

1st Thessalonians

"The Comfort of His Coming"

(1st Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Some Immediate Context: Paul had presented the gospel message to some in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. Some heard the gospel message and were saved while many others rebelled against it and took mob action against Paul causing him to leave the area quickly. He left behind a small group of believers who experienced the wonderful joy of life in Jesus Christ. While away from them, the church experienced great persecution and Paul sent Timothy to assist them in their faith. Timothy visited them, encouraged them, and reported back to Paul. He told Paul that the Thessalonians were standing fast in the faith, even considering the persecution, and were looking forward to the return of the Lord. However, they had several theological questions and one of them concerned the fact that some among them had died. Would they now be at a disadvantage at the Lord's return?

Some "Wider Angle" Context: In the Upper Room, where Jesus last ate with the disciples before his crucifixion, there was concern among them that Jesus said that he was going to leave them. This did not fit with their expectation of him as Messiah. John 14:1-3 records Jesus' response to their concern: *"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.* At the time, the disciples did not understand the difference between Jesus' 1st and 2nd coming. Consequently, they did not understand this. However, these verses are Scripture's first revelation of the Rapture of the Church in which Christ will come back and take his own to heaven. The disciples were unprepared to accept this truth. It was not until later, under the ministry of the Apostle Paul, that the doctrine of the Rapture of the Church was given in more detail. As recorded in Acts 9, Paul met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus which dramatically changed his life. He went from attempting to rid the world of believers in Christ to being one of Christ's biggest advocates and was one to whom God gave special revelation concerning several Christian doctrines including the Rapture of the Church. In 1st Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul answers the Thessalonians question regarding their dead and in the process identifies the details of the special revelation of the Rapture of the Church. This revelation is recorded for all believers about 20 years after the time of Christ's meeting with his disciples in the Upper Room.

The Text: 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. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words. (ESV)

Paul's Answer: five essential facts:

1. Revelation: We have God's Truth (4:13, 15a)
2. Return: Christ is Coming Again (4:14-15)
3. Resurrection: The Christian Dead Will Rise (4:15-16)
4. Rapture: Living Believers Caught Up (4:17)
5. Reunion: Christians Forever with the Lord (4:17-18)

Purposes of writing 1st Thessalonians:

1. Paul commended the Thessalonians for their exemplary living under persecution.
2. Paul defended his conduct in Thessalonica against criticism that had developed in his absence.
3. Paul explained his absence from them.
4. Paul explained why he sent Timothy to them.
5. Paul gave instructions on sexual purity.
6. Paul admonished the Thessalonians on the proper manifestations of brotherly love.
7. Paul also corrected them about their misperceptions of the dead and their relation to the return of Christ.

Bodies will be Suitable for Heaven (1st Corinthians 15:35-41): ³⁵ But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" ³⁶ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹ For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

Parallel Revelation (1st Corinthians 15:51-58): ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall 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 will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Calvary Bible Church and the Thessalonian Letters: The Constitution of CBC refers to 1st Thess 4:13-18 in support of its Statement of Doctrinal Beliefs as recorded in Article III, Statement of Doctrinal Beliefs N, The Second Advent of Christ: *We believe in that "blessed hope," the personal, imminent, pre-tribulation and premillennial coming of the Lord Jesus Christ for His redeemed ones, and in His subsequent return to earth, with His saints, to establish His millennial kingdom.* As we can see, the doctrinal statement clearly sees the Lord coming for his redeemed ones (i.e., The Rapture of the Church) and a subsequent coming with his redeemed ones to establish his millennial kingdom. Additionally, the CBC Constitution refers to 1st Thess 4:16-17 in support of its Statement of Doctrinal Beliefs as recorded in Article III, Statement of Doctrinal Beliefs O.2, The Eternal State: *We believe that the souls of the redeemed are, at death, absent from the body and present with the Lord, where in conscious bliss they await the first resurrection, when spirit, soul, and body are reunited to be glorified forever with the Lord.* The first resurrection is the rejoining of the immaterial with the material parts of the believer which became separated at death; the spirit/soul going to be with the Lord and the body going into the ground. The resurrection will include a glorified body suitable for all eternity.

In Two Weeks: "Don't Walk in Your Sleep (1st Thessalonians 5:1-11)"