Paul seems to be presenting Christ's return in the air as the second coming of Christ, not what is commonly taught as the rapture.
 - a. According to the teachings on the rapture, Christ partially returns to take believers out of the world before or in the middle of the tribulation.
 - b. Then, the full or second return of Christ takes place at the end of the tribulation.
 3. However, we should not be surprised that these additional ideas are not presented here because the stated focus of **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** is how Christians grieve for those who die before Christ's return.