

## SEE YOU AT THE PAROUSIA! 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

My wife, Mindy, was exceptionally close to her dad when she was growing up. Next to her twin sister, she considered him her best friend. So, when he died suddenly when she was just nineteen years old, she grieved for a long, long time. Besides the pain of separation, besides just missing him terribly, what grieved her most was anticipating her father's absence at the big events in her life. He would not be there to see her graduate from college; he would not be there to walk her down the aisle at her wedding; he would not be present at the births of her children; he would not see them put their faith in Christ and be baptized. For Mindy, not being together with her dad at those events was a crushing weight of grief.

After Gwenyth Kamstra was born a couple of weeks ago, her grandmother, Lory, confessed that intermingled with her immense joy was the sorrow of not sharing that joy with *her* father, Sam, who went to be with the Lord in January. Sam had been ecstatic when he learned that his granddaughter was going to have a baby and that he would be a great-grandfather.

The pain of separation caused by death, most especially the pain of separation caused by what seems to us to be *untimely* or *premature* death, is excruciating. And it cannot help but cast a pall *on* those big events in our lives, because at such times we are acutely conscious of our loved ones' absence. We feel the ache of separation more intensely, and we are reminded of the gaping hole their deaths have left.

This morning we are going to be looking at some instruction Paul gave to friends who were feeling the sting of death, but whose pain was exacerbated because of their misunderstanding that these departed loved ones would not be able to participate with them in the grandest, most glorious event of all—the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus.

Paul is writing to the church at Thessalonica, a group of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus, all of whom were relatively young in the faith. You may recall that after preaching the gospel in the city for just three weeks, Paul and Silas were run out of town by some jealous Jewish adversaries, leaving the fledgling church to fend for itself. However, because it is Jesus' church—not Paul's or Silas'—because the gates of hell cannot prevail against Jesus' church, this young Christian community thrived in their absence. In the early part of his letter Paul identified several things that were evidences of just how strong and healthy they were.

But that did not mean they were *fully* mature. It did not mean they knew everything there was to know about their faith or that they knew how to respond in every situation. Maturity is a process that takes time. And so, part of what Paul wanted to do in this letter was provide instruction that could help them grow, that could fill in the gaps, and that could relieve unnecessary anxiety caused by ignorance and misunderstanding. One topic of instruction concerned what happens to believers, loved ones, who die before Jesus comes again.

You should know that a major part of Paul's gospel presentation wherever he went was the declaration that not only did Jesus die on a cross for our sins, not only did He rise from the dead three days later, not only did He ascend into heaven after forty days, but He is presently *in* heaven awaiting His Father's instructions to return to this earth and take us to be with Him. That coming will be a glorious event—the exclamation mark of history—and it could happen at any time.

The Second Coming of Jesus is a major emphasis in the New Testament epistles. Indeed, the biblical writers portrayed it as the pinnacle of the believers' hope. Paul would say, "*Our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await our Savior from there, the Lord Jesus*

*Christ” (Phil. 3:20 NIV). And Peter said, “Set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet. 1:13).*

The event of Christ’s return is what we are living for, for it marks the beginning of when we start to really live. It marks the end of the reign of sin and Satan in this earth realm, the end of our sin-cursed hearts and minds and bodies, and the beginning of when all things will be made new and right—an existence where there will be no sin, no pain, no fear, no tears, no struggle, no viruses, and no death.

The Thessalonian believers were excited about this, and when Paul told them that Jesus could return at any time, they really anticipated that He *would* return. And as time went on and He did not, they were confused and disappointed, especially when some things happened that they did not expect, like the deaths of some of their believing loved ones.

So, Paul writes in chapter 4, **verse 13**, *“But 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.*

Paul is about to address some questions the Thessalonians had regarding the grandest, most glorious event of all—the Second Coming of Jesus. Did the deaths of church members mean that they would be excluded from participating in the glorious events associated with Jesus’ coming? Would they miss the event entirely? If so, were they disadvantaged in some way?

So, when Paul says in verse 13, *“...we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep,”* he was addressing these questions. “Sleep” was a common euphemism for death at this time. Both Jews and Gentiles used the word much like we say, “passed away” instead of died. But Paul’s purpose for writing about those who have died is stated clearly in the last part of verse 13. He does not want the Thessalonian believers to grieve like those who have no hope.

Paul is not suggesting that it is inappropriate to grieve when believing loved ones die. He is saying that Christians do not need to grieve in the same way as those who do not have hope. The fact is, believers in Jesus *do* have hope, and he gives the basis for that hope beginning in **verse 14**. *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him.*

God’s provision for the gift of eternal life was set in motion when Jesus died on the cross for our sins and made it possible for us to be forgiven and reconciled to God. That gift was secured when Jesus rose from the dead. Peter said it this way: We have been given *“...a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3)*. Jesus’ resurrection proved that He was who He said He was—Messiah, Son of the living God. It demonstrated His divine power. It established that His death on the cross did accomplish what He said it would—the forgiveness of sins, the defeat of the powers of darkness, and the opportunity to be reconciled to God. It also established His sovereignty over life and death.

It proved that all of His claims are reliable and true. And one of those claims was this: *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).*

In other words, a believer may die physically, but he will never die spiritually. Paul said in another place, *“To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8)*. When a believer dies, his/her spirit goes immediately into the presence of the Lord. But that is not the end of the story, for God did not intend for us to live eternally as disembodied spirits. When Jesus returns something extraordinary and miraculous will happen to the bodies of believers who have died.

Look at **verse 15**. *<sup>15</sup> For 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.*

It is not often that I urge you to learn new words to add to your theological vocabulary. But I would like to encourage you to do just that this morning, because this word describes such an important event for the Christian. It is the word *Parousia*, a Greek word that is translated “presence” or “coming” or “arrival.” In secular Greek literature it was used to describe the arrival of a king or a dignitary that was accompanied with all manner of pomp and circumstance. In the Old Testament it was used to describe the anticipated coming of Messiah, who would establish God’s kingdom and make all things right.

The word *Parousia* was part of early church’s vocabulary, and it stood by itself as a concept that needed no explanation. When someone asked, “Are you ready for the Parousia?” or someone declared, “I wish the Parousia would happen today!” nobody replied, “What do you mean by *parousia*?” They knew it was a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus, the event they were all anticipating with great eagerness and enthusiasm, the event they were living for.

In verse 15 Paul begins to construct a sequence of occurrences that will correspond to the *Parousia*. However, it is important to remember that when the *Parousia* does happen it will happen so suddenly and so swiftly (“in the twinkling of an eye”) that we may not have time to even notice a chronological sequence.

He says that *we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep*. The word *precede* has the idea of doing something before someone else in order to gain an advantage. Paul uses an emphatic negative construction in the original language to emphasize that deceased believers will in no way be disadvantaged compared with believers who are living at the time of Christ’s return (Marshall, 127). In fact, Paul deliberately contradicts a common view in Judaism that those who were alive when Messiah arrived would fare better than those who were deceased. Paul says that those who have died are *not* going to miss out; they are *not* going to be disadvantaged. If anything, they may have a slight *advantage*.

Look at **verse 16**. *<sup>16</sup> For 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.*

I want to remind you that while a real event is being described, it is one that cannot be described adequately in human language, since activity in the heavenly realms is beyond human language and comprehension. And so, Paul and the other biblical writers have to resort to analogies and metaphors in order to convey their message (Marshall, 128). But let’s look at each of these phenomena.

First, none other than the Lord Jesus himself comes down from heaven. So important is this event, so climactic is this activity in God’s grand eternal plan of salvation that no one other than the King of kings and Lord of lords could possibly fulfill this role. After all, this is what all of history has been building towards. This is the Great Unveiling, the Grand Finale. And center stage, in the spotlight, the Object of everyone’s undivided attention is the One by whom and for whom all things were created in the first place and around whom everything in the universe revolves.

Second, “...*with a cry of command*,” or “with a shout of command.” This is rather awkward language for us, but in a number of cultures and languages “a shout of command” was another way of saying, ‘when the command is given’ or ‘when the command is shouted’ (Louw and Nida). Not surprisingly, it was a military term used with reference to a commanding officer when he was directing his troops in the heat of battle. Here, it is intended to call our

attention to Jesus' authority and power. This is not a call for Christ to act, but the order of Christ himself, calling forth the dead and initiating the beginning of the *Parousia*. Think of it: Jesus is able to gather together all of those who are scattered and all those whose bodies have decayed and disintegrated with a single command.

Then, there is the voice of an archangel. Archangels are the topmost grade of angels—angels of the highest echelon. The only other time archangels are mentioned in Scripture is in Jude 14, however it was well-known in Judaism that archangels formed part of the heavenly entourage of God.

Next, there is the sound of the trumpet of God. In the ancient world, just before the king was to make an important declaration or give an important decree or summons, designated trumpeters blew their horns as a means of getting the public's attention and impressing on them the importance and urgency of whatever was about to follow. Here, presumably, the trumpet blasts that precede the return of Christ is for the benefit of "the dead in Christ."

And that is the essence of what Paul wants to communicate to the Thessalonians concerning their believing loved ones who have died. They will most certainly *not* miss out; they most certainly will *not* be disadvantaged. On this great and glorious day, when the command is given and the angelic voice is heard and trumpet sounds, the dead in Christ will rise first.

Deceased believers who have physically died and whose bodies are buried in the ground, are not going to miss the Parousia! On the contrary! They will rise *first*. In a fraction of a second, their spirits (which are already in the presence of the Lord) will rejoin their bodies which are buried in the ground or the sea, and God will recreate and recompose those bodies so that those who remain alive will be able to see them and participate in this grand, glorious event together.

Look at **verse 17**. *17 Then 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.*

Paul now turns his attention to believers who are alive at the coming of the Lord, and his emphasis is that they will join deceased believers who will have been raised so that we all participate in the Parousia together. The dead are resurrected out of their graves to join the living, and then we are all caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

This word "caught up" (*harpazo*) means literally "to seize" or "to snatch." It is from this word that biblical theologians have derived the concept of the *rapture* in association with the second coming of Christ. Many of you know that some Bible teachers have a lot of say about this subject. Some of them have developed elaborate theological constructs concerning the rapture complete with charts and timetables, which is a bit unnerving given the fact that this is the only time in Scripture that this particular word (*harpazo*) is used with reference to Christ's return. I want to remind you that one of the first rules of hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) is that 'the fewer Scriptural references about a subject the more careful one must be not to read too much into it.'

In using this particular word *harpazo* (meaning "to seize" or "to snatch") Paul may have been making a play on words. Plutarch, a Greek philosopher and historian and a contemporary of Paul's, used *harpazo* with reference to those who died an untimely death and were thus "disadvantaged" in that they were snatched away from the opportunity for education, marriage, and other pleasures of life (Holmes, 151). In other words, being snatched or raptured was a negative concept. Some of Paul's audience were no doubt aware of Plutarch's remarks. And so, Paul may well have been saying, "Look, believers who die

will *not* be disadvantaged. If anything, they will have a slight *advantage*, because they will be snatched first.”

And this is precisely the reason why we do not grieve like those who have no hope when our believing loved ones die. Our hope is that they *will* be resurrected in their newly recomposed bodies, which will be transformed from their decayed and disintegrated state into beautiful, glorious bodies. And in a split second they will appear in our midst, and then together we will ascend in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air together.

By the way, “in the clouds” is literally “in clouds” and it likely refers to the mode of transport rather than to the destination. The phrase originated from Daniel’s vision in 7:13, where it is used with reference to the coming of the Son of Man. Believers get to use the same means of transport as the Son of Man—Jesus.

“In the air” is the destination of our ascension—the space between heaven and earth. That is where believers go to meet Jesus; where those who are still alive when he returns get to see his face. And that face to face encounter is the grandest, most glorious event in the history of the world.

The Greek word for “meet” (apantesis) was used in secular Greek and in at least two NT references of the formal reception of a visiting monarch or dignitary, in which a delegation of citizens or city officials would go out to meet him on his way to the city and then escort him back into town with appropriate pomp and ceremony. This suggests to me that the resurrected dead and the raptured living will meet the descending Lord in the air and then accompany him in glory and honor as he continues his descent to the earth (Holmes, 151). In other words, we will do a U-turn in the sky, and then follow him back to earth. But while that *is* my view, I hold it rather loosely, since I don’t believe there is enough evidence in this text (or any other) to have a dogmatic opinion about the rapture.

What I can say for sure is that this is one of the most important passages in the New Testament about the Second Coming of Jesus. And I hope you have seen that Paul did not give this instruction to satisfy our curiosity or answer all our questions about the sequence, details, or timing of Christ’s return. He simply wanted his readers to be assured that both living and deceased believers will participate together in the grandest, most glorious event of all—the Return of Jesus.

I have entitled this message, “See You at the Parousia!” There are people in our church who are currently feeling the sting of death because their loved ones have recently departed this life. There are also people in our church, like Diane Slater and my mom, Janice, who are presently on hospice care and will soon depart this life, and those of us who are left behind *will* feel the sting of death, even though we know that their spirits will have immediately gone into the presence of Jesus.

But we do not have to grieve like others who have no hope. Yes, we may be sad when they are absent from those big events that we will experience here on earth. But we *will* be together during the biggest, grandest, most glorious event of all. When Jesus gets the word from His Father, He will rise from His throne, and with a cry of command, the voice of the archangel, and the sound of the trumpet of God, He will descend in the clouds. At the same time, the dead in Christ will rise and those of us who are alive will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. We will see His face, and we will be with Him forever.

I have been telling my mom for the last couple of weeks, “Mom, when you die and go to be with Jesus, if I’m still alive when He returns, I will see you at the Parousia! And I cannot wait to see your newly recomposed, recreated body on our way up to meet the Lord. I cannot wait to be in His presence *together* forever!”

I think such conversations are appropriate. I think that is what Paul may have meant when he said in **verse 18**, *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

The Bible's instruction about the Second Coming of Christ were not given to satisfy our curiosity or answer all our questions or incite us to speculate about the end times. It was given to encourage weak and weary saints who needed encouragement.

I have a sense that some of you are weak and weary and need to be reminded about what we are living for. We are not living for Governor Brown's word to reopen our society so we can get back to life as it was. We are living for the Father's word to open heaven, so that we can get on with life as He intended to be. That is called the Parousia. O what a glorious day that will be!

## See You at the Parousia!

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Main Idea: Living believers and deceased believers will participate together in the grandest, most glorious event of all—the return of Christ

Future Status of Deceased Christians (13)

A Need to Clear up Some Confusion (13a)

No Need to Hopelessly Grieve (13b)

Foundational Christian Beliefs (14-17)

Jesus' Death and Resurrection (14a)

Jesus' Second Coming (14b-17)

The Meaning of *Parousia* (15)

Manifestations of Glory (16)

The cry of command

The voice of an archangel

The sound of God's trumpet

Deceased Christians will Fully Participate (14b, 16b)

Living Christians will be Raptured (17)

Mode of Transport: "Clouds"

Destination: "In the Air"

Outcome: "With the Lord Forever"

The Purpose of this Instruction (18)